

Start First with What You Believe

By Joe Gerstandt



Expert Forum



The idea of fact has always appealed to me, maybe you as well. Part of the appeal, for me at least, lies in the fantasy that by presenting you with enough cold, hard facts I will not need to argue or try to convince you of something.

“This isn’t just my opinion/agenda/perspective, look at all of these facts!” I have, for many years now, been on a fact finding bender. I am a voracious reader, and until recently would not even allow myself much fiction, as I did not have time for “stories,” I needed to collect All The Facts. (Fortunately, I was eventually reminded that there are far more facts to be found in good fiction.) When I was starting out as a person who thinks and writes and speaks about diversity and inclusion, I was going to be the person to “bring the science.” Many of the diversity and inclusion related conferences, presentations, and workshops that I had experienced felt to be long on passion, care and conviction, but short on facts and science. Me to the rescue!

My collection of facts is impressive. Books and books and books, and they are underlined and they are dog-eared and they are highlighted. Journal articles. Stacks of journal articles, also highlighted and underlined with brightly colored post-it notes making it easy for me to rediscover the glorious fact to be found on page 19. And the one on page 27. Magazine articles, blog posts, white papers, my office is so full of facts there is barely any room for me. I find them, I collect them and I use them. I have embraced the “shock and awe” approach to public speaking, using my 60 minutes to bury the audience under an avalanche of facts.

I love my facts. They take many forms, but I love them all and I think that I always will.

But they are my facts, and I have chosen them for a reason.

My particular collection of facts is directly correlated to my particular collection of beliefs.

Do we wage war with facts because we are afraid to own our beliefs? Maybe it is just me. Maybe on some level I feel that belief is not as valid or as strong or as appropriate for argument and debate as fact is? I still love the idea of fact, but I consistently see intelligent, adult human beings selectively cling to different sets of facts in arguing about things they care about. I consistently see fact in the service of belief. One side throws apples, the other side throws oranges and both refuse to acknowledge the fenced off fields that produced them. This actually summarizes much of 2014.

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Again, I love my facts and think that I always will.

But belief is the part of the iceberg below the waterline, the big part, the part that sinks the ship.

So start there. The facts will come. It is easier than ever before to get your fingers on facts, and whatever you believe you can find research to support it. Stop your search for the perfect book, article, study, webinar, tweet, best practice or metric and audit the foundation. Start first with what you believe. Without this foundational clarity you will be unnecessarily susceptible to every popular meme, tweet, post, article or viral video that self-proclaimed “thought leaders” like myself are filling the internet with.

You will also cling too tightly to your facts if you are not clear on your own beliefs. You will convince yourself that you are being objective (you are not). You will convince yourself that you are unbiased (you are not). You will convince yourself that you are without an agenda (you are not). You will think that your facts are The Facts, rather than just the ones that you have chosen because they fit snugly to the stuff underneath.

What do you believe?

What do you believe about people? What do you believe that you know about people, about rich people and poor people, about black, brown, and white people, about male people and female people, about young and old people? Do you believe that, generally speaking, people are good and honest and trustworthy, or something else?

What do you believe about work? I believe that work can be a righteous thing, and that if it can be then it should be. If you believe differently it might be hard for you to find value here, because this belief is one of the things that informs what I do here and how I do it.

What do you believe about talent? What do you believe about employment? What do you believe about management, about governance, about authority? Before you sort for what is “right,” sort for what is true to you. What do you believe about dissent and conformity, what do you believe about human nature, what do you believe about how change happens, what do you believe about the purpose of business?

If you do not believe, for example, that diversity and inclusion are valid and significant issues for your organization, a savvy, fact-filled business case is not

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likely to change that. **Beliefs certainly can and should change, but I think it rarely happens because of a fact.** Clarity on your beliefs provides you the opportunity to inquire into where those beliefs came from.

Do you believe that people are equal? Do you really believe it? In the deep, dark corners of your heart and mind do you believe it? I used to think that this was a nearly universally belief in this country, but I have recently been overwhelmed by evidence to the contrary. If you work hard to collect and advocate facts that justify or explain far from equal outcomes, experiences and consequences for different groups of people it becomes hard for me to understand how you believe in equality.

Forget being right. Forget being appropriate or politically correct. Put your script aside for a minute and start by telling the truth, at least to yourself.
Be good to each other.