Know When to Walk Away

Career Development

My husband and I just returned from our annual summer vacation. Instead of our usual week-long trip, we splurged and took almost two weeks. If you're like me, and you're the solo in-house counsel, taking two weeks off is a true luxury. Even if you do book two consecutive weeks of vacation, I imagine you are still plugged in or even "on-call." If you have the rare opportunity to completely unplug from the demands of the office, you most likely have someone covering any issues that may happen while you're away.

In preparing the office for my absence, I put together detailed instructions and files for other personnel to use as guidelines for circumstances that may arise. With my written instructions, the non-attorneys were able to navigate the contractual issues. However, one unexpected situation arose regarding the emotional intelligence of one of our customers' negotiators that I was not prepared for. As a reminder, "emotional intelligence" is defined as "the capacity to be aware of, control, and express one's emotions, and to handle interpersonal relationships judiciously and empathetically."

In recounting the incident to me, my stand-in coworker informed me that the negotiator, who we will call "Ted," appeared quite upset with the fact that he was not able to deal directly with me. He wanted to postpone the entire contract discussion until my return. At one point throughout the negotiations, he even hung up on my CEO. I had never experienced this type of behavior from Ted in all my past dealings with him. It made me think that the issue may not be about our company. At some point, cooler heads prevailed and we received correspondence from a different customer representative who had reviewed and accepted the changes to my drafted terms.

When I returned, a final contract was executed. However, I felt it necessary to follow up with the customer to get an understanding of what happened between Ted and our personnel. I called a trusted contact at the other organization who has been a reliable and consistent negotiator on other

projects. As she and I performed a mini postmortem of the events of the previous week, she recalled that she had seen Ted become quite upset at a company meeting announcing recent organizational changes. Aha! Light bulbs went off in both our heads. The company had experienced changes in management, procedures, and even employee benefits in the last year since I dealt with Ted. Perhaps the recent shifts in staffing and benefits had affected Ted enough to cause his displeasure to spill over into dealing with outside personnel. If that was the case, it helped to explain his behavior. It did not, however, excuse or justify it. My counterpart agreed. Regardless of the day you are having, it is a disservice to both you and your company to let a bad attitude overflow into your communications with others, regardless of whether whether they are internal or external to your organization.

> “It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you’ll do things differently.”
>
> Warren Buffett

I have no doubt that many of us can identify with a situation where someone has redirected their anger and irrationally aimed it at us. We just happen to be the first person present after their prior “emotional collision.” Even more common, can you recall a time when you directed a harsh tone or words at a perfectly innocent bystander who had the dubious privilege of being the last straw? We have all been on both sides of that scenario.

My mother gave me some great advice many years ago, saying, “If you get mad, the other person has already won.” She was right and yet I would take that advice one step further: “If you get mad, you have already lost.” It is our choice whether or not we allow a bad communication to get worse. With email, a good rule of thumb is to take a few hours, or maybe even a whole day to respond — especially if you feel your blood pressure increasing at the thought of the correspondence. Your organization and your health will greatly benefit from cultivating your emotional intelligence in dealing with people.

Kenny Rogers said it quite eloquently many years ago:

> “Know when to hold them, know when to fold them; Know when to walk away, and know when to run.”

Emotional intelligence involves more than just the ability to control one’s emotions; it also involves knowing when to delay an engagement until you have your emotions under control.

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