Slow Down to Go Fast

Career Development

Prior to law school, I worked as a server in a restaurant. I've often said that my experiences back then were particularly valuable in forming my worldview; their relevance certainly rushed back to the fore when I began in-house practice in a department of one. I've sometimes observed, only half-jokingly, that my stint as a server gave me the knowledge that others spend years acquiring an MBA to get, and I was paid while I did it (friends and acquaintances with actual MBAs have repeatedly discouraged me from saying this, though none of them ever waited tables).

Like most workplaces, the restaurant world has its own lingo, sometimes bearing no apparent relationship to its meaning. For example, "86" means the kitchen is out of some menu item. It's deployed variably as a verb ("86 the avocado toast!") or as a preposition ("we are 86 on the buttered coffee!"). My favorite was "in the weeds," which describes a server with more tables than he or she can competently manage because of sheer volume, coinciding needs, or untimely complications.

I once found myself well into this state during a lunch shift, and the owner stopped me in my tracks as I dashed from the kitchen to the dining room with a large tray of hot plates balanced on one shoulder. I was incredulous as he put out his hand, halting my forward motion, and said "Stop. Breathe." Couldn't he see all this food was going to get cold? Didn't he know the kitchen was running behind and diners were getting impatient?

Of course he did. He also knew that my approach wasn't the best one. While I stood there, taking in that he wasn't apparently angry with me or concerned that the food would cool, he told me that if I deliberately slowed my pace, even when everyone else wasn't, I'd only add a few seconds to my trip. More importantly, I could use those seconds to think beyond my current task and on to what my next two or three actions should be. That way, I'd gain efficiently in the longer term, get out of "the weeds," and (his words) "not look quite so psychotic when you approach the table." I followed that advice then, and many times since. It served me well with my physical steps, and my diplomatic ones.

A server is often the only one simultaneously connected to all of the varied constituencies in the restaurant, dealing directly with the customers, the kitchen, the front-of-house management, the scullery, and (if so equipped) the servers' assistants and the bartenders. This often puts the server in the position of intermediary, negotiator, and problem-solver. For example, the server, receiving a complaint from a diner about an item, may need to return it to the kitchen for correction. Frequently, the server will translate the diner's feedback into a more solution-oriented communication ("tell the idiot who ruined this steak to get it right this time" becomes "the customer ordered medium-rare, and this is well done").

I recently started a new position,[1] and found myself hearing the restaurant owner's advice from my new boss. The difference here was that I was not "in the weeds" when he gave it; rather, he wanted to make sure I never got there to begin with. He understood the critical need for me to take the time to get to know the business and form relationships with my new colleagues at the outset, and took care to keep the load on my inbox light. It's not that there isn't plenty to do; my position is an addition to the department, predicated on the increased needs of a growing company. He set me up for success by allowing me the time and space to consider my initial steps as I form those connections.

The concept arose again in a team meeting last week, but this time we were discussing the benefit of helping our internal customers and seting a more deliberate pace. The key here, as true now as it was in that restaurant, is to give yourself sufficient time between receiving the stimulus and choosing the response. That way, you can see beyond your immediate decision, and set yourself up to more

adroitly handle whatever arises from it. **Sometimes, slowing down is the best way to ultimately go faster.**

1 That interview I described in my November column worked out!

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