

THE IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING BEYOND WORDS

I have a client who has been cancelling meetings at the last minute. A few weeks ago, she said she was sick. After that, her dog needed attention. And last week, just minutes before our scheduled meeting, she emailed me to say she needs to go to her doctor. When she does show up, she's often late.

Clearly, I was irritated given this has happened several times in a few weeks. I decided when she rescheduled, I was going to tell her this was unacceptable, that my time is valuable and if it continued, it would not be productive to work together. I had it all planned out.

A few days later she reschedules. I log onto Zoom expecting her to be late and there she is. Early. Before I have a chance to say a word, she launches into an apology and bursts into tears. Not sure what is going on, I ask what's wrong and if she wants to talk about it.

Silence.

Then she says, I'm pregnant. I say that's great, not understanding why she's crying. She says well I mean I was pregnant. She explains when we were supposed to meet last week, she felt funny which is why she went to the doctor. She had a miscarriage.

I felt so sad for her. I was also so thankful that I didn't scold her.

When you don't know someone well which can be the case in business situations, it's hard to know what's going on in their lives that causes them to act or speak the way they do. It's typically not about you even though it may affect you.

Think about the waitress who seems to have an attitude every time you ask why your order is taking so long. What you might not consider is because of staffing shortages, she is working overtime, feels unappreciated and harassed by customers who constantly blame her for order issues.

Or what about the guy who cut you off in traffic? Maybe he has a sick child or is dealing with a family emergency. He may not be thinking clearly.

It's natural to react when we think we've been wronged. But it's also important to identify situations where we can put ourselves in someone else's shoes to understand what they're going through.

I work with a group of city health officials who are intimately involved in the COVID-19 crisis. They have to deliver positive test results to people and advise them to quarantine or take precautions. Frequently, people are resistant and lash out at the workers, refusing to heed their advice. As we were role-playing some of these difficult conversations recently, it's eye-opening to see what might seem like such an obvious course of action to many of us poses significant difficulties to others.

Some people are single parents and can't afford to miss work. Others have spent years saving every penny they could to visit a loved one and refused to cancel their trips. Another worried taking too much time off would cost him his job.

The healthcare workers were great. They approached every interaction with compassion and kindness. When meeting resistance, they focused on other proactive behaviors such as the importance of mask wearing, hygiene and ventilation when gathering indoors.

As we were discussing best communication practices, one of the case workers advised looking beyond someone's words and reactions. She said often people aren't upset that they tested positive. They're scared and worried about other pressing issues. She said there are three things you must do to establish rapport and foster more productive conversations.

1. Ask questions to get to the root of the problem
2. Listen
3. Sit in their seats to respond with empathy and compassion

When we fail to understand and acknowledge what someone else is feeling, we risk inflaming the situation even further and closing the door on important interactions. However, behaviorists say when we're kind, it can actually set off a positive chain of reactions.

I recall the day my father died. It was snowing but I had to get out of the house and get some fresh air. So, in a bit of a daze, I went to my local Wawa and almost cut someone off in the parking lot. I was too self-absorbed to realize what I did and didn't even wave an apology.

As I stood in line to pay my coffee, the cashier pointed to the man in front of me and said, he paid for you. I thanked him and asked why he was buying coffee for a stranger to which he replied, "You look like you're having a bad day."

That little act of kindness didn't take away my pain, but it made me smile through my tears.

As I think back to my client who lost her baby, I know I can't ease her pain. But I decided to share that I understood what she was going through because I too lost a baby while pregnant. That shared experience prompted a very open and raw conversation that connected us and has likely transformed our professional relationship.

While it's not possible to know why a stranger cut you off in traffic or someone snaps at you for apparently no reason, simply recognizing that there may be something more behind their words and actions that might make you think twice about reacting back.

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