

Bob Gunn, Editor

Not for Sissies

BY ROBERT W. GUNN & BETSY RASKIN GULLICKSON

Can anger be a good thing? Last month in this column we wrote that anger is our enemy. Have you ever been swept away by anger? Ever find yourself screaming, slamming doors, even throwing something? Your harsh language may have caused people to avoid you

or may even have stirred up trouble.

Yet some people point to the upside of anger. Oncologists, for example, may urge patients to foment anger as a way of unleashing energy to fight their disease. In this vein, record-setting cyclist turned advocate for cancer survivorship Lance Armstrong issued a press release in January 2007 that said, in part, “Impatience got me over countless mountain passes, across the finish line in New York City, and through four rounds of ruthless chemotherapy 10 years ago.” He gave an argument in favor of anger: “Patience is a polite quality and often appropriate, but it rarely gets things done.... Patient people may accept the status quo, but the status quo isn’t working for us.”

We see two problems with the perspective that disses patience. First, indulging anger is playing with fire. Life is an unending stream of



experiences transmitted by the senses or emotions linked to our thoughts. Every reaction, no matter how much energy lies behind it, is simply our thoughts flowing faster

and faster down a deep mental riverbed. As they move downstream, they pick up our story lines, memories, assumptions, and anticipations. Hence, unchecked anger can eddy into speech or action replete with aggressiveness. Once that escalation begins, there’s no telling where it will end. Inevitably, we’ll increase the upset in other people and, sooner or later, add to our own suffering.

We submit that patience has been given a bad rap. Patience isn’t passivity or weakness; it isn’t lying down as a doormat. Patience is actually a powerful state of mind fueled by insight and vision. More than that, it requires energy and willpower. For a leader, patience is a synonym for “resolve.”

Consider, for example, the CEO who recently came to us with frustration building toward anger. His firm has an audacious goal. To make a giant leap in its industry standing, it recruited senior talent and mapped a fantastic change strategy. And yet the change initiative wasn’t really moving. The CEO sees that team members haven’t engaged on the emotional level. He can’t understand why and wants to get things rolling by “doing whatever it takes.”

Open up the toolbox, and let's see what we can throw at the CEO's problem. Reorgs. MBOs. Project management with stepped-up deadlines. Motivational workshops. Turn up the heat, push harder.

But before those plans roll too far downstream, reflect on the starting assumption that the team is somehow at fault for not having achieved emotional engagement quickly. Hesitancy or reluctance reflects a universal truth: Everyone is insecure in the unknown. Instead of being a spark for frustration or anger, the team's lack of engagement should remind the leader to show forbearance. He must exercise the dynamics of patience: Set a clear intention and direct his will toward that intention, holding the mental space into which others can step with confidence (or, at least, with fear in check).

But how does a leader harness the power of patience?

The phrase "remain like a rock" reorients us. It points to resisting action, avoiding ill-considered speech. It isn't a question of "shutting down emotionally." Rather, it's a discipline of taming the mind. Refrain from giving voice to negativity; restrain angry action; regain mental balance. Escalation isn't the solution; eruption isn't the path to resolution. No matter how urgently we feel the need to lash out or vent our hostility, the right response is to "remain like a rock" until we can regain our sensibility.

In other words, when we feel ourselves getting hooked by negative emotional energy, why not spit the hook out? That process of letting go takes but a nanosecond. Suddenly, we find ourselves present.

How do you cultivate this ability to be like a rock in the face of the most upsetting circumstances? The

*"I'm not as strong as
I might be,
but I'm patient...
Patience is very necessary
in a leader,"*

LORD TORANAGA (ADVISING A LIEUTENANT
IN JAMES CLAVELL'S *SHOGUN*)

first step is simply to notice that you have become "triggered." Sense the emotional tensing, that urge to shut down, the welling up of urgency, or that jolt of agitated energy. Hear the common words for habitual reactions: So and so did such and such and ticked me off. I felt hurt. He ignored me! I must be a bad person. He can never do anything right.

Right then you have the chance to avoid a habitual reaction. Instead of allowing a conditioned response to play out, notice your train of thoughts. Ever had a driver cut you off in heavy traffic? Fear or anger wells up, but the moment passes. Everyone is okay as long as we just keep heading down our chosen road and don't act on our reaction.

Betsy lives among the redwoods in northern California. No matter how upset she gets, she knows that simply by putting her feet outside her back door, she is in the ageless, present forest. No matter where we reside, we can send our thoughts to the deepest glade in the forest where everything is still, quiet, and calm. We can tap into the feeling of ageless tranquility, waiting for our minds to clear with patience—with resolve.

Even if a "trigger" overtakes you like a speeding motorcycle coming on your blind side, you still have a chance to stay on track. Sometimes that story line is so familiar that you'll feel compelled to act, to lash out. After all, aren't you justified?! Someone needs to tell the culprit to

stop, to get his attention with a sharp word or pointed elbow. And yet it still isn't too late. You have the choice of not speaking or not acting. Granted, this takes tremendous discipline and practice. Habits of a lifetime aren't changed overnight. Recalling the image of a forest or putting one on your Web browser might be a sufficient reminder. Discover what works for you—perhaps just standing up, walking into another room, or taking a deep breath creates the mental space to quiet your thinking and allow the storm to pass.

Of course, sometimes an outburst overpowers your intentions. Even then, it still is isn't too late to take something positive from the experience. Replay the event, discover the point when you felt the initial impatience. That annoyance. That edge. Such perception can be an important step forward. Mere recognition opens the possibility that next time you'll notice the tug at its first, most subtle sign, giving you plenty of time to stop, to lie down in the forest, to become like a rock.

When it's the leader whose buttons are pushed, team productivity can be shot for a day, week, or more. The patient leader holds her anger in check. Thus, she allows others to step up to challenges with confidence and verve.

Patience isn't for sissies. ■

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