



Which Dog Do You Feed?

Career Development



There is an adage that I am sure many of you have heard: “You never get a second chance to make a first impression.” As I reflect back on my time in law school, I saw the truth of this statement manifested many times over three years. Although many memories are fuzzy from those mountain dew-fueled late nights and coffee-fueled days, some recollections that remain sharply in focus are centered on the people I met. People who sweated with me through research, writing, and exams remain firmly planted in some of my fondest memories. Others take up space in my head because of their eccentricities.

And then there is the third category of people — remembered not because of their friendship or eccentricity but because of the challenge they presented. The personalities seemed more at home in conflict than in resolution. One person in particular stands out and exemplifies the truth about first impressions. For the purpose of this account, I’ll call him Greg. The first week of classes, I shared many professors with the same group of students. As with any group of strangers who are getting acquainted with each other, jokes are made in an attempt to foster camaraderie. I don’t remember the joke I made on day two in class but apparently whatever I said rubbed Greg the wrong way.

For the next three years, he held that joke against me. I know this because in my last year of law school, I was talking to a very close friend of mine who also happened to have a fairly good acquaintance with Greg. I remember saying to her, “You know, I never quite seemed to form any kind of friendship with Greg. I have tried to get to know him but he doesn’t seem friendly to me.” She responded, “That’s because he’s always held that joke you made that first week against you.” I was dumbfounded. For three years, a joke I made as an insecure first-year student fresh out of college was held against me? That revelation was the beginning, but not the end, of my exposure to what I will label “the conflict personality.”

I've encountered many personality types over the years and have tried my best to exercise emotional intelligence. I have learned that honesty, integrity, and humility go a long way. When someone upsets me, I try to see things from their perspective and approach them face to face and not through emails. It's amazing what a simple in-person conversation can accomplish. I have learned that a person's behavior can be motivated by any number of factors such as frustration with a plan or a policy, issues in their personal life, grief, insecurity, or uncertainty about their job. I try not to take someone's reaction personally and instead make an effort to understand what is driving the emotion. I have found this approach to be fairly successful with people both internally and externally to my organization.

Successful with all but one type of personality... you guessed it: the conflict personality. For some reason, some people do not want to resolve a conflict. They act passive-aggressively and when confronted head-on, refuse to admit a problem or even engage in communication. I have tried to understand and find a way to crack the enamel on this personality but to no avail. It's like dealing with an addict who refuses to admit she has a problem. I am reminded of the following story:

An old Cherokee chief was teaching his grandson about life...

"A fight is going on inside me," he said to the boy.

"It is a terrible fight and it is between two dogs."

"One is evil — he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, self-doubt, and ego. The other is good — he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith."

"This same fight is going on inside you — and inside every other person, too."

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which dog will win?"

The old chief simply replied, "The one you feed."

I have learned that no matter how much emotional intelligence I exercise, I have no control over which dog a person chooses to feed. And by dwelling too much on the other person's actions or reactions, I am letting them live "rent free" in my head and that is not emotionally intelligent at all.

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