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RIGHT FIGHTS

Making Conflict Productive | Saj-nicole Joni

You've built your reputation as a leader on a trinity of skills: a clear vision, a dynamic strategy, and your ability to get everyone pulling in the same direction. Your company is stable and full of satisfied employees. Success shall be yours. Right?

Wrong. If everyone's content, you're headed for trouble—the kind that can drive your organization onto the shoals of failure.

Here's the dirty little secret they didn't teach you in business school: it isn't your job to achieve happiness and contentment in the workplace. It is your job to orchestrate the right battles and to make sure they are fought right. You cannot create and sustain a winning business without what I call *Right Fights*.

What is a Right Fight? Let me answer this question with another. Haven't you, at some point, fought for something that really mattered to you? A principle? Brand integrity? Innovation? Market share? Mind share?

Time out! you say, *What about alignment? I work hard to get my team to get on the same page so that we can achieve common goals. You're telling me that I should be getting people to fight?*

But the fact is that content employees don't drive a company to achieve big wins. It takes employee conviction, desire and ambition, and those traits don't create a naturally "aligned" workforce. Show me an organization where employees are universally content, and I'll show you a failure about to happen. The bottom line is this: If you want your company to innovate and to deliver sustainable value, you and your people need to resist the temptation to indulge in "confrontation avoidance."

Now, obviously, aligning around a vision and strategy is essential. But it's insufficient, because it's too easy to get bogged down in organizational politics. Ask yourself: "Do I really believe that if everyone was aligned all tensions would go away?" NO! This means that your job as a leader isn't to eliminate dissonance—your job is to *make conflict productive*. Right Fights enable you and your team to stop fighting about everything that doesn't matter and start fighting, in a high-minded manner, about what really matters.

I promise you this: Master the competencies of Right Fights and you will achieve sustainable breakthroughs and effect real organizational change. The fuel of human invention is found in dissonance, diversity, competition, and even conflict. That's how you win in the marketplace.

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Start by asking yourself: **Is this the right fight to fight?**

Part of knowing what to do is knowing what not to do. You need to avoid the three kinds of deadly, wrong fights:

The wrong fight fought wrong. Starting in the early 1980s, when the demands of the market-place were shifting beneath GM's feet, the company failed to respond quickly. Of course, this ultimately led to GM's catastrophic implosion and filing for "controlled bankruptcy" in 2009.

The right fight fought wrong. As CEO of HP, Carly Fiorina fell into the trap of making herself the centerpiece of the failed Compaq acquisition.

The wrong fight fought right. Dell's more recent rigid adherence to alignment at all costs resulted in losses of both market and mind share, and a decline in its reputation for service and quality.

Knowing how to tell the right fight from the wrong fight (or no fight at all), and how to manage a great fight will keep you from falling into these three deadly traps.

So how do you fight the right fights right? Start by following these three principles:

Make the fight worth fighting about. This is about more than mere message management. It's about asking those in your organization questions like: *What threatens our success or our very survival? Does this threat involve, or should it involve, everyone in the company? What new, unheard ways of talking about the problem could help bring some resolution? Have other leaders experienced—and ignored—a similar situation to their detriment or demise?*

If you can identify a tough problem that has the potential to turn your world on its ear, if you know the outcome for other companies in similar tough spots wasn't pretty, then it's time to start a fight.

This is where message management kicks in: Establish a sense of urgency among your people about the need to have a good, honest debate. Make the stakes big, and convince everyone they need to have some skin in the game. If they believe the problem is worth fighting about, they'll know it's a right fight.

Focus on creating the future. Right fights aren't about the past or the present. If that's what you're focused on, you're not in the right fight. Make it about the future of the company.

Make your pursuit a noble purpose. Yes, it's important for everyone in the organization to have a sense of personal involvement in the outcome of the debate. But they also need a strong sense of purpose. Frame the debate and the consequences of failing or succeeding in noble terms. If the fight is noble, chances are excellent it's worth fighting about, and chances are even better your people will recognize that.

Once you've picked the right fight, ask yourself: **What is the right way to fight this fight?** This, too, has three principles:

Make the fight sport, not war. Most leaders are reluctant to foster a "dust up" because they're afraid it will be destructive.

Instead of viewing "right fights" as destabilizing, look at them as tempering—steel on steel sharpens the knife. Similarly, ideas refined in the fire of debate produce better outcomes. And when you've mastered the ability to identify and stimulate the right things to fight about, you're actually reducing organizational risk.

So don't fear the fight. At the same time, don't let it turn into something other than a fair fight. Don't let staging of the process get out of hand. Set the rules for the fight at the outset—what is acceptable, what is not—and maintain and enforce those rules. Match the opposing sides of the debate evenly. This is absolutely essential for fighting "right."

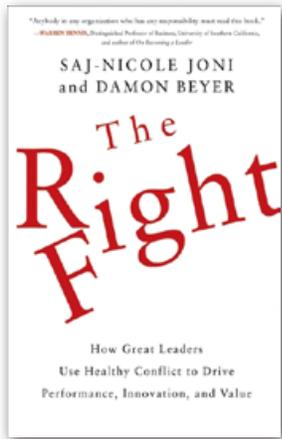
Set the stage for the fights through the formal structure of the organization, but let the actual debate unfold through the organization's informal structure. Why? Working through the formal structure of your organization will take advantage of a framework that's already in place. But it will also exploit imperfect alignment, and that will help you identify weaknesses.

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On the other hand, the informal structure will rely upon networks of personal and professional connections you won't find on the org chart. Those networks are built on trust. Informal coalitions help to ensure that great ideas don't get smothered by the formal hierarchy, so that fights pan out "right."

Turn pain into gain. The struggle should energize—not deplete—everyone. It should stretch the winners' and losers' skills beyond their former shapes and sizes. Ultimately, it's your responsibility to help everyone—even the losers—see how they benefit from the outcome. Make the gains explicit to everyone.

Remember: If you want your firm to achieve great things, get busy learning how and when to introduce, and manage, the appropriate tension to sharpen the organization's creative intelligence. **Stir up a Right Fight.** 🗣️



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Get more details or buy a copy of Saj-nicole Joni's [The Right Fight](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Saj-nicole Joni, Ph.D. is an internationally acclaimed business strategist and confidential advisor to CEOs and their top executives. She has served on a number of boards including public and private companies. She currently serves as a Trustee of the New England Conservatory and on the advisory board of the Simmons School of Management. Her first book, *The Third Opinion* (Portfolio: 2004), was met with critical and professional acclaim. Her second book, *The Right Fight* (with co-author Damon Beyers), was released by Harper Collins in February, 2010. A frequent speaker with a regular column featured on Forbes.com, Saj-nicole has appeared on National Public Radio's *Marketplace*, and in publications including *The Harvard Business Review*, *strategy+business*, and *Fast Company*.

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