

THE ART OF REFRAMING

I was presenting a workshop at a conference, one of several concurrent sessions in the morning to be followed by a gala luncheon. There were about 100 people in my group and things seemed to be going well for the first 20 minutes. Then a woman at the back of the room gathered up her purse and writing materials and quietly walked out. My immediate thought was, "Gee, I must have been a big hit with her." The moment passed, I regained my confidence and carried on. An hour later the same woman reappeared, sat at the back of the room, opened her workbook and started to participate in the session. After 15 minutes she again picked up her things and left. This time I thought: "Well, there's strike two! She gave me a second chance and I blew it." Again I was taken aback, but quickly put it out of my mind.

At lunch, all the speakers were seated at one table. And guess who was sitting with us? She came over to me and said, "Your session was terrific. I'm sorry I couldn't stay." ("Yeah, right!" I thought.) She continued: "I'm one of the (conference) organizers and it was my job to slip in and out of the sessions to make sure things were under control. I could see your participants were really enjoying themselves. I wish I could have heard more." I was pleasantly surprised and relieved.

That incident became a touchstone for me, a reminder not to jump to conclusions. It also illustrates that most of our stress comes not from events and situations, but how we interpret them. Things aren't always what they seem.

In addition, it raises an exciting possibility. If stress usually results from the way we think about things, then we can reduce our stress by changing the way we think. The technique for doing this is called Reframing. It's one of the most powerful skills in our stress management repertoire.

We all use reframing at times, spontaneously and by instinct. For example, I made a housecall on a teen-aged boy who was very sick. He had a high fever, raw red sore throat, swollen lymph nodes, and an enlarged liver and spleen. After examining him, I said to his mother, "I'm pretty sure he has infectious mononucleosis. I just want to confirm it with a blood test." She immediately became alarmed and said, "He's got Mono?"

Just then I noticed, out of the corner of my eye, that the kid was smiling. A moment ago he looked really sick, but now he looked pretty happy. I asked, "What are you smiling about?" He replied: "I have two exams next week. And I'm not prepared for either of them. Now I'm off the hook." He was right about that. He was too sick to go anywhere. But what he had done in that moment was a classic example of reframing. He had seen an upside to a down situation. We all do this on occasion, but we can learn to do it more consistently and by intention.

When I was writing my first book, it took me four years to find a publisher. When the first rejection letters came in, I got a little discouraged. So I developed other ways of looking at the situation.

1. I did a reality check and admitted that it would be pretty unlikely for an unknown author to find a publisher on the first try. Obviously, the process takes time.
2. "The longer I wait for an acceptance, the more exciting it will be when it finally happens." (which certainly proved true)
3. "It'll make a much better story to tell later on than if I'd found a publisher quickly." ("The saga of how I overcame adversity") Success is more interesting when it involves struggle.
4. "This is a test of my determination and persistence," (plus patience and optimism).

5. "This gives me a chance to keep re-working my manuscript, to make it better." As Tom Peters observed: "Feedback is the breakfast of champions." In retrospect, I'm grateful the manuscript wasn't accepted in its early drafts. I think it's a much better book because of the time-consuming process that was required.

Reframing helped me to manage the feelings of frustration and disappointment. By holding the rejections in a different way in my mind's eye, those letters started to look like rungs on a ladder rather than rebukes from the universe. By changing my thoughts I changed my feelings.

Incidentally, if I'd discovered that the woman left my seminar because she thought I was doing a lousy job, I would have reframed that too -- perhaps by saying, "Well, I guess you can't please everybody all the time."

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