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As They Are

Skills and Professional Development



Fresh on the heels of the 2017 ACC Annual Meeting, I continue to reflect on a statement made by one of the speakers during a refreshingly creative session entitled “Building Resilience and Grit: Adding to Your Emotional Intelligence Toolkit.” My compliments go out to the Law Department Management (LDM) Committee and to LDM Chair Stephen Roth for this outstanding presentation.

The statement was: “Don’t believe everything you think.”

Take a minute and let those words sink in: “Don’t believe everything you think.”

In last year’s December ACC Docket, I wrote about the internal negative dialogue that we replay in our heads about our own value, abilities, and skills due to past criticisms, critiques, or failures and how we need to get rid of those old emotional mental soundtracks. Unfortunately, those aren’t the only records we play. We also have a tendency to believe the worst about others, as well as ourselves.

Although it may be true that actions speak louder than words, actions do not always tell the entire story. Action or lack of action, rarely (if ever) reveals the motivation or truth behind a particular event or decision. Without knowing the full story, we are left to infer, invent, or imagine the “backstory.” And being the innovative, creative, and dare I say, critical, group of high achievers that we are, we often allow our imaginations to roam freely — believing the worst of a given scenario, person, or decision. It should come as no surprise why we assume the worst given that our role in our individual

organizations invariably includes crisis prevention and management. Through our legal training, we become wired to prepare ourselves to handle the worst that could happen. However, when that becomes our default mindset in dealing with other people, it can become a serious handicap rather than a beneficial skill.

In his book *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey tells the story of an encounter on a subway. Covey was calmly riding a subway car with other passengers when a man and his children enter the car. The man sits down and the children begin yelling, grabbing at things, and disrupting the other passengers. Covey turns to the man and says:

“Sir, your children are really disturbing a lot of people. I wonder if you couldn’t control them a little more?”

“The man lifted his gaze as if to come to a consciousness of the situation for the first time and said softly, ‘Oh, you’re right. I guess I should do something about it. We just came from the hospital where their mother died about an hour ago. I don’t know what to think, and I guess they don’t know how to handle it either.’”

And that one statement changed Covey’s entire perspective. How many times could just one more fact, one more statement, one more precious nugget of information shift our entire thinking about an action or decision executed by someone else? As with any “crisis” situation, we need to remember to step back and gather all the facts before jumping to conclusions. Admittedly, it’s true that people “train” us with their behavior. If someone is regularly unreliable or prone to exaggeration, we feel like we can intuit their motives behind a certain behavior. And once we share our belief with a sympathetic listener who is equally willing to believe the worst but has no more insight into a situation than we do, we become confident that our thinking is truth. However, the affirmation or repetition of false thinking can result in damaging reactions and consequences.

Believing what we THINK instead of what we KNOW is the slippery slope that allows us to let annoying people or situations live rent free in our heads. When that happens, we tend to act, or in most cases, react based on emotion rather than fact. Instead of assuming the worst of those people, we should challenge the internal (and replaying) negative records about the behavior and motives of others. We need to put the following words on REPEAT in our mental stereo: “DON’T BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU THINK.”

American novelist Anaïs Nin once said: “We don’t see things as they are, we see them as we are.”

Reflecting on her insight, purposely recognize and remove the wrong thought before it grows into an emotional tumor that clouds your vision. Then you can see things truly as they are.

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