

“Back When I Knew It All”

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“At the ripe old age of nineteen, when Mama and Daddy didn’t have a clue--back when I knew it all!” The popular song by the duo Montgomery Gentry is a retrospective look by a man, maybe about your age, reflecting on how foolish and immature he was in his youth.

Can you think back to a time when you were unbelievably naïve, or inordinately cocky? When you made brash claims and did some things that would make you shake your head in disbelief today?

“I’m learning so much more than back when I knew it all!” When I think back to those times, I can remember them, but it feels like a different life! For example, I look at my very first performance review in a managerial position after college, and I wonder why they kept me employed! Nothing I did was malicious or even damaging; I was just ignorant. I contributed little of value!

Mark Twain understood the phenomenon. Twain described it this way: “When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years!” We all see the world through our own experiences. It’s so easy to point out the deficiencies that exist “out there.”

“I’ll never be as smart as I once was, back when I knew it all.” As we assume some responsibility in life, some of us transition to thinking that our position requires us to know it all. And we fear that if we don’t know it all, we won’t be respected.

Occasionally I’ll work with an individual who acts like he or she knows how everything should work. The operative word here is “should.” He (or she) can describe what the politicians should do to reduce taxes, how suppliers should be more flexible in charging for their services, and why employees should be more willing to adjust their schedules on short notice. In reality, none of us have enough control to make the world function like we think it should!

My work with leaders stimulates them to consider new possibilities and reflect on why the outcome is different (better) than when they executed the old way. Albert Einstein, recognized by most as an intelligent individual, is quoted as having said, “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result.”

“Man, I can’t believe all the answers I’ve found since back when I knew it all.” At some point in time, most of us realize we don’t have all the answers. Only then do we become open to considering new alternatives.

Though I help my clients build their leadership skills, that’s not their greatest progress. They value most the awareness they gain. They are more willing to actively engage their colleagues and direct reports, seeking collaborative insights. They intentionally ask energizing questions that generate creative thinking about “what could be.”

“I’ve done some growing up. And I’m still growing up.” Good leaders create an environment that encourages growth for the future. They avoid telling others “what should be.” Instead they invite inquisitive exploration, realizing the value of diverse experiences and perspectives. They offer their direct reports challenging opportunities, yet they provide support in the form of clear expectations, resources, and encouragement.

How about you? Imagine if I were to interview those who take direction from you. Would they tell me that you are closer to being a “know-it-all” or to being a person who is open to paradigm-shifting insights? Are you respected for having all the answers or for knowing the right questions to ask?

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