



THE Learning Advantage

Mobley's Musings: Awfulizing - Accentuating the Awful

When I began drafting this article, the coronavirus had yet to spread beyond China. Now that it's a pandemic, this Musing about "awfulizing" takes on even greater meaning. It's important that we neither downplay nor falsely exaggerate this virus and its impacts. Stay healthy, control what you can, and do things that increase positivity: take deep, cleansing breaths, exercise, engage in things you enjoy, laugh, count your blessings, and talk with friends and loved ones.

Recently a client was updating me on what was going on in his life, and he described several situations he was confronting. His organization was restructuring to better align with customer priorities, and he was sure his new boss would be a loser. I asked what made him think that. He explained that he'd finally begun working for someone he respected and he just knew it wouldn't last. I asked what evidence he had for that expectation and, of course, he had none.

Anticipating this bad-boss scenario, he was applying for his "dream job" at a company he'd long admired. But he was sure he wouldn't get an offer even after several interviews. I asked him what made him so certain. He had lots of reasons, all possibilities but none grounded in actual facts.

Then he mentioned he had a great idea for a book. He was clearly passionate about the topic and had given it a lot of thought; he'd already written over a hundred pages. But he was sure no one would publish it. Again I asked why he thought he wouldn't find a publisher and again he had no concrete evidence.

On a personal note, he mentioned his wife wanted to take a cruise for their anniversary. I said that sounded fun, but he was sure it would be awful. Even though he'd never been on a cruise before, all he could envision was everything that could go wrong.

I teased him, describing how he was "awfulizing" all these situations that many people might consider positive opportunities. What benefit was he getting, I asked, by expecting only worst-case scenarios? He was taken aback, unaware of his consistent Debbie-Downer attitude. Upon reflection he said he was probably trying to manage his expectations: he didn't want to get his hopes up only to have them crushed if he didn't achieve what he wanted.

How can that attitude—always expecting disappointment—ever help us achieve our goals? Our attitude has an undeniable impact on how we approach both our personal and professional lives. If my client put as much effort into imagining positive outcomes as he did negative ones, he might discover ways to improve the likelihood of achieving satisfaction. Going wholeheartedly after something we care passionately about is more likely to bring success than holding back for fear of disappointment.

Sandy



Ask Sandy

Should leaders have deep technical skills or focus on strategy?

I see leaders debating whether to go deeper in their field or maintain a high-level focus that emphasizes strategy. This dilemma particularly affects technology leaders. Some believe that at higher leadership levels you don't need to have strong technical knowledge; hire smart people and let them do

what they do best. Others believe that if you don't stay on top of technology you won't be knowledgeable enough to lead a technical organization. Is it possible to be both technical and strategic?

One leader, Chris, thinks the ability to do both is critical in his work. He needs to be strategic when talking with senior leaders and setting direction for his organization. But he also needs to have deep skills to help staff solve technical problems so they can meet their goals and move forward.

Another leader, Phyllis, realized she needed to let go of the technical in order to focus on the strategic. She had a strong technical background and found herself getting too deep into design issues, causing her staff to feel micromanaged. I worked with her to determine the degree of technical knowledge she needed to be able to assess the quality of her team's work while providing strategic leadership.

If you focus solely on the strategic you may risk becoming irrelevant. No matter your organization's industry sector, staying on top of changes and trends will always matter. Being proficient in the current programming language probably will not.

Learning for Leaders: Assess how confident you feel in providing direction to staff. That will help you determine whether to stay at a high level or go deeper.

Coaches Corner: When conducting 360-degree assessments for leaders, consider whether the leader needs deeper technical competence or a more strategic approach.

If you have questions you'd like Sandy to address in future newsletters, email them to sandy@learningadvantageinc.com



Flexibility: A Key Leadership Trait

Flexibility is a key that unlocks creativity, resilience, and happiness, allowing us to rebound when things don't go as planned. And it's something we can learn and enhance in ourselves. Without the ability to be flexible, you can be stumped when the one way you know how to accomplish something isn't viable. For example, if you only know one route home but an accident blocks the road, you may think you have no option but to sit and wait, whereas someone who is more flexible might investigate back roads to find an alternate way home.

In the workplace, flexibility is integral for collaboration. A leader who has a rigid mindset will likely have trouble finding solutions that work for multiple parties. By being flexible and seeing beyond their own points of view, leaders can create synergies that help solve current challenges and strengthen relationships.

In physics, there is a principle of cybernetics that says the element in a system that has the most flexibility has the most influence. Imagine two tennis players: one has a terrific serve but a poor backhand. The other player doesn't have one great skill but is good at many things, allowing her to be more flexible. She can hit the ball to her opponent's backhand and win the point.

If you've found yourself relying on your terrific serve to address challenges, consider changing up your routine with fresh approaches. Start simple: If you normally put your socks on your right foot first, start with your left foot instead. Use your non-dominant hand for tasks like brushing your teeth or eating. Becoming flexible requires you to slow down and be more conscious of what you are doing, maybe even more present. But keep in mind that changing all your routines can be overwhelming, so start by doing just one or two things differently.

Your unconscious routines may be the most difficult to change. For help, ask close co-workers, friends or family members to point out patterns they see you engaging in. A colleague might note, for instance, that no matter what solutions she offers for a problem, your first response is "no," even though you typically change your mind later. Next time try responding, "Yes, and" If you always begin a conversation by sharing a story about yourself, ask about the other person first. Several clients have discovered that simply changing up how they begin conversations with their direct reports — either by leading with their own point of view or asking others to share theirs first — can have surprising positive results.

Trying something new is a sure-fire way to increase flexibility. You might take a class on astronomy, join a local Meetup group for vintage car enthusiasts, or sign up with a cozy mystery book club. Making friends and learning different skills will bring new ideas and expand your possibilities.

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