

Ignorant and Foolish—Dealing with Human Weaknesses

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2008, published Nov. 17, 2008 in the Savannah *Business Report and Journal*

I routinely use electronic mail. As with any communication medium, rules of etiquette have emerged. Recently, a colleague suggested some e-mail manners that were unknown to me, but very appropriate. Because I view myself as being quite competent in the use of e-mail, I was stunned at my ignorance. I had unwittingly committed a minor discourtesy for years!

Impressed that my friend cared enough about me to volunteer her knowledge, I thanked her extensively. And I immediately changed my behaviors based on her suggestion.

My intentions all along were honorable. Can you see, however, that my being unaware of a simple technique could lead my e-mail recipients to believe otherwise?

I was thinking about this situation as I read my Bible recently. Hebrews 5:2 reads, “The high priest must be able to deal sympathetically with the ignorant and foolish because he realizes that he is himself prone to human weakness.”

As I read this and pondered my recent experience, I was reminded of the gentle way my friend dealt with my ignorance, and I was grateful again.

Though the text refers to the high priests of the Old Testament, it seems like excellent counsel for anyone in a leadership position.

Have you ever observed a leader being intolerant with a worker who made a mistake? Have you ever exhibited such impatience yourself?

Oh, how we express anger with those who exhibit traits we don't like in ourselves! Psychologists call such tendencies “projection.” Good leaders are aware of their limitations as human beings and are indeed sympathetic to individuals who don't know any better or who make an error in judgment.

Constructive responses are possible for both situations.

Training can overcome ignorance, a lack of competency on a given topic. In my case, a simple suggestion by a friend was able to overcome a deficiency that had existed for years. We are all ignorant until we learn, and we learn through either trial and error or someone showing us the way.

Appropriate feedback, given lovingly and courteously, can prevent future errors in judgment. To reduce the risk of repeat error, the leader can provide the individual with appropriate organizational values and a set of criteria to use in evaluating future situations.

Who among us has not made foolish choices? Who has not acted with impropriety? Who has not made a decision without considering possible outcomes? And who among us has not gone ahead with a poor choice even realizing the potential consequences?

Being in a position of leadership does not give you the right to “cast the first stone.” Ignorance and foolishness are not desirable, but are characteristic of our human condition.

With sympathetic love and an eye on the future success of both the individual and the organization, leaders are responsible to both educate the ignorant and redirect the foolish. With the amazing grace Jesus showed to the adulterous woman, a leader's patient guidance delivered with an expectation of “Go and make this mistake no more” can be far more effective than retribution delivered in anger.

Please pause and reflect. Are you aware of the truth expressed in this scripture? If so, you are no longer ignorant. Congratulations!

Still reflecting, do you respond with sympathy to followers who behave foolishly? Can you see how any other response is also foolish, especially in the long run?

If you violate this counsel, be sympathetic with yourself! Learn from your mistake. Give yourself grace. However, now you know better. Choose differently next time.

Dennis Hooper is a leadership coach, helping organizations build future leaders. Contact him at dhooper2@juno.com. Call him at (404)-575-3050. His website is www.buildingfutureleaders.com.