

IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers and Judges

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

THAT PERSON REALLY IRRITATES ME!

When a client pushes our buttons, we tend to think of that person as “hard to deal with” or “difficult.” Have you noticed, though, that not everyone reacts the same way to that person? Behavior that comes across as difficult to you may be considered strange, but no big deal, to another person. There’s a clue in that – perhaps you don’t need to be as bothered as you make yourself!

Here are some practical techniques to employ to better manage encounters with troublesome clients (or opposing counsel or judges). First, realize early on that the person is getting under your skin. When you recognize it, label it. Say to yourself, “I find myself getting very irritated when I have to deal with X. Isn’t that interesting?” Labeling is different from complaining about a client’s annoying actions or blaming the client for your reaction.

A second option: Be curious rather than furious. Ask yourself what the client is doing and why. There’s a fork in the road here, and you make the choice. Do you immediately go down the blame route, or are you able to use the “isn’t that interesting” path? When you make that choice early, you manage the interaction rather than allowing the interaction to manage you.

When we analyze someone’s behavior, we are likely to consider it in new ways. Often we learn something in the process. For example, when someone says you should do something, it usually aggravates us. When the directive comes from a “difficult” person, it’s a chance to remind yourself not to do the same thing.

Curiosity gives you that insight and keeps you from being upset in the process.

In dealing with someone who rubs you the wrong way, there is a solid concept that, when applied to your own internal processes, can make a big difference. Namely, you may not be able to change another person’s behavior, but you can change the way you react to the behavior.

Your reaction is where you undeniably can exercise control. Rather than feeling irritated, choose to respond in ways that work better for you.

Attorneys tell me that one of the most practical lessons from my seminar is the pause – breathe – choose strategy. In our fast-paced world, we experience many stimuli that generate responses over the course of a day. Here’s an example:

Someone tells you, “You did a lousy job on that assignment!” Pretty strong stimulus, right? When that happens, we’re likely to have an immediate, strong inner reaction: we feel hurt, or angry, or curious.

If we feel hurt, we may withdraw. If we feel angry, we’re likely to get defensive or to attack. But if we feel curious, we’re likely to seek more information and see what we can learn from the exchange.

Most people find that gathering information gets better results than withdrawing or attacking and losing effectiveness. Your inner reaction will be immediate and automatic, happening even before you have a chance to think. So how do you get off autopilot and get to that better choice?

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You put something between your inner and outer responses. Pause, breathe, and choose. Catch yourself before you respond automatically by literally saying to yourself, “Pause.” Take a solid breath that assists in that pause. Then, choose your visible response.

You can easily teach yourself this technique. Attorneys often say they’re surprised at how well this works and the difference it makes in their irritation levels.

To recap, use these four tips to manage yourself when you encounter annoying behavior:

1. Recognize that the behavior bothers you, then label it. When you’ve done that, your irritation has a better chance of subsiding.

2. Be curious rather than furious. Avoid the blame route, which only makes you more irritated.

3. Focus on what you control – your reaction, not the other person’s behavior.

4. Practice pause, breathe, and choose. Train yourself to get better and better at this. It’s not hard to learn.

CAL SUTLIFF

MANAGEMENT TRAINER

The author presents a one-day seminar, “Enhancing Your People Skills for Attorneys” and can be reached at calsutliff@aol.com. This article originally appeared in GP Solo eReport, vol. 1, no. 9, April 2012, published by the Solo and Small Firm Division of the American Bar Association. Reprinted with permission.