

The ABCs of Work: Equanimity

Career Development



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Is there a formula for success at work? Are there simple rules that you can follow to increase your chances of getting what you want? Career Path columnist James Bellerjeau thinks the answer is yes. In this series of articles The ABCs of Work, he shares the formula with you

Today's topic is **Equanimity**.

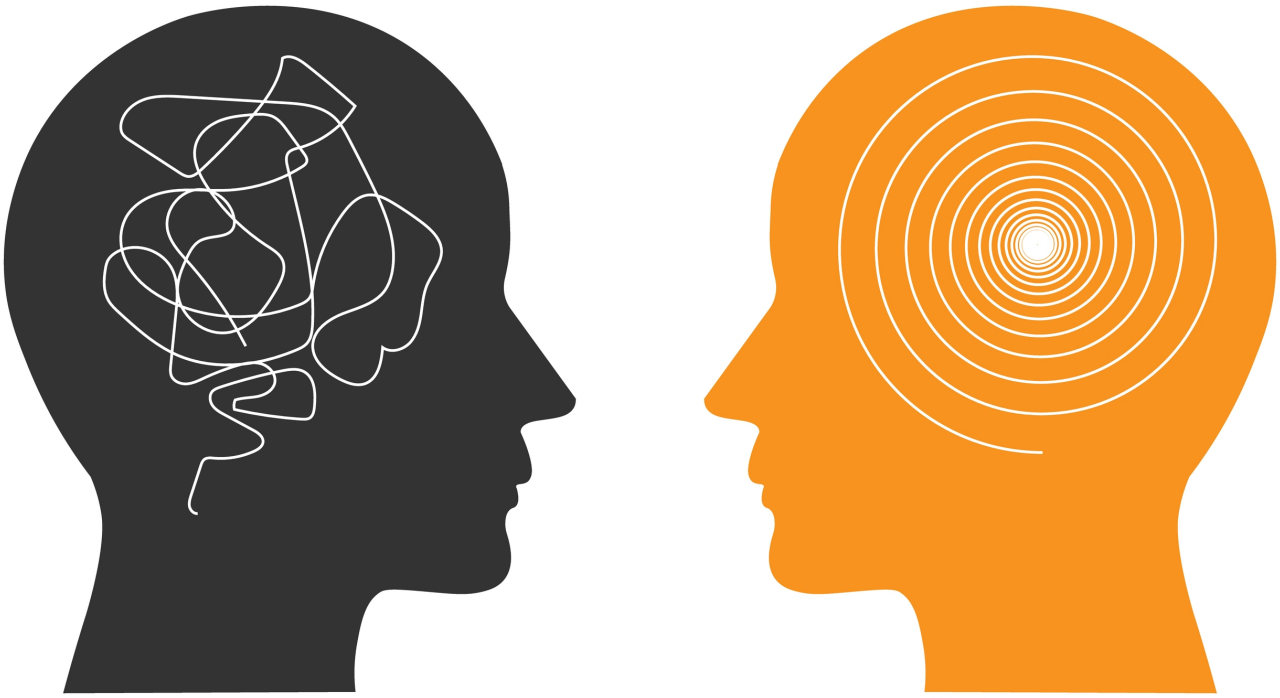
Last time we talked about Diversity in the sense that we must keep an open mind and expose ourselves to multiple ideas. Today we talk about the mindset that is most conducive to long-term success: equanimity.

Is equanimity just another plug for the Stoics?

I'm a big fan of Stoic philosophy. At its core, Stoicism calls upon us to recognize the difference between things that are in our control and things that are not. Very many external circumstances are outside our control, and this includes much of what we're confronted with at work. A supplier going bankrupt. A customer re-opening negotiation on a completed framework agreement. An employee

raising discrimination allegations. A regulator asking for more information about something your chief financial officer said at an investor conference. The list is depressingly long.

When everything in our environments is unstable, what is it that we can control? In a word, our thoughts. We have control over how we respond to the situations we find ourselves in. Can we stay calm, maintain our composure, and keep our tempers? This is the Stoic ideal, and interestingly enough, close to the definition of equanimity.



Having control over your thoughts can assist with your response to certain situations. Yellow duck / *Shutterstock.com*

The Stoic's highest possession is his or her own well-ordered mind. Applying our reason to our situations, we can ensure that we act consistently with our values. We may not be able to control outcomes, but we can control our inputs, which includes our thoughts and our actions.

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Maintaining peace amidst chaos is what sets high-level lawyers apart from the average lawyers. TRONIN ANDREI / *Shutterstock.com*

There's another benefit to maintaining equanimity amidst difficult circumstances. If you do so, you will stand out, because most people cannot. When confronted with indignities and unfairness, which are all too common at work, most people give vent to their frustrations. This is temporarily satisfying but does nothing to make things better.

If you can bring a smile to your face when all others frown, people will want you by their side in a crisis. If you can keep your cool no matter how unpleasant the mess you're in, people will trust you to make good decisions. I wrote about this in Keep Your Cool. It's one way average lawyers make the leap to next-level performance.

Question, comment? Contact Career Path columnist James Bellerjeau.

Should we ever avoid equanimity?

In the spirit of keeping an open mind and questioning whether our approach is always suitable (see last week's piece *The ABCs of Work* — Diversity), is it ever OK not to be even-keeled?

I would say yes and no. No in the sense that you should never really lose your self-control. But yes in the sense that it is sometimes appropriate to display genuine emotion. Let me give you a couple examples.

You are the person responsible for communicating the impact of new laws and regulations to management and business colleagues. Because these laws and regulations slow down the business, while increasing cost and risk, no one is ever happy with the news you're bringing. Indeed, they are sorely tempted to vent *their frustrations*, resulting in your taking hits as the messenger.

You counteract this by displaying your own emotion — you agree that the new law and regulation is annoying, distracting, misguided, etc. You express frustration at ignorant regulators who impose stupid rules on hardworking, honest businesses. You make sure to put yourself on the same side of the desk as your business colleagues in venting. And only then do you talk about how to deal with the new law in a sensible way.

And don't underestimate cultural norms. Your Spock-like logical approach might work wonders with many Chinese, American, and German colleagues, who are known for often appearing dispassionate, but your southern European colleagues are used to seeing a little heat. I still remember my friendly Italian general manager pulling me aside to tell me I needed to show more emotion.

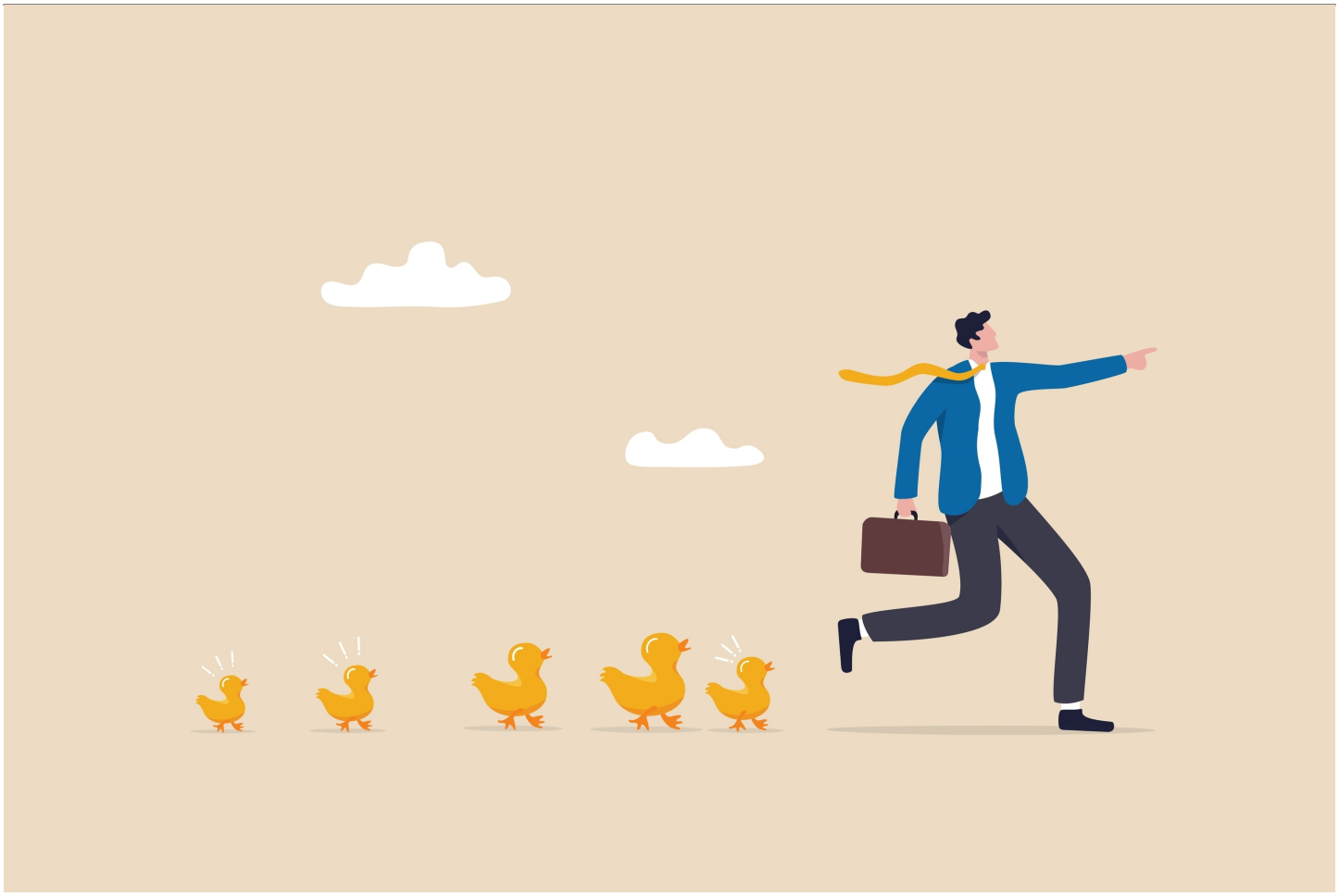
"James," he said, "I don't know whether you really care about an issue until I see you get excited about it." That was a valuable lesson. I now pay close attention to my feelings before making a conscious choice whether to amplify or dampen them, depending on the moment's need.

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Honorable mentions

Leveraging a single tip to drive work success is a heavy lift, even a tip as important as equanimity. Our formula will necessarily be incomplete. But the formula has impact, and all the more so because we've kept things simple. Here, to finish, are some honorable mentions to serve as food for thought:

- **Emotional intelligence** — Knowing your own emotional makeup and how your behaviors impact others are hallmarks of emotional intelligence. This is closely related to what we've been discussing today.
- **Equity** — I debated including this at all, but I want to be honest with you even when it is painful. You are likely to be confronted with the desire to promote equity at work. All I'll say is beware. Equity is not equality, and some people pushing the former are typically not interested in the latter. The unintended consequences could be severe.
- **Example** — Serve as an example to others. This is particularly true when you are in a leadership position. But I say serve as an example even when no one is watching. You are also serving as an example to yourself. You hold yourself to a high standard because *you want to*, not because anyone is forcing you to.



By leading with integrity and setting a great example, others will follow. eamesBot / *Shutterstock.com*

Be well.

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Bellerjeau served for two decades as group general counsel for Mettler-Toledo International Inc., an S&P 500 company with its worldwide headquarters in Greifensee, Switzerland. He then led Mettler-Toledo's global Sustainability program for several years through June 2021.

Bellerjeau shares thoughts on how to live a good life at Klugne. You can also follow him on LinkedIn.