

Patch Adams—The Power of Fresh Insight!

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2010, published in the *Savannah Business Journal* on Monday, April 30, 2012

Do me a favor. On second thought, do yourself a favor! Find a copy of the movie “Patch Adams” and watch the first fifteen minutes. Just fifteen minutes? Yep, that’s all I’m asking. (If the first fifteen minutes seduces you into watching more, enjoy!)

This movie, produced in 1999, is one of my favorites. I don’t know which inspires me more, the unique approach of Patch Adams to serving his patients, or the interaction early in the movie between Hunter Adams (played by Robin Williams) and another patient, Arthur Mendelssohn.

Depressed and suicidal, Hunter Adams has admitted himself into a hospital psychiatric ward. He can’t figure out where or how he fits in this world. Mendelssohn (“one of the most innovative minds of our time”), self-admitted with genius syndrome, keeps holding up four fingers and asking, “How many?”

The obvious answer doesn’t satisfy him, so Adams visits with the old man privately. Still seeing four fingers, Adams hears, “You’re focusing on the problem. If you focus on the problem, you can’t see the solution.” Mendelssohn insists that Adams search beyond the problem.

Looking past the fingers at the expectant man’s face, Adams sees a blur of out-of-focus fingers and hesitantly offers an answer of “Eight?” Mendelssohn responds enthusiastically with, “Eight. Yes, yes! Eight’s a good answer! See what no one else sees. See what everyone else chooses not to see, out of fear or conformity or laziness. See the whole world anew!”

Respectfully, Hunter Adams pauses. Still seeking some semblance of positive self-identity, he asks the genius, “What do you see when you look at me, Arthur?”

In his thoughtful, endearing response, the old man gives Hunter Adams a new name, “Patch,” and the beginning of an insight that transforms his life.

Ah. Fresh insight. New awareness. We are often so anchored in our habitual way of seeing the world (our long-standing perceptions of right and wrong, good and bad, what is and what couldn’t possibly be) that we don’t realize how securely our limited perceptions hold us in a state of deception. Often, when a person or a situation is trying to show us a different perspective, we refuse even to consider it.

That night, an experience with his roommate further contributes to Patch’s new insight. The next morning, Patch marches into the Director’s office and announces he is leaving. “I want to help people. Last night with Rudy, I connected to another human being. I want more of that! I want to learn about people. I want to listen; I want to really listen to people.”

What great insight for any leader! To what extent do you really listen to people in your environment? Do you connect in more than a superficial way with your employees, your customers, and your community? (Keep in mind that you aren’t the evaluator of your listening capabilities. Other people make that judgment, and they rarely tell you the quality of their experience!)

Hunter “Patch” Adams enrolls in medical school. Even as his grades are among the highest in his class, his unusually effective form of connecting with patients and nurses is unacceptable to the academic powers. Unable to corral him, they expel Patch Adams.

An appeal to the State Medical Board results in his appearance before a panel of doctors--and dozens of supportive observers. The panel acknowledges, “We applaud your love of a patient....You carry with you a flame which one could only hope would spread through the medical profession like a brush fire.”

Clearly, Patch Adams influenced the doctors, nurses, and patients in the hospital and medical school.

You may wonder why I consider all this relevant to leaders. Let me explain. Habit, accepted practice, and “that’s just the way I am” are all superb time-savers. Your routine behaviors may usually serve your internal and external customers adequately.

However, if you want a culture that values improvement, you must always be searching for fresh insight. Please recognize that it can come from anywhere and can occur at any time!

What do I suggest you do with fresh insight? Experiment! Your new awareness generates a willingness to try very different behaviors. An alternate approach just might yield a better outcome.

Please be on the lookout for fresh insight. Constantly. Opportunities for new perspective occur several times a day, but you have to attend to them to make them stick with you. Actually, I prefer that you acknowledge your paradigm shifts to a colleague, consider how you might use the insight, and then go execute some new behavior. Then pause to reflect on what you’ve learned.

Finally, share your learnings with as many people as will listen! As a leader, you are an influencer!

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