

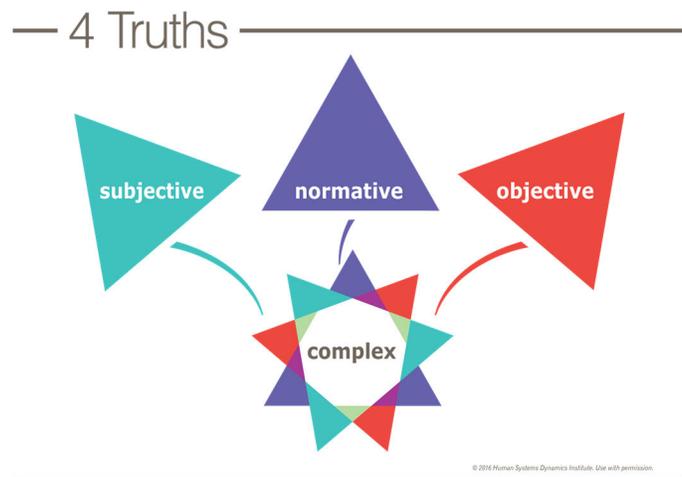


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## Four Truths

### Description of Four Truths

Four Truths offers a way of understanding different perspectives that influence individual and group action. When you recognize and consider the possible perspectives in any situation, you are better able to navigate the differences that limit open dialogue. The Four Truths, as a model and a method, provides you a way to consider multiple perspectives and then identify the one that is best fit to your purpose.



### What?

In any situation, there can be as many descriptions of the event as there are people in the space. The Four Truths, as a model, helps you understand such a phenomenon because it describes four ways people see their own "truth" in the world.

- ▶ **Objective Truth** is what exists and can be proved in this physicality.  
(A round ball of fire appears to cross the sky each day.)
- ▶ **Normative Truth** is what we, as a group, agree is true.  
(English speakers agreed to use the word "day" to name that time when the sky is lit by that round ball.)
- ▶ **Subjective Truth** is how the individual sees or experiences the world.  
(Today is a good day for me.)

Nothing is intractable.

- ▶ **Complex Truth** recognizes the validity of all those truths and chooses which one is most useful at any given time.  
(The sun is up; the day is bright. Today is a good day for MOM, so let's take advantage of that and ask for ice cream for dinner.)

## So What?

We use this model to help us understand different perspectives in our work with individuals, groups, teams, and organizations.

As a model, the Four Truths represents the various perspectives or ways we claim truth. As a method, it becomes the basis for inquiry and questioning as individuals and groups seek to:

- ▶ Identify their similarities and differences
- ▶ Find common ground for problem solving and decision making
- ▶ Understand others' perspectives and actions

## Now What?

Pay attention in times of disagreement or high emotion.

- ▶ Look for cues about how people see and share insights about what is happening.
- ▶ Share your observations to help others make sense of the situation.
- ▶ Use what you see together to identify and take your next wise action.



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### What is the Purpose of Four Truths?

The idea that there are multiple perspectives about any given event has been the subject of poetry, fiction, and confusion throughout time. When you see something happen, it is difficult to imagine that others did not experience the occurrence in the same way you did. You expect others to respond in accordance with your perspective, and often they just do not.

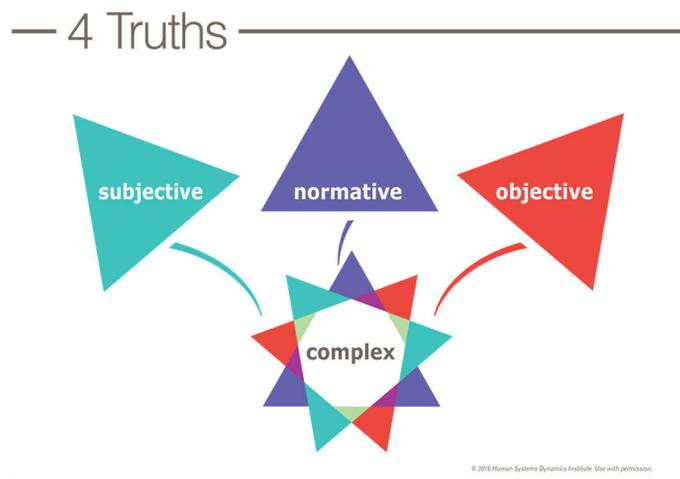
The Four Truths serves as a model and method to help you see validity and importance of the multiple perspectives, understand the roles those perspectives play in shaping current patterns, and make informed choices about how best to inform future action.

In human systems dynamics the idea of Four Truths is borrowed loosely from Jurgen Habermas' ideas of truth claims, and they offer a path for problem solving and generative discourse.

First there is **objective truth**. This is what is observable, evident, and present. It is outside the group—it's what we refer to as the "facts."

*Here on Earth, we experience cycles of light and dark that last approximately 24 hours each. This is objective truth because it is observable and present in the same way across groups, cultures, and locales.*

Second there is **normative truth**. When any group comes to agreement about what is true, that is normative. It belongs to the group—much of what we call culture is made up of normative truths of a given group of people.



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*Humans who speak English have agreed that the lighter part of the cycle is called "day" and the darker part of the cycle is called "night." Other languages have different words, but those words are generally accepted as normative truth across any group that shares that language.*

The third way of knowing is **subjective truth**. This type of truth belongs to the individual. It is the personal beliefs or convictions, perspectives or opinions any person holds as lenses for seeing and understanding his or her world.

*As individuals experience their days, they each form opinions about the quality of that experience. For instance on days when my clothes fit right and my hair looks good and the traffic is light and people are smiling at work, my own subjective truth is that I am having a good day. At the same time, another person may not require that many positive elements to consider a day to be "good." His or her subjective truth may be that it is enough to have gotten to work safely and without incident. Another subjective truth may say that any day at work is not good.*

The final way of knowing is referred to as **complex truth**. No group can function effectively when all the possible truths are in play and conflicting with each other. What has to happen is that the group comes to a tacit, or sometimes explicit, agreement about which truth serves them best at this given time and they use that for their decision making and interaction.

*In a setting where one person is volatile and unpredictable, the whole group may agree to operate according to that individual's subjective truth, regardless of their own experiences. In such a setting, when that person is having a good day, everyone is having a good day. When that person is not doing well, no one functions well. The members of that group have considered all the possible "truths" and selected the one individual's subjective truth to be most productive in that place and time.*

## So What Benefit Do Four Truths Offer?

It's important to realize the impact these four perspectives can have on a situation. While the examples used above are simplistic, you know individuals who can and often do influence those around them such that the group "agrees" to complex truth. Beyond that, however, there are many ways the four truths can be useful.

- ▶ In conflict situations, unbraiding the different truths can help clarify reality (objective truth) from the story that individuals may be telling themselves (subjective truth). The individuals in conflict may develop a normative truth as an

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explicit agreement about what to do, or they may use complex truth, selecting on one of the current perspectives over the others.

- ▶ In culturally or socially diverse situations, knowing the various normative truths is very helpful in creating understanding and increasing productivity. Even knowing that there is such a thing as normative truth allows people to stand in inquiry with each other, rather than judgment of different beliefs and behaviors.
- ▶ In sales and marketing, knowing the normative truths for various demographic groups is critically important. Often strong marketing campaigns can, in fact, frame the complex truth that becomes the normative truth for much of a population. Think about the power that sports events have in shaping the behavior of entire countries during the final, championship events. The World Cup in soccer, the Super Bowl in American football, the Americas Cup in sailing...each of these has been marketed such that interest in them has shifted from subjective truths for committed individuals to become normative truths that often cross traditional geographical or cultural boundaries.
- ▶ In self-awareness, understanding our motives and needs by examining our own subjective truths can help us function differently in the world.

Awareness of these four truths offers new insights to inform action in very different ways. When we approach our world through a stance of inquiry, we can understand others' truths. We are better able to establish conditions for productive, generative relationships that move us toward common goals.

## Now What Can You Do to Use Four Truths?

The next time you find yourself in a conflicted or confusing situation, pause and consider the Four Truths.

- ▶ What can you see, feel, touch, smell, etc.? (objective truth)
- ▶ So what are people, in general saying and agreeing to? (normative truth)
- ▶ So what are people, in general disagreeing about? (subjective and normative truths)
- ▶ So what sense are you making of that data? (subjective truth)
- ▶ So what sense do others seem to be making about that data? (subjective truth)
- ▶ So what can you do to engage others in a conversation about what would be most fit for purpose in this situation? (complex truth)
- ▶ Now what can you do to engage others to agree to move forward, based on that one shared truth? (complex truth)

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