

BOOK

In Defense of Troublemakers: The Power of Dissent in Life and Business

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SYNOPSIS [FROM THE COVER]

“ In *In Defense of Troublemakers*, psychologist Charlan Nemeth argues that this principle is completely wrong: left unchallenged, the majority opinion is often biased, unoriginal, or false. It leads planes and markets to crash, causes juries to convict innocent people, and can quite literally make people think blue is green. In the name of comity, we embrace stupidity. We can make better decisions by embracing dissent. Dissent forces us to question the status quo, consider more information, and engage in creative decision-making.”

QUOTES

“This book is fundamentally about how we make decisions and judgments.”

“A consensus position can sway our judgments even when it is in error, and even when the facts are in front of our face.”

“Persuasion by a dissenter is more indirect, requires more time, and follows a more subtle choreography of argument.”

“When we are exposed to dissent, our thinking does not narrow as it does when we are exposed to consensus. In fact, dissent broadens our thinking. Relative to what we would do on our own if we had not been exposed to dissent, we think in more open ways and in multiple directions. We consider more information and more options, and we use multiple strategies in problem-solving. We think more divergently, more creatively. The implications of dissent are important for the quality of our decision-making. On balance, consensus impairs the quality of our decisions while dissent benefits it.”

“However, what is less recognized is that dissent has value, even when it is not correct. What we will see in this book is that the value of dissent does not lie in its correctness. Even when wrong, dissent does two things directly pertinent to the example. It breaks the blind following of the majority. People think more independently when consensus is challenged. Perhaps more importantly – and this is the core message of this book – dissent stimulates thought that is more divergent and less biased.”

“But persuasion is different from changing the way someone thinks about an issue, and it’s different from stimulating thought.”

“The best way of assessing quality is to instead assess the decision-making process.”

“Good decision-making, at its heart, is divergent thinking. When we think divergently, we think in multiple directions, seek information and consider facts on all sides of the issue, and think about the cons as well as the pros. Bad decision-making is the reverse. Thinking convergently, we focus more narrowly, usually in one direction. We seek information and consider facts that support an initial preference. We tend not to consider the cons of the position, nor do we look at alternative ways of interpreting the facts.”

“When there is dissent, the decision-making improves.”

“Consensus narrows, while dissent opens, the mind. Both affect the quality of our decisions. The take-home message of the research and this book is that there are perils in consensus and there is value in dissent.”

“The message of this book is not that we should create dissent, but that we should permit dissent and embrace it when it is present.”

“Senator William Fulbright: “We must learn to welcome and not to fear the voices of dissent.” I could not summarize this book more succinctly – unless by adding this remark from Mark Twain: “Whenever you find that you are on the side of the majority, it is time to reform – (or pause and reflect).”

“Minority views, on the other hand, have an uphill battle to persuade us. We don’t agree readily. In fact, we find many reasons to resist agreement. Dissenters – “the few” – don’t persuade immediately. It has to be done over time, through a choreography of persuasive style. When we do agree with a minority view, it is usually based on a real change in attitude.”

“Majorities get us to agree. They get us to follow them, often without reflection. This is especially true when they are unchallenged. We may believe that we generally think for ourselves and are persuaded only by strong arguments. But we will see that, when faced with the opinions of others, we often agree without good arguments or any arguments at all.”

“Most research shows that conformity increases as the majority size increases from one to around three or four; thereafter, size corresponds little to the amount of conformity.”

“This fear of being in the minority manifests itself in workplaces as well. For example, Kathleen Ryan and Daniel Oestreich have found that around 70 percent of employees don’t speak up when they see problems. Their research suggests two reasons. One is that employees think that speaking up won’t matter and the company will simply ignore what they say. The other reason is fear of the majority – fear of those who remained silent and did not report the problem. This is clearly the fear of repercussions, such as ridicule and rejection by colleagues or a larger audience. Silence then becomes part of the power of the majority.”

“People assume the accuracy and the propriety of majority views and actions. They also fear the repercussions of not being part of the majority. They thus follow or agree with the majority, often automatically and blindly, even when the majority is wrong.”

“Having votes taken anonymously or by written ballot has another benefit. It commits us to recognizing what we believe before we learn the opinions of others.”

“The powerful reality is that people get very upset when confronted by dissent.”

“Daring to dissent takes courage. What is interesting, however, is that this courage, when summoned, is contagious. Dissent can actually increase the likelihood that others will also show courage when faced

with consensus in another situation. It is another form of liberation. Dissent can increase the likelihood that we will speak up.”

“DISSENT ENTAILS RISK. IF you dissent, you will get attention. You will have the floor, at least for a while. You will be questioned and pressured to change your mind. You will be reminded that you are in the minority, with the implication that you are wrong. You are likely to be disliked and even rejected.”

“At that point, many of us start to conclude that dissent is not worth it. We ask: Why do this? Why not stay silent? Is it futile to speak up if we hold a minority viewpoint? Even if we recognize that we could help others to think more independently, can we ever prevail?”

“Galileo, for example, was tried by the Roman Inquisition in 1633 and sentenced to indefinite imprisonment, later commuted to house arrest. Some dissenters in history were put to death. Think of Jesus Christ, or of Martin Luther King Jr. Yet no one questions whether they persuaded people. They gained agreement with their ideas. It took time, however – a great deal of time. It took two centuries for the ban of Galileo’s “Dialogue” to be lifted and another century before he was formally cleared of any wrongdoing.”

“We repeatedly find that people resist showing public agreement with dissenters. Often, however, we find that they have been persuaded privately. When you ask them later, or if you ask them in a way that enables them to avoid acknowledging that they agree with the dissenters, they show substantial attitude change in the direction of what was proposed by the dissent.”

“It was the “late compromise” condition that had it both ways – both public and private attitude change. When a dissenter compromised at the last minute, he did two things. He appeared consistent and, at the same time, flexible enough to achieve an agreement. He did not change his position. He simply offered a concession. As a result, he achieved both outcomes. This was the “sweet spot.” He got the other participants to make public concessions and he changed their private attitudes.”

“While a dramatic vehicle, the film demonstrates with subtlety how minority positions can prevail. It is consistent with available research. That’s why the film works.”

“Initially, we see the power of public voting to apply pressure to conform. The first ballot is a public show of hands. When asked who favors a “guilty” verdict, the first few confidently raise their hands. The others follow, though some hesitate. Eleven jurors vote for a “guilty” verdict. Then we see the difficulty in being the “one,” the dissenter. When asked who favors “not guilty,” Fonda raises his hand. He is alone.”

“Our own decision-making can go awry when we agree without reflection – that is, when we follow others, right or wrong.”

“Alone, we consider only a slice of information. We have many biases in how we select and interpret that information, usually in ways that are consistent with our beliefs. We also have biases in the strategies we employ in problem-solving, often using old solutions when they no longer work. However, when we are faced with majority opinion, our range of thinking narrows even more.”

“Jim Jones had a powerful message, and he was charismatic. However, he also understood the power of consensus for thought control. To achieve consensus, he carefully recruited individuals who were likely to “fit” the community and be receptive to his message. He repeated his message continuously. He made sure potential converts interacted with believers. Whole families went to Jonestown and then reinforced each other’s decision to be there. Jones encouraged public expressions of agreement, and he did not tolerate dissent. He didn’t even tolerate doubt. Friends and family members who didn’t believe or follow soon became ex-friends or ex-family.”

“There is a reason why cultlike organizations cultivate consensus and reject dissent “like a virus,” as described in popular books such as *Built to Last*. As we saw in Part I, majority opinion has a forceful impact on gaining agreement, especially when there is consensus.”

“Much like decision-making, problem-solving usually benefits from multiple approaches. If we take only one approach to a solution, we had better hope it is the right strategy or at least the best one.”

“Training also is not very effective in getting people to speak up. There are realities to power and hierarchies. People don’t give up power and position willingly, and speaking up has costs, real or imagined. We find it difficult to speak up when we are in the minority or when we think we lack sufficient expertise. We are helped when a rebel is present. The real peril of consensus is when it goes unchallenged.”

“A narrow perspective impairs good decision-making. It also impairs original thinking.”

“When exposed to a dissenting opinion, we think more divergently than we would on our own. We do this whether the dissent is right or wrong. To use a metaphor, we explore different routes. We seek information on all sides of the issue. We explore more diverse options. As a result, we are better able to make good decisions and detect novel solutions.”

“Criticism is not the same as dissent, but both point to the value of challenge for the generation of creative ideas. The idea here is that, rather than constrain ourselves by contemplating how not to offend or criticize, we should be free to truly brainstorm ideas. This might involve criticism of an idea. It is not a mandate to criticize, but rather permission to criticize. As with the advice regarding dissent, challenge is best when permitted, not fabricated – and even welcomed when it is authentic.”

“GROUPS OFTEN OPERATE IN A WAY THAT “STRAINS” FOR consensus, a term that Irving Janis, then at Yale, used to describe “groupthink.” As his description of some major political fiascoes shows, such strain has been behind some truly poor decisions.”

“One of the best-known decision fiascoes was the ill-fated US-backed invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs in 1961. That decision has long been a staple of academic research into the failings of groups and is still enormously illuminating, especially through the lens of consensus and dissent. The Bay of Pigs decision-making was prototypical of groupthink and of Janis’s model of bad decision-making.”

“In the groupthink model, common symptoms of bad decision-making in groups – ones to watch out for – are rationalization and hubris. Members have an illusion of invulnerability, a belief in their own inherent morality, and they stereotype the outgroup or the enemy.”

“Polarization is one of the most powerful and widely researched phenomena in social psychology. Here is the basic finding: when people share a leaning in a certain direction and they discuss their views, they become more extreme in that direction.”

“The bottom line is that we might want a mix of people on our teams. We might want people who vary in age, race, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation – and maybe educational background, height and weight, and personality for that matter. There are many good reasons for this, but there is little evidence that it will improve performance or decision-making by itself. The value is found in the persistent expression of a differing view, which stimulates thought about the decision at hand. Diversity in its many forms may provide the potential for improving decisions, but the real engine for good decision-making is dissent.”

“Dissent, while often annoying, is precisely the challenge that we need to reassess our own views and make better choices. It helps us consider alternatives and generate creative solutions. Dissent is a liberator.”

“So why do we punish dissent? Most of us believe that we are open to differing views. Some of us believe that we like challenges to our ideas. In practice, however, most of us dislike a person who believes the opposite of a position we hold, and we creatively look for reasons for his “error.” We tend to think of him in negative terms. He is a troublemaker who is wasting time and blocking our goals. We are quite willing to punish him, most often through ridicule or rejection.”

“Despite the impression given by these images of dissenters, the research covered in this book is not about anger. It is about the willingness of an individual, or a few, to express an opinion that challenges the majority view. Dissenters may provoke anger, but they are not expressing anger. They are expressing an opinion or perspective.”

“Fundamentally, people want cohesion and harmony at all costs. I am convinced that the legacy of at least one popular guru of the past century has been the notion that we need to “get along” – that we need to win friends in order to influence. That’s in fact the title of Dale Carnegie’s book: *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. A timeless best-seller, it has sold over 15 million copies and is still running strong some eighty years after it was first published.”

“The enormous and enduring success of Carnegie’s book has contributed to the notion that nothing good happens unless we have harmony and liking. This assumption is deeply embedded in research traditions as well as in the popular mind. I believe it is also behind the desire to find techniques to stimulate more divergent thinking while preserving cohesion, liking, and harmony. The devil’s advocate appears to fit the bill, but it is a contrived intellectual argument.”

“Dissent brings two types of value: it breaks the power of consensus, enabling us to think more independently and to speak our own truth, and it stimulates our thinking. We become more inquiring, more divergent in our thinking, and more creative. Dissent is not just the presence of another position, but a stimulus to better and hopefully wiser thinking.”

“Speaking the truth does not mean being rude or disrespectful. It does not mean malevolent intentions to harm or denigrate someone. Speaking up is when you have a position that you believe to be true.”

“Let the philosopher Eric Hoffer bring this book to its close beautifully and succinctly: “The beginning of thought is in disagreement – not only with others but also with ourselves.”