

Dumb is Smart and Smart is Dumb

By Robert T. Whipple MBA CPLP

In his famous program, “Effective Negotiating,” Chester A. Karrass, makes the observation that, in negotiations, often appearing dumb is a great strategy. The idea is that acting naïve causes the other party to fill in some blanks with information that may ultimately be helpful to you in the negotiation. Conversely, acting as if you know everything is usually a bad strategy, because you end up supplying too much information too early in the conversation. This habit gives your opponent in the negotiation a significant advantage.

As I work with leaders in organizations of all sizes, a similar observation could be made about leadership. Being dumb is sometimes smart, and being too smart is often dumb. Let's examine some examples of why this dichotomy is a helpful concept.

To make enlightened decisions, leaders need good information. It sounds simple, but in the chaos of every day organizational issues, it is sometimes difficult to determine which set of information is true. Rather than blurting out their preconceived notion of what is going on, if leaders would simply act a little confused, like the brilliant detective Colombo, they would elicit far more information from other people. The way to execute this strategy is simple. Refrain from making absolute statements, and ask a lot of open ended questions. This draws out alternate points of view from individuals and allows the leader to hear many nuances before tipping his or her hand.

When leaders display hubris, and expound their perspective on every issue before others have a chance to voice their ideas, it stifles collaboration and creativity. Therefore, being smart is often a dumb strategy. Of course, no rule of thumb works in every situation. Leaders need to know when the time is right to divulge their opinion. Unfortunately, due to over active egos, most leaders like to weigh in on issues far too early. This colors objective conversation and cuts off interesting alternate perspectives.

The same logic holds when making decisions after the information has been gathered. If leaders would say, “I wonder what we should do,” instead of, “Here is what we have to do,” they would draw out the best ideas available. Smart is dumb and dumb is smart in terms of getting a smorgasbord of options from which to choose.

The antidote to this problem is simple. Leaders need to understand this dynamic and catch themselves in the act. By being alert to the dangers of advocating too early, leaders can improve their batting average at allowing everyone to enter the conversation at an appropriate level. Sometimes in a crisis situation, it may be necessary for a leader to be

highly directive and quick on the draw. Usually, it is better for the leader to allow conversation around sensitive issues, and then work with people to find the best solution.

If you are a leader, it is important to catch yourself on this issue and begin to train yourself to have more patience and improve your listening skills. It has been said many times that the Lord gave us two ears and one mouth, because we should listen twice as much as we speak. Many leaders do not understand this simple logic, and it works to their detriment. They are dumb because they are too smart.

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