



The Power of Patience

Career Development



It's all about instant gratification.

When your children want something, they want it now. They absolutely, positively cannot wait for it. And they make sure you know about it, immediately and repeatedly.

Kids are smart. They have a clear strategy to their unending requests. They don't expect you to buy them everything, but they know that constant badgering may yield occasional results. If pestering works only 10 percent of the time, it's a worthwhile use of youthful energy.

All parents know that if they can ignore the constant pleas, these urgent desires will usually subside. After a day or two, the desperate childhood need for that one new thing will disappear, replaced by the next must-have item.

It's called the "I'll think about it" technique. It doesn't always work, especially with precocious children, but it's worth a try.

Parents choose the tactic of delay because we don't want to raise spoiled kids. We tell ourselves that if we teach our children to wait for what they want, they will learn to be patient and appreciate delayed gratification. Having the strength to wait for something is a critical life skill.

Now if we adults only followed our own advice.

Adults are horrible at delayed gratification. The existence of any steady disposable income undermines all that our parents taught us. We have the power to wait, but we choose not to.

It doesn't help that we work in a business climate that demands instant gratification. Our clients want quick answers, our CEOs want instant solutions, and our shareholders — the most impatient group in existence — want their profits now.

For in-house lawyers, this is a problem. The product we deliver is advice and solutions; results often take time. How can we deliver a quality work product when impatience is the norm and instant results are the expectation? How can we engage in reflective thought when immediate answers are assumed?

Our goal is to be quick and responsive, but sometimes a complex challenge requires data and deliberation. Satisfying the desire for immediate solutions can be disastrous when our advice is wrong and time would have allowed for a critical correction.

There is a narrow window of redemption:

“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response.”

I am not sure who penned that quote. Most writers credit Viktor Frankl, the Austrian neurologist and Holocaust survivor, but I cannot find those words in any of his published works. Steven Covey, the American author and businessman, uses variations of the quote in his writings, but attributes it to an unknown source.

Regardless of the author, that statement perfectly describes our opportunity to think. That sliver of time between the stimulus and response, either before we hit “reply” on a panicked email chain or before we blurt out a half-baked oral response on the fly. However brief, this is our time to think, if only to realize that more thought is required.

For an in-house lawyer — constantly hounded for immediate solutions — tactical responses are a necessary tool. If you can create a strategic delay, the urgency will often subside. Even if it's just a few minutes or hours, you can take the time to ponder.

Most often all that is needed is a quick reply of: “Got it. I'll get right back to you.” Sometimes a more substantive holding statement is required, like: “I can give you an answer now, but it won't be what you want to hear. Can I look into this?” Your client, coworker, or CEO will appreciate the acknowledgment. After some reasonable time, they will respect your thoughtful answer even more.

Your colleagues may not pester you with repetitious requests like your children. They may not be consciously trying to wear you down but they have the same desire for instant results. As dedicated professionals, we naturally want to acquiesce. We want to make them happy.

Sometimes, however, you are better served ignoring your legal training and recalling your parental skills instead.

Just say, "I'll think about it," albeit in a more diplomatic way.

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