Donâ??t Accept Generalities. Instead, Push for Clarification.

Description

I often write about having the discipline to pause. I am a work in progress on this. One of my favorite books, written over 50 years ago, shared that an unkind word can ruin a relationship for a day, a week, a year, or a lifetime. While itâ??s true that the ability to respond quickly has many benefits, it also has some consequences. It is so easy to say or write something in the moment that one would like to take back.

So, pausing is healthy. However, it does not mean we do not address items that need to be addressed. Recently I spent the day with city leaders in Crestview, Florida. The early morning session focused on steps to build a more vibrant community. The rest of the day was spent with City Manager Tim Bolduc and his direct reports. Tim and I go back a bit and the day was so much fun. Tim shared with the group some of his learnings over the years. A few of these learnings have been front and center in my own life recently.

A learning that Tim shared with the group is to not overreact to generalities. If you are in the workplace at some point you may have heard someone saying, â??Morale is terrible here. It has never been worse.â?• Now the person may be right in terms of how *they* feel. However, it would be better for them to say, â??This is my opinionâ?• rather than making a global statement. At times like this a person may believe they are correct and/or that others agree with them because their statement goes unchallenged. To create a healthier company or community, it is important to not let generalities go without asking for some clarification. Otherwise, the speaker goes unchecked and the generality may be seen as absolute truth.

For example, a few weeks back I sent a request out to some people to see if they were interested in providing a job shadowing experience to a University of West Florida student. I received a response that was not about job shadowing but about how terrible downtown Pensacola is. They wrote that people hate going downtown, wanted to know why parking is charged for when there are so many empty spaces, and stated that young people donâ??t want to live in Pensacola.

I paused. My first thought was â??Letâ??s not get into an email contest.â?• I thought I should just let it go. But after giving it some thought I responded. My note was not meant to say the person was not entitled to their opinion. However, it did point out some objective measurements. I shared the results of the Mason-Dixon Quality of Life survey which showed that overall people are more positive than 10 years ago and the results keep gaining. I shared that the assessed property values have increased over 30 percent and investment is up 67 percent in last five years, not counting several projects about to start. Residential startups are up also. I pointed out that Verizon named Pensacola the 17th best city to start a new company in and *Strong Towns* named Pensacola the winner of its strong town

competition. I did write that yes, there are plenty of opportunities for improvement; however, I am optimistic.

Here is another example. After a recent podcast with James and Deb Fallows, a person wrote that in 2013 Pensacola was on fire and is now moving backward. They added â??Do we need to wait till the good old boys die out?â?• This was posted on a social media site. To the personâ??s credit they owned the statement. My response was to ask, â??What is driving this perception?â?• At times I find a person is upset they did not get a contract and feels the process was unfair. I then outlined many of the factual measurements that demonstrated much has been gained since 2013. I offered to meet with the person to hear why they feel the way they do and to offer some information they may not be aware of. I was thinking of the amount of support being provided to small local businesses, the large viewership of the CivicCon speakers, and several other data points. This person has every right to feel as they do, and I have the right to feel as I do.

The main point is that it is good to ask people for specifics.

Often people use words like â??a lotâ?• to describe something. How many is a lot? I find the number can range from two on up. The issue is when we donâ??t define specifics, we can end up under reacting or overreacting. By drilling into specifics, we can better understand the situation, take better actions, and at the minimum feel good that we did not support statements that we feel are not correct via our silence.

Here are a few tips for when you hear generalities:

1. Pause and decide whether you want to respond or not. There are times when it is best to let it go. Donâ??t rationalize that it is not worth responding just because itâ??s uncomfortable to speak up, or because you feel that speaking up may have an adverse impact on others. Sometimes you need to respond anyway. However, there are times when responding is not worth the time or the trouble, and of course there are times when a response is called for.
2. Start out by asking the person to explain. In my note to the individual who said Pensacola was moving backwards I asked them to help me understand why they felt that way. First seek to understand. Using the phrase â??help me understandâ?• is a good starting point.
3. Offer to get the facts, or if you have them already, provide them. While the person may not agree, at least you provided objective data.
4. Donâ??t be afraid to ask the person to provide more information they might have to support their own opinion. Yes, it is fine for the person to have their own opinion, but ask for some facts.
5. Accept that you may be wrong. When you ask for data and the person provides it, be willing to be corrected. Be as open to the personâ??s input as you want them to be to yours.

One of my top pieces of leadership advice is do not accept generalities. We have a human responsibility to make people, organizations, and communities better and that may mean pushing to get to the facts, even if it makes us uncomfortable in the moment. Often it will be worth it in the long run.

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