



Do You Filter Out the Positives?

Description

Part One of a Two-Part Column

A question I get asked often, particularly by less-experienced managers, is, “What’s the number-one piece of advice you have for people new to leadership?” My answer is, “Always be kind to yourself.” I’m not sure I would have said that years ago. Maybe it’s age. Maybe it’s experience. Maybe it’s life lessons. Whatever the reason, it’s the first message I give these days.

Recently I received a phone call from a person who heard me speak this year at the American College of Healthcare Executives (ACHE). She was calling to discuss some research on compassion. In the call, she mentioned what a difference she had noticed between this talk and one when she heard me speak ten years ago. She said it seemed that I was much more vulnerable this time. I think she was right.

Maybe this comes from looking back in life at things I wish I had done differently. But I think it’s really true that I have more compassion, empathy, and understanding than I used to—not as much as I would like, not as often as I would like, but more often.

While I feel it’s important to not over-rationalize things that have to be better, it’s also important not to beat oneself up. One of the things I notice about people in leadership is that they tend to take home what didn’t go well, instead of what did go well. If they supervise 40 employees, they spend the nights and weekends thinking about that one employee they wish they could positively impact instead of the 39 they are having a positive impact on.

I’m in healthcare, and we know that every caregiver wants to do everything they can to make sure a patient has the best clinical outcome. But despite our best efforts, there are some patients whose condition or illness prevents them from having the outcome we’d like.

No doubt that's true of almost anyone in a helping profession, or a profession that's focused on keeping people safe. There are just going to be disappointments. What I always say is, "We don't have to look for the disappointments. They just come naturally to us. It's the wins that we sometimes need to search out and not reject."

I have a text group with three other gentlemen. Every morning we text each other three things we are grateful for. Chuck always goes first. I know when I wake up I'm going to see a text message from Chuck. At about 4:50 a.m., he's going to write, "I am grateful for..." and put down three things. It's a simple reminder: Ah, I need to look at what I'm grateful for.

We can all create processes like this one to help us get back to what's right. I did the same thing when I was at Holy Cross Hospital in Chicago as the chief operating officer. Luckily, we had a great CEO in Mark Clement, but we faced some tough challenges. There were disappointments in many areas. I saw that the managers were getting down on themselves, because even though they'd work really hard, the outcomes weren't what they wanted.

So, one of the changes I put in place was this: Every day before they went home, each manager would send me one thing they did that day that resolved an issue, answered a question, or moved their department forward. It was amazing. After a short time period, you could almost see the self-confidence grow. Isn't that what leaders do—develop people for self-confidence?

Besides putting a process like this in place, we can surround ourselves with people who will give us honest feedback. It's important to create a safe environment where people can give you feedback, and I hope I've done that, but I always wish I could do better. Still, I'm very lucky that I have people who will sort of give me a look. When I see that look, I think, *Uh-oh. I need to pause. I need to check how I'm presenting this, or how I'm acting, or what I'm saying because I'm just drifting off course.* As Beth Keane, one of my past colleagues, always said, "When we love somebody, we tell them they have spinach in their teeth."

My big learning in this area came when I was 31 years old. I went to see Amy Storm, a counselor at Catholic Social Services in Janesville, Wisconsin. Why? Because I felt so darn crummy about myself. Now, I will tell you I had done some things that I should feel crummy about, but I just couldn't shake it. So I went to see Amy, and we had some sessions. She made me feel safe and comfortable, and she helped me take a more objective viewpoint of myself.

One day, something happened that changed me. Amy said, "Can I provide you some feedback?" Of course, I wasn't sure I wanted the feedback, but I said yes. And she said, "I notice when I tell you positive things about yourself, when I compliment you, you deflect it. You will actually tell me why it's not true. You'll give me some other information to counterbalance it. You'll even cross your legs, fold your arms, and turn away from me." She concluded, "I think one of the reasons you feel so bad about yourself is you subconsciously filter out the positives."

Now, I'm not saying this immediately changed all my behavior, but I remember walking out of that office and walking down the street feeling almost like a weight had been lifted off my back. It was a new self-awareness. I sort of realized, *Well, no wonder I feel so lousy about myself. I filter out the positives.*

I think today we might call this “the imposter syndrome,” that feeling we have when we doubt our own abilities and question if we really belong. I find many people are tough on themselves. I often say, “Sometimes you don’t have to be tough on others. They’re already tough on themselves. Instead, help them be less tough on themselves and move them into solutions.”

Now that I’ve told my own story, I’d like to offer up some ideas others can use to stop filtering out the positive. Please join me next week for part two of this column...as always, thank you for reading.

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