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SUCCESS

## Yale research: Highly successful people argue differently

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Twenty/20

Instead of trying to “win” every argument you find yourself in, you could have more success if you look at arguments as opportunities to learn and grow.

That’s according to Matthew Fisher, a psychologist and marketing professor at Southern Methodist University, who co-authored a [2016 study while at Yale University](#) on the benefits of “arguing to learn.” “Being willing to hear out other perspectives and engage in

In fact, according to Fisher, keeping an open mind during an argument not only helps you learn new things, it can also help you land on the correct answer and make others more receptive to your point of view.

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### **What is 'arguing to win'?**

Fisher and his fellow researchers on the 2016 study set out to determine if someone's approach to arguments can impact how they understand the nature of truth when it comes to a given debate topic.

The setup was simple: Participants had to debate hot-button topics in an online chatroom. One group was instructed to adopt a competitive mentality in order to "win" the argument, while the other group was told to "argue to learn."

An "arguing to learn" mentality rests in viewing contentious conversations as collaborative exchanges that can deepen your understanding of a given topic, rather than battles to be won.

That mentality can hold the key to success: [Research shows](#) open-minded people perceive the world around them differently, leading to an increase in happiness and creativity.

Fisher hypothesized that those in the "arguing to learn" group would be less likely to believe there was a single, set answer to the debate at hand — and the study confirmed his theory.

People who were "arguing to win" took a hard line and only saw one right answer, while those who "argued to learn" were more likely to accept opinions that were different from their own.

Arguing to learn is ultimately a mentality, not a single set of tactics, and the key to doing it effectively rests on understanding why it matters in the first place.

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### **Go into arguments with 'an openness and willingness to learn'**

Think back to the last time you argued with someone. There's a good chance you were solely focused on the content of the argument, not why you were debating in the first place.

That's a common impulse, Fisher says, but you may be neglecting the bigger picture.

One of his key takeaways from the study is that approaching hot-button issues from an "arguing to learn" mentality can help shift your own thinking. It can also change the other person's point of view — a rarity in our [polarized](#) times.

Keep that in mind the next time you find yourself in heated conversation, he suggests. Before digging in, set your own intentions, and remember that approaching the discussion with "an openness and willingness to learn," will make it more likely for your conversation partner to see how your position could be true as well, Fisher says.

The benefits of that extend beyond fostering more productive debates, Fisher says.

"Time and time again, you see that the chance to bounce your ideas off other people with at least a receptiveness to being wrong gives you more accuracy. You perform better. You're getting the right answer more often," he explains.

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### **Ideally, 'both sides walk away feeling they would do that again'**

In a [follow-up study](#) also published in 2016, Fisher and his colleagues found that the "arguing to learn" mentality doesn't come naturally: Most people's debating default is an "arguing to win" mindset.

A good starting place: Harvard world-champion debater Bo Seo's advice for [people-pleasers looking to get better at debating](#).

Seo recommends thinking of a debate as an opportunity to clarify your own point of view, rather than a chance to "beat" someone else. In Seo's telling, "both sides walk away feeling like they would do that again" in any good argument.

People are often focused on what they're going to say next, rather than what they're learning from an argument. So Seo's debating basics might make it easier to get your mind off the specifics of a debate and help you truly listen to your conversation partner.

He recommends trying to hit four "primary W's" in any argument:

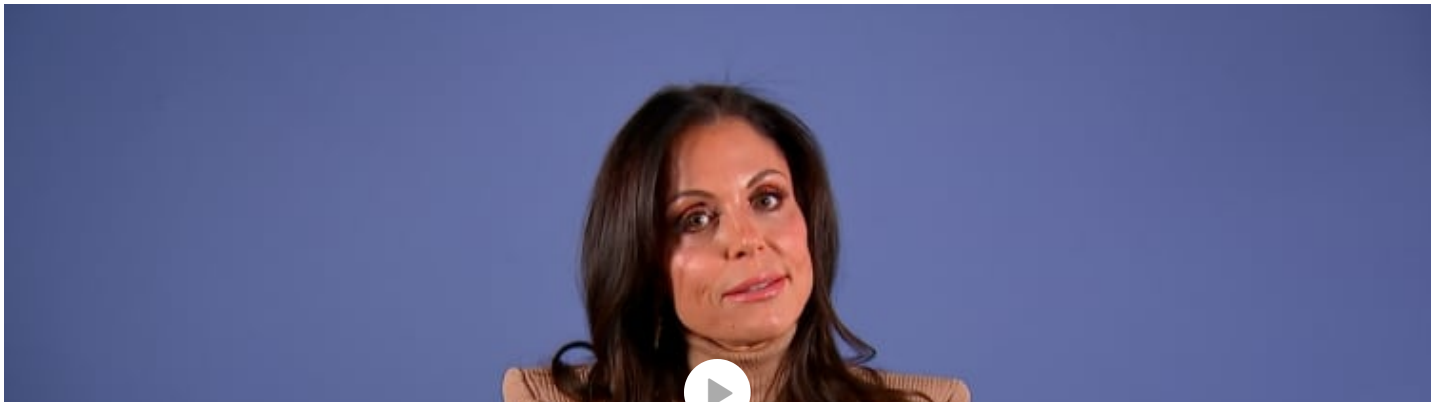
1. What's your argument?
2. Why is it true?
3. When has it happened before?
4. Who cares?

It's advice that can benefit most people, especially in the workplace, Fisher says. In environments where people in leadership positions are unwilling to admit they're wrong, people might be too scared to speak up — and that's the worst case scenario for any kind of conflict, because either one point of view dominates or the problem goes unsolved.

"That's going to actually hurt everybody in the long term," he says.

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