

The Truth About Truth and Business

By Josh Fowke

This article is part of a series of articles that aims to apply the ideas of psychologist Dr. Jordan Peterson to business. I am looking for better ways to think about organization culture, leadership development and operational effectiveness. Accountability and innovation are highly sought after by companies today and multiple themes in Peterson's work look like they help support those aims. This paper details what businesses can take away from Peterson's truth theme. The concept of truth that Peterson puts forward is complex and the details matter. In this paper I will highlight the major takeaways. I will tie those takeaways together with other themes that Peterson presents in a future paper.

Paying Attention and Speaking the Truth are the Most Powerful Virtues

Peterson's perspective on truth is strongly informed by pulling psychological meaning out of mythological stories. Ideas about the importance of truth were developed most prominently by Christianity, but the idea can be traced back through ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. His interpretation of the Mesopotamian myth the Enuma Elis is as follows: Mesopotamia had a period of tribal integration which brought together various gods from each tribe. These gods can be conceptualized as ideals to aim at and they also had to be integrated for the tribes to unify. The act of integrating the gods is the same thing as thinking through how different modes of being or ideals stack up against each other. The result of this process was the supremacy of the god Marduk. Marduk was elected by all the other gods to neutralize Kingu, the leader of the monsters of chaos that were threatening the world at the time. What is significant is what virtues the Mesopotamians elected to be supreme; Marduk's features were that he had eyes all around his head and spoke magic words. The message of this myth is that paying attention and speaking the truth are the most powerful virtues. Similar sentiments are developed in 'the word' or Logos in Christianity, the Eye of Horus in Ancient Egypt and even the Eye of Providence. People who embody these virtues are the people who climb hierarchies of competence in stable societies, as observed by countless generations. They are selected as leaders because of their ability to pay attention and articulate, thus those abilities are at the foundation of leadership. The reason that these virtues are so powerful is implied in the story of Marduk's battle with Kingu, where he catches Kingu in a net, cuts him up and makes the world out of his pieces. Translation: paying attention and articulating the truth allows one to capture a problem, solve it and move society forward as a result. These ideas regarding the power of truth have continued to develop in mythology. Another example is the logos (or the word) in Christianity, which illuminates how consciousness uses the spoken word to make order out of chaos. In other words something does not really exist until it is named. Practically speaking it is hard to confront and solve a problem without being able to identify and communicate it.

Reality Wins, it is Only a Matter of Time

The best way to describe what Peterson means by truth is that one should act out the spirit of dialectic (genuine dialogue aimed at understanding what is true), as opposed to debate or deceit. Peterson argues that paying attention and trying to articulate your truth as clearly as you can, helps align you with reality and ensures that things turn out as best as they could for you

individually as well as for society as a whole. Consider that you can use language in two ways. Either as a tool to manipulate the world to get what you want, or alternatively, as a tool of articulation. The first use of language can be compelling and thus is a common strategy because you can get what you want. In fact, sharp-minded children learn to lie earlier than their peers. However, Peterson points out that such deceit is costly in the long-term, because when you bend reality it tends to snap back and cause you trouble at some point, a pattern he uncovered in his clinical practice. From my point of view this karma-like phenomenon seems to be due to our limited ability to perceive the entirety of reality; our limited attention results in massive blind spots and missed data, while the endless subtle interdependencies that make up our reality prove too complex for one person to grasp and manipulate with any sustainable success. Reality wins, it is merely a matter of time, hence the better strategy is to align yourself with reality. This means that you need to pay attention to the world and arguably more importantly to pay attention to yourself as it's hard decipher what you want and what you're up to.

How Am I Fooling Myself Today

It only takes a moment thought to realize how self-deceit can be very costly, but Peterson's work on meaning could imply that self-deceit is even more damning. Peterson has much to say on the topic of meaning, but he makes a point that is particularly important with regard to truth. After decades of thought Peterson says it looks to him like meaning is an evolved nervous system response that is experienced when one is balanced between order and chaos, and playing a good Piagetian game (The best game being one that is good for everyone / everything across time). The issue is that if you are not truthful to yourself, you can corrupt your nervous system, not only jeopardizing a sense of meaning, but also losing your ability to trust yourself when faced with a big life decision. Compared to the rest of his work Peterson considers this more speculative, although he has not been able to disprove it after years of effort. Whether that theory holds true or not, deception is a dangerous game to play. Peterson describes the "webs of deceit" that he sees in his clinical practice and how they can take you out. Other prominent psychologists also highlight the connection of truth to psychological well-being. Jung claimed that there was little difference between psycho-therapeutic effort, supreme moral effort and truth. Freud's repressions can be conceived as lies of omission and Rogers preached that truthful dialogue is where clinical transformation takes place. A takeaway here is that telling the truth requires a lot of effort, because we have the capacity to deceive ourselves and that can have serious consequences. This lends more credence to the timeless YPO (Young President Organization) practice of asking yourself, "How am I fooling myself today?".

The Spirit of Genuine Dialogue is the Process That Keeps the Organization Alive

However a failure to manifest this concept of truth is not only detrimental on an individual level, it is also a liability for the organization. Due to our limited capacity to perceive, each individual only sees part of the world. Peterson explains this phenomenon like this: each person does not see the facts and then comes to a conclusion, rather each person sees a curtain that covers all possible facts and based on how they are oriented and their personality each person's curtain has holes in it that reveal a subset of facts. In other words, depending on the circumstance and the person different bits of information are shiny to different people, and we can only take in so much information on our own, leading to idiosyncratic perspectives. This leaves people and

organizations vulnerable to missing information that may be key to their improvement or decision making. On a political level Peterson describes society as being on the back of a moving serpent, sometimes the right is correct, and sometimes the left is correct, it depends on what the serpent does, but the only way to find out and avoid falling into chaos is to have dialectic conversations across political beliefs. In this manner Peterson describes free speech as the mechanism in which society can identify problems and formulate solutions. Analogously, for organizations genuine dialogue is the safeguard against falling off the ever-moving serpent, acting as the mechanism by which the organization identifies problems and solves them. Thus on an organizational level fostering a culture that encourages such conversations is of paramount value. I'll go even further; it seems to me that a good organization makes articulation of one's thoughts a duty for all employees. Moreover, organizations should hold the spirit of free speech and genuine dialogue as the most important thing, because it is the process by which the organization is kept alive and improved, and the structure needs to be subordinate to the process of reform and problem solving in order to survive over time. Therefore organizations should select and develop traits that are optimal for engaging in and facilitating such dialogue, such as open mindedness, good communication practices, articulateness and psychological maturity.

Integrity Keeps Trust Intact

Another important implication is that acting out the spirit of the truth is the same thing as integrity. Integrity keeps trust intact, and trust can be too often overlooked. Which is unfortunate because trust is a great enabler of productivity, allowing us to cut down on how much time and energy we spend watching each other and guarding ourselves. Trust allows us to take others at their word, allowing us to spend that time and energy on our organizational goals. Since trust is beneficial to all the parties involved, integrity is a game worth playing.

The Spirit of Genuine Dialogue

A final thought on this concept of truth; Peterson claims you must have faith and let go of the desired consequences of your speech. The act of faith is the practical assumption that speaking as truthfully as possible will yield the best possible outcome for you. You may not want to say something for fear of losing your job. But if speaking honestly and respectfully lost your job, that is probably better for you than suppressing your thoughts and feeling trapped. I think you can still speak strategically and pick your words carefully, but the point is to be genuine and put words to your thoughts; to speak order out of chaos. Moreover, you need to engage in dialogue that aims to get at the truth, so you can gain more clarity on your thoughts and get a better sense of reality. In order to get these benefits you need to listen to others with the same genuine thoughtfulness that you use when trying to articulate your own thoughts. Your counterpart can tell you something important, because they have different filters on the world, but you need to listen with humility and open mindedness to reap the rewards. On the company level, the spirit of genuine dialogue; namely the exchange of thoughtfully articulated ideas and the incorporation of corrective feedback drives the company toward understanding reality. Thus truth is a process that a society or a company can embody through genuine dialogue.

What This Means for You

The main point is that your business should foster a culture that holds truth as the paramount value by promoting genuine dialogue, because that is the process that improves the business and keeps it healthy. Keep in mind that the freedom for your employees to speak does not mean that genuine dialogue will happen. Freedom to speak is a necessary but not sufficient prerequisite to dialogue; significant effort is required to develop and maintain dialogue. Another ingredient that will aid dialogue is the character of the people in your organization, thus businesses should select for and develop traits in their leaders that are conducive to fostering a truthful culture; such as psychological maturity, articulateness, superb listening skills and authentic open mindedness. Moreover, acting out the truth, or in other words acting with integrity, promotes trust in the organization, which allows the company to function more smoothly and efficiently, and helps facilitate dialogue.

Going Forward

It is my belief that the theme of truth ties into other themes that if integrated can provide businesses with an ethos that optimizes organizational performance and longevity. These themes also align with some current trends in business, which can provide great case studies as well as specific tools for implementation. Going forward I will detail out this ethos, how it connects to other trends in business and how one might practically bring said ethos to life. Stay tuned.