

For those days when you're less than perfect

I like to think that one of the compensations for middle age and unwelcome wrinkles is wisdom and enhanced decision-making abilities. I also like to think that mistakes are a part of my past rather than my present/future. But thinking doesn't make it so! Perhaps the ultimate grace associated with decades of business experience is that you realize more quickly how fallible you really are.

A situation occurred the other day that continued to remind me of my humility. Since the fall of last year, I have been coaching a sr. level executive in the States on a fairly regular basis. These were practical sessions, geared at meeting some of the daily challenges he was facing in his new role. Coincidentally, I was asked by another American colleague, if I would be interested in coaching her husband, a sr. executive in the HR world. Mistake #1 – In a moment of self-aggrandizement, I said, "I would be delighted to talk with him. For your information I've been working over the past 6 months coaching another HR executive who recently moved to the south." She said, "It's not Fred Mertz, is it?" at which point a shocked I blurted, "you know him?" What odds - 296 million people in the United State, and they know each other. Narrow it down because they work for the same mega-conglomerate, but locations in different states. (If only I could master these odds with my lottery purchases.) Mistake #2 – When she told me that they had worked together and she had lost his email address when he changed companies, I recited his contact points before my brain fully engaged.

What to do but fess up. I sent him an email, and made light of the situation under the category of "ain't it a small world". One day later I received The Call. The words I remember that he used: "disappointment, trust, thought of you as my secret weapon, didn't want people to know I wasn't as smart as they thought I was, need to rethink our relationship"None of these are good words to hear.

Fortunately, I avoided Mistakes #3, #4 and #5 (when my insight belatedly kicked in) because I could have made it even worse by justifying, defending and becoming righteous. The experience was a telling one for me, for I chalk it up to another Life Business Lesson. On my office wall, I post my Life Business Lessons, all learned the hard way, so that I don't repeat them. There's one about don't change your price in the middle of a project simply because you did a bad job defining the project in the beginning. There's another one about don't tell a CEO what he wants to hear when your belief is that the opposite should be said. Now I have this third one ready to be framed: Even though you're not a doctor, lawyer or a priest, do not divulge anything about a client whom you're coaching, and that includes the acknowledgement that he is a client being coached. The corollary is do not give out contact information to others without first getting permission from your client. In other words, do not assume that other people will be as open as you might in their place.

Does this story have a happy ending? The jury is still out on it, but it's never an unhappy ending when a lesson has been learned.

I sent my US client the following, and I share it with you in the hope that you might learn this same lesson less painfully than I.

"Hi Fred,

You never know when coaching moments occur, so treat each opportunity that arises as the source of a lesson. When you learn that you have done something wrong (by commission or omission) and it has a negative impact on someone else...."

DON'TS

- Make excuses or stories or try to explain (...excuses are irrelevant, even if they are true)
- Blame anyone else
- Minimize or dismiss the impact of the action on the other person
- Beat yourself up so much afterwards that it

loses proportion...that would allow guilt (an overused emotion) to distract you from the real lesson

DO'S

- Take ownership...(the final choice was always yours)
- Mentally place yourself in their position and allow yourself to feel the pain/hurt/frustration/upset/disappointment that they felt
- Acknowledge what happened
- Say "I'm sorry" with sincerity
- Thank the individual for their courage in sharing it with you (...it's a far easier decision for the other person to not say anything to you and to avoid you; 96% of people who are disappointed never complain...they just leave)
- Keep the situation present so that you understand the lessons from the experience
- Make a commitment to yourself to change that specific behavior in the future, so you don't have to relearn the same lesson
- Realize that trust in you has been abrogated and takes time to recover if it's possible
- Ask what you can do to make it better
- Unselfishly follow up with the individual

Thanks for the lesson, Fred.

As a trainer and personal coach, I've learned with others that the only real way to learn a lesson is to make a mistake. Unfortunately we don't accrue wisdom by reading about other people's mistakes. I remember my mother decades ago saying, I don't want you to make the same mistakes I did. But I did...I had to learn the hard way. But lessons are about relationships, and there's another half to the equation of making mistakes. That's forgiveness. Forgiveness is looking, and listening, and accepting, and finally, letting go. People will always make mistakes. It's forgiving yourself and forgiving others.

Thank goodness I'm not too old to learn!