

choice

We all need to make a decision

By Lehan Stemmet, Ph.D.

For many years I have been a peer reviewer for a number of research journals and one thing I often see in organizational research publications is a set of recommendations highlighting what organizations and managers should do for people to help them perform better, grow, be more engaged and less stressed, more satisfied in their work and more resilient. The list goes on. In itself there is nothing wrong with those suggestions, but they usually lack context and seem overly generalized with little purpose beyond “keeping people happy”. Linking this with a keen interest in seeing people achieve their full potential, there are a couple of points we need to keep in mind when we aim to “keep people happy” at work.

For over 20 years I have had an interest in resilience, stress and overall personal development and have benefitted from having thousands of conversations with numerous people from all sorts of interesting backgrounds. My passion is to see people achieve their full potential, not just for their own sake, but also to contribute positively to their families, friends, communities, organizations, countries and the world. I have also read widely, researched and dug deep into biographies of people who achieved amazing feats despite tremendous challenges in their lives, and also those who have not coped well with life. I’ve worked alongside some of the most renowned researchers and have met some incredible people over the years – with varying levels of success as we would define it in the modern western world with all of its worldly glamour.

Similarly I have also had the privilege of being in leadership roles since my junior primary school days, in sports teams, cultural activities and eventually also in the business world in several industry sectors. I have coached and mentored several people in various areas of life and business and have also taught undergraduate and postgraduate courses to school leavers and senior executives who have decided to return to tertiary education. I have worked with some of the poorest communities one could imagine and some of the largest multinational organizations in the world today.

I mention all of these things to provide a platform for something I have observed over the years in all of these contexts and environments... it relates to the first paragraph above. The challenge with the first paragraph is that such statements as the one mentioned often divert our attention to the importance of external influences and how it impacts on us internally. This is problematic in a world which seems to become more and more focused on feelings and emotions and the impact of external factors on our “inner world”. It minimizes the importance and value of logical thinking and being responsible for one’s own thoughts and behavior.

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Of course we cannot always control what happens to us, what happens around us and what people do or don't do for us or to us, nor for what they say or don't say. What I have observed during the years is that despite your best efforts no amount of motivation, inspiration and learning and development will lead to better engagement, satisfaction and happiness for some people. This is not meant to be a negative comment, but rather one to help you prioritize where you place your focus. Some people may need more support or specialist help than what you are able to provide and you may do them a favor by rather referring them to someone else. Often people may need to hear a specific thing said in a specific way, at a right time by a specific person, and that person may not be you. This applies to us in the business world as much as it applies to our personal lives.

Don't be too quick to judge though, because the principle noted above applies to all of us. We all fall into this trap of self-pity at times and wish that someone else could take our problems away. We wish for someone else to be responsible for our satisfaction, development, motivation and overall thoughts and behavior. Taking ownership of our thoughts and behavior is not easy, but it is effective. As much as no amount of motivation, inspiration, learning and development provided for someone else can change them unless they want to; none of that can help you unless you want to improve, think better, feel better and do better.

It requires conscious effort, logical thinking, commitment and resolute determination. It means owning your life and not relying on anyone else for your motivation, engagement, development and happiness. You can ask other people to help with a number of things, but building your logical thinking, commitment, motivation, inspiration, attitude, behavior and happiness is simply nobody else's responsibility. When we finally decide to take ownership and responsibility for our lives we actually start developing.

I have seen this happen countless times with individuals in different contexts. People who continuously blame other things, people or events simply don't do very well in life, whether it is physically, emotionally, mentally or spiritually. The point that we all need to take ownership of our thoughts and behavior doesn't automatically give others the right to do and speak to us the way they want to and not accept any responsibility for those actions. The point of this short post is that despite what they say, do, don't say or don't do; each of us needs to take responsibility for our thoughts and behavior and development. So many people I speak to blame someone or something in their lives for some of their quirky or less desirable behavior, but never acknowledge the contribution those things or people have made to their determination and success when it is obvious that it must've contributed to who they have become in a negative and positive sense. If you are going to blame the hard things in your life for the challenges in your behavior, thinking and emotions; you also need to give it at least some credit for the good things in your life, such as your level of determination, success, etc.

Let me be clear: nobody has the right to treat anyone without respect. But nobody improves by victimizing themselves in whatever context and for whatever reason. Nobody develops unless they want to. Nobody stands up from adversity unless they want to. Nobody seeks help unless they want to. Nobody commits to anything unless they want to. Nobody builds grit and resilience unless they want to. I often say that the problem you have been complaining about for so long is probably not a big enough problem if you have not yet even attempted to do anything constructive and proactive about it. Importantly: proactive and constructive. It must start with you and it must be constructive. Complaining, for example, meets the proactive criterion, but not the constructive criterion and therefore fails as something useful to expend any further energy on.

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In many instances victimizing ourselves about the things we experience is an unrealistic and unhelpful activity simply because what you experience doesn't always happen to you, but simply happens as a consequence of the journey that we are on. By way of an analogy: If you travel from point A to point B and end up sitting in traffic, the traffic doesn't happen to you. It affects everyone who is on that journey simply because that is the route they have taken. Learning from the experience will likely benefit you and others as well... and it would be unwise to take the same route again unless there is absolutely no other way. Just don't get stuck on the route and on one spot during the journey. Keep moving and also keep an eye out for others who may need a hand on that route. Sometimes this is a way you can contribute to them too... an overheated car, someone who ran out of fuel, a flat tire... you may be who they have been waiting for to give them a hand so that they can also continue on.

So in a nutshell, we all sometimes need a shoulder, helping hand, wise words of encouragement and perhaps even a hard word to get on with it. It is not easy to develop personal responsibility for our thoughts and behavior, but the benefits far outweigh years or even decades of unhappiness, dissatisfaction, unforgiveness, anger, spite, envy, regret and waiting for the world and those around us to buffer us against the challenges of life. The people we rely on also have their own burdens. If each of us take responsibility and consider ways to contribute rather than continually wait with folded arms or cupped hands as inadvertently suggested by many of the research articles I have reviewed over the years, the world, our communities, and organizations might just become a better place for you, me and them. No amount of political correctness and legislation can replace our responsibility to own our thoughts and behavior.

Don't underestimate the commitment it takes to challenge and develop your own thoughts and behavior. Don't underestimate the commitment it took someone who you currently admire for their accomplishments and clarity of thought. Often it simply means accepting that life sometimes throws us a challenge and sometimes an opportunity and that it is unrealistic to think everything will and should always go well. The biggest issue many people have with problems in their lives is that they think they should not have problems to deal with. Find out what other mentally tough people have done - and keep doing - to maintain clarity of thought, and to continue behaving in a proactive and constructive way despite perhaps faltering at times - people who seem goal directed and who achieve the things you admire. Read about their lives. Find out what makes them tick, what they did to change the course of their lives and to have a positive impact on their families, communities, organizations, etc. It is your choice. We all need to make a decision, for our own sake... but the world, our organizations, our communities and our families also need us to make the right choice.

