The Right Fight: an interview with Saj-nicole Joni & Damon Beyer

Interview by Alistair Craven

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Saj-nicole heads a CEO advisory firm working with top leaders in Fortune 100 companies around the globe. A sought-after speaker for many years, she has recently addressed groups at Coca Cola, Johnson & Johnson, Linkage, and Deloitte.

Damon Beyer has been working with business leaders around the globe for over two decades, drawing on a broad range of strategic, operational, and organizational experience to help executives unleash the full potential of their people.

Damon is a creative thinker who blends ideas from different industries, challenging clients and their teams to think big, value candour, and look for practical changes that can drive big results. A senior executive advisor at the firm of Booz & Company, Damon guides leaders to frame new ways of thinking about old problems, move beyond conventional wisdom, and generate new insights so they can meet the future head on, create breakthrough organizational performance, and unlock the leadership potential buried deep within their organizations.

The authors’ new book The Right Fight demonstrates "right fights" need to be well designed and carried out to be effective. Alignment cannot be ignored; without it, organizations can be plagued with bitter, energy-draining wrong fights. But a certain amount of healthy struggle is good for organizations. Right fights unleash the creative, productive potential of teams, organizations, and communities. Joni and Beyer provide a practical guide to harnessing the power of right fights for results in every organization.

AC: Can you tell us about the purpose of your new book?

Saj-nicole Joni & Damon Beyer:

Working with executives all over the world during the past decade, we’ve observed that the great ones know how to use dissent and tension – in carefully managed amounts – to bring out the best in teams, to drive the most creative results, and to navigate the tricky path to superior performance. This is true for leaders everywhere: in business, in nonprofits, in education, in the sciences, arts, and in government. This is not something that anyone teaches in business schools or writes about, and we thought it was time to help managers everywhere understand this important leadership truth. Well managed, conflict, competition, and dissent, brings out the best in people in all sorts of organizations. It’s human, it’s part of our nature, it’s the spark of our creativity, and it’s the way we excel. If you aspire to lead in our complex 21st century world, you must be able to productively harness tension, diversity, and dissent, leading people to collectively perform beyond what they initially thought possible.
“Of course, alignment is very important – but our research shows that alignment is only half the story.”

AC: Interestingly, you note that happy employees are not necessarily the most driven or the best. Can you elaborate on this?

Saj-nicole Joni & Damon Beyer:

It turns out that the research shows that happy employees tend to get complacent and not do their best work. On the other side, overstressed, unhappy employees don’t do the best work either. As you might expect, their minds are on other things. It’s in the middle of the curve that you find the sweet spot – employees that are motivated and energized to do their best work and to achieve breakthroughs.

AC: You propose that healthy conflict is a good process for an organization, yet at the same time you note that few of us feel we thrive on conflict. Can you explain this statement?

Saj-nicole Joni & Damon Beyer:

Most people associate conflict with the day-to-day wrong fights they have to endure – internal office politics or personal snide attacks. These kinds of conflict are all too common and almost always about assigning blame for past, or petty concerns, or settling scores. It’s that kind of conflict no one enjoys, and that has given “fighting” a bad name. But when we think about well structured debates of ideas or capabilities like the excitement generated by the Olympics, for example, where competition and conflict are present in every race, every heat, every game, we realize that conflict, when played by the rules, can be incredibly energizing and bring out the best in everyone.

AC: What are the dangers of an organization falling into a “comfort zone” so to speak?

Saj-nicole Joni & Damon Beyer:

Organizations that get too comfortable are in danger of failing to adapt to changing reality – following old paths of success that no longer work, falling behind the competition, and failing to innovate fast enough to stay relevant in a fast-moving world. And organizations that don’t stretch their best people inevitably lose them to more exciting opportunities.

AC: You conducted lots of research for the book. Do your ideas about conflict apply and work in countries and cultures that are not necessarily used to such practices?

Saj-nicole Joni & Damon Beyer:

These ideas apply worldwide. The terminology and cultural expressions may be different, but the practices are universal. When we talked about our book in Japan, for example, we found that the Japanese word for “fight” has very negative connotations, but the word for “battle” has very positive associations. Battles in Japan, are honourable, noble, and worth doing. So the better title in that country might be The Right Battle.

AC: Interestingly, you suggest that a leader’s time “is not always best spent trying to help his or her teams get along.” What do you mean by this exactly?

Saj-nicole Joni & Damon Beyer:

The conventional wisdom is that most leaders and organizations should focus on alignment; that is getting everyone on the same page, with shared vision, commitment, and mutual respect. Once everyone is aligned, the thinking goes that everyone can pull together and produce great results. Accordingly, organizations, consultants, and leaders spend a huge amount of time achieving alignment. Of course, alignment is very important – but our research shows that alignment is only half the story. Once you’ve built alignment and trust into you teams, then the real work starts, because the purpose of alignment is two-fold. First, alignment allows you to stop fighting about everything that does not matter,
and then you can, and must, choose to fight about the few things that really matter (right fights) and fight them right.

AC: How can we differentiate between the right and the wrong kind of fights?

Saj-nicole Joni & Damon Beyer:

Right fights follow three principles:

First, make it worth fighting about: make it material. Fighting is hard even when you know it will bring out the best in people in the long run. So make the stakes big enough to motivate everyone and help everyone feel that the game is worth the candle.

Second, focus on creating the future. If you’re arguing about the past or power struggles that are already over, or apportioning blame, then you’re not fighting the right fight. That’s as close to an absolute rule as we can offer. Right fights are about the future, not the past.

Third, pursue a noble purpose. Make your fight about improving the lives of customers, for example, or changing the world for the better. Right fights connect people with a sense of purpose that goes beyond their own self-interest, unleashing profound collective abilities to create in ways they didn’t think possible.

The wrong kinds of fights miss one or more of these principles and are often political, or about the past, or about settling scores.

AC: What can happen to an organization having too many of the wrong fights?

Saj-nicole Joni & Damon Beyer:

An organization consumed by wrong fights will exhaust its workers, waste everyone’s time, and fail to focus on positive projects and activities that will create a viable and vibrant future. People can and will sustain amazing performance when fighting for things that really matter – in a fair and high-minded matter. But in an environment of perpetual wrong fights, your people will become cynical, self-interested, and short sighted. Ultimately, your best people will leave, and your organizations will spiral onto a path headed towards failure.

AC: Using the auto industry as an example, you state that “true future focus requires people to change their habitual ways of working.” What do you mean by this?

Saj-nicole Joni & Damon Beyer:

The US auto industry, like many other failing industries before it, has focused too much on the past, on doing the same things over and over again that had brought it success in the past. In the late 90s to mid 2000s, US automakers invested heavily in building SUVs and other vehicles which brought short term financial success but were bound to fail as energy prices rose and fuel efficiency concerns played out. When the marketplace changed – as marketplaces always do – the industry was caught flat-footed, unable to adapt.

AC: Another interesting quote from the book: “it's in the crucible of productive tension that great leaders are created.” Can you tell us a bit more about this?

Saj-nicole Joni & Damon Beyer:

Managing tension productively requires leaders to develop courage, discern and navigate uncertainty, and know their teams and organizations well enough to raise and lower stress levels strategically. Great leaders know that alignment alone is not enough; they have intuitively realized that you need to get people competing with one another to bring out their best. It’s in that good tension of productive competition that leaders realize their highest potential, guiding teams to great results.

"An organization consumed by wrong fights will exhaust its workers, waste everyone’s time, and fail to focus on positive projects and activities that will create a viable and vibrant future."
AC: The book contains several case study examples. Which impressed you the most, and why?

Saj-nicole Joni & Damon Beyer:

Rolf Claussen’s ‘right fight’ in the company that he had recently taken over (as CEO) took enormous courage, strength, and dedication to the right end result. He might have easily gone along with the natural pressure simply to agree to the merger that had been proposed – and was well underway – before he got there. But he had the wisdom and insight to step back, evaluate the decision, and most importantly, start a right fight among the executives of the company to determine the best possible outcome for the future.

AC: Finally, are there any closing comments you wish to make?

Saj-nicole Joni & Damon Beyer:

Getting this right matters. Look at a recent example. The executives at Toyota seem to have been aligned around the goal of protecting their company when reports of gas pedal acceleration were surfacing. They should have started a right fight to use every resource they had to find out what was wrong, stop selling flawed cars, and save lives. Instead, they chose the wrong fight of convincing people that the problem was only floor mats. Today, innocent people have been hurt and killed, sales have dropped dramatically, and Toyota could be facing the biggest auto recall in history. Think about it – would you trust Toyota today?

Most people have worked in organizations where they’ve seen office battles that are wasteful, about self-interest, and sometimes even mean. You probably hated it. Those are wrong fights.

But what about fighting for something that really matters? Something like brand integrity, or innovation, or safety, or the environment? Just about anyone who has fought that kind of fight has found his or herself accomplishing things that were surprising, beyond the usual level of achievement. Tension, difference, and fighting are fundamentally human. When done for important causes, with dignity, and fair play, a right fight can lift all the participants to achieve great things. ☐

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