

NOTE: After publication, a colleague offered a related question, appropriate for a coach to ask to stimulate the client to become more aware, perhaps to trigger a powerful insight: "What are you pretending not to notice about this situation?"

Dennis Hooper, November, 2009

On a "Truth" Quest or a "Feel Good" Quest?

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We humans are easily deceived by circumstances and other people in our lives. Do your co-workers, family members, and friends sometimes stretch the truth a bit? Can you admit that maybe sometimes you also deny, ignore, or pretend in ways that make you feel good or look good to others?

Several recent books I've read and conversations with clients have caused me to challenge my beliefs and question my behaviors! For example, I recently wrote about Dan Ariely's book *Predictably Irrational* in which he describes situations where people behave illogically. I must admit that some of his examples apply to me, too.

Several weeks ago, I wrote about *The Principle of the Path* in which Andy Stanley describes that we often follow paths that lead us to places we never expected to be. Yep, I gotta confess--true for me!

Yikes! Why do we all do that? Why do we create problems for ourselves and others by acting irrationally; by denying, ignoring, or pretending; and by stretching the truth?

We recognize these acts in others more easily than in ourselves. Once you see "feel good" behavior so clearly in others, however, you begin to realize that maybe you've not been as objective as you thought all these years. Perhaps you'll confess that you, too, are subject to self-deception.

I've found some enlightenment by asking myself, "Are you on a 'truth' quest or on a 'feel good' quest?" The question tends to be a mild affront. "Are you implying that I'm not seeking the truth?"

Well, yes, I am. We routinely deceive ourselves. We claim to be objective, seeking accuracy and certainty. However, we often seek to accomplish objectives that serve only our own interests.

Andy Stanley writes, "We don't wake up every morning with a burning desire to know what's true, what's right, what's honorable.... We want to be--as in *feel*--happy.... When happiness points in one direction while wisdom, truth, integrity, and common sense point in another, that's when really smart people start doing really stupid things." Those are harsh words, I know, but I ask you to examine your motives.

I was talking about this topic with a colleague who reminded me of the role Henry Fonda played in the 1957 movie "Twelve Angry Men." All the action takes place in the hot jury room (before air conditioning!) of a courthouse. Fonda and eleven others are determining the fate of a young man accused of murdering his father.

All twelve jurors feel the teen could have committed the crime. Eleven of them voted "guilty" to end their responsibility quickly. Fonda is not convinced and asks repeated questions that tap into the experiences and biases of the other jurors. He's not certain the lad is innocent, but the facts don't line up properly.

A highly engaging drama, Fonda's standing up to his fellow jurors is a fine example of someone on a "truth" quest. He asks many questions and spends more time listening than talking. He genuinely considers ideas, and he deeply seeks to understand the perspectives offered by each juror.

What can you do to generate more "truth" quests in your organization? Start with your behavior. When you are faced with a situation, do you choose a response that will deliver a beneficial long-term outcome? Or do you go with what's easy, delivers immediate satisfaction, or makes you look good?

Next, share this article (or at least this concept) with others in your organization. Ask, "How can we help each other recognize when we are on a 'feel good' quest?" That dialogue itself will be hugely beneficial!

Finally, get comfortable confronting folks. Ask the "truth or feel good" question. The first couple of times may feel awkward, but it won't be long until you've elevated the standards within your organization. You'll have introduced a very positive improvement to your culture.

NOTE: When I published “Avoiding the Deception of Confirmation Bias,” a long-term reader brought to my attention that it reminded him of what I had taught him close to ten years ago about us humans being more interested in a “feel good” quest” than a “truth” quest. I think there is a lot of validity to his point, so I’ve added this note to this article, and I’ve added a similar note to the “Confirmation Bias” article. Readers of this article should also read the “Avoiding the Deception of Confirmation Bias” article, published in 2018 and available on my website, www.buildingfutureleaders.com, on the “Article Archives” page.

Dennis Hooper, January, 2018