Trying My Patience

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“Patience is quiet hope and trust that things will turn out right. You wait without complaining. You are tolerant and accepting of difficulties and mistakes. You picture the end in the beginning and persevere to meet your goals. Patience is a commitment to the future.” – *The 52 Virtues Project*

Mother’s Day reminded me that patience, while a virtue, is not one of my best qualities. At some point during the day my teenage daughter remarked, “But let’s face it Mom, you’re not very patient.” Patience and motherhood go hand in hand. At least they are supposed to. For this mother, patience is not instinctive, but practiced one mistake or trying circumstance at a time.

While patience often tops the list of essential “parenting skills,” it is rarely mentioned in the context of managing performance or risk in the workplace. Yet it is easy to lose patience with the people around us—whether they are at home or in the work environment. And cultivating patience is arguably *essential* to effective governance, volunteer management, donor relations, and of course, customer service.

Last week I found myself at the end of a fraying rope of patience while trying to arrange for the installation of a kitchen appliance. Each person I spoke to repeated the same incorrect statement (that I was missing an essential system component) and appeared unconcerned with my growing frustration. Finally, a representative came on the line and began by telling me his name. He then said, “I can hear the frustration in your voice and I’m so sorry. Let’s figure out how to resolve this unfortunate situation.” As we progressed through the maze of complex corporate relationships and transaction protocols, the representative finally discovered the error (an incorrect order code!). He patiently persevered until he found someone able to create a new, correct order ticket. The call took over an hour. Yet the customer service manager’s profound patience (with me and with the others with whom we spoke during the hour) inspired patience in me. The hour flew by, and when it was over I gently hung up the phone. The installer arrived in less than an hour.

Some of the frequently cited tips for improving one’s patience with children include **communicating** in a language that children understand; **staying cool and calm** and not reacting in the moment; and having **realistic expectations** rather than expecting children to behave like small adults. Each of these tips can be adapted to address the risk of impatience in the workplace.

1. **First, communicate** — Communication is fundamental to all cherished relationships. And healthy and effective relationships in the workplace—with peers, superiors, subordinates, contractors, clients and

others—are vital to the success of every nonprofit. A text message does not create nor sustain a relationship." Despite the exponential growth of communications options, we're really not any better at communicating openly, candidly and respectfully. Resist the urge to rush when you write and speak, and allow the person you're communicating with time to catch their breath before you insist on a response.

2. **Next, stay cool and calm** — It's easy to get frustrated with a co-worker/volunteer/fellow board member/donor/client/vendor who either "doesn't get it" or who is rightfully or in your view "wrongfully" upset. Yet there is little benefit, and great potential for harm, in allowing frustration to get the upper hand. Stay cool and calm and try to see patience as a strategic lever for getting past what in most cases is only a temporary barrier to a shared goal or worthy mission.
3. **Finally, keep real expectations** — Expecting others to behave and perform exactly as you would (under the circumstances) is unrealistic. Whether you're coaching an employee, designing a volunteer orientation, or asking a board member to take on new responsibilities, remember to temper your expectations with a healthy dose of realism. Discuss your expectations in a candid (never veiled!) way and ask questions to gauge whether those expectations are practical or fanciful.

Let's face it. We're not very patient. And in many cases we're only patiently patient if we see a clear personal benefit for our patience. The former Prime Minister of Great Britain, Margaret Thatcher once said, "I am extraordinarily patient, provided I get my own way in the end." Over time each of us can cultivate and practice patience at home *and* at work. Patience in the workplace is extraordinarily important in an era of unprecedented workplace stress and increasing awareness of workplace bullying. By focusing on communicating more effectively, staying calm and cool when the nerves of others are clearly frayed, and by keeping our expectations grounded in reality, we stand the best chance of turning a frustrated client, donor, employee or even board member into an equally calm, life-long supporter of a nonprofit mission.

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