

# Don't Take It Personally, Really

BY ANNE E. COLLIER

**ADMIT IT: AT ONE TIME** or another, you've taken "it" personally. "It" being a person's behavior, critical words, email communication and even silence.

Characterizing another's behavior as a personal affront is not just a sign that you are stressed, it's disempowering. When you are focused on what happened "to you," you are focused on your own hurt or anger, and you feel vulnerable. Quite simply, you are off your game. You aren't able to think clearly, objectively or critically. Your ability to solve the very problem that has caused the affront is compromised.

When the affront occurs digitally, whether via email, blog or social media, the disconnect is even worse because it's nearly impossible to fully assess the communication. Dr. Albert Mehrabian's studies on nonverbal communication concluded that 7 percent of communication is the literal meaning of the words, 38 percent is tone, and 55 percent is body language and facial expressions. Unless you are magically able to tune into the mind of the drafter at the moment of a communication's creation, *you* are missing 93 percent of what you normally rely on to assess meaning. The problem is that if *you* are under stress, *your* mind fills the gap, and not in a good way. Let's face it, the pandemic has amplified our typical stressors and added new ones. In the remote online world, the lack of context and missing information can sound imperious or attacking.

The implications for communication are astounding or devastating if *you* choose to let them be. For example, a client takes the time to draft a very clear, brief and to-the-point email. You read it and ask yourself, "Is the client upset or angry?" You start to believe the client is criticizing you for your work and become upset, angry or both. Now consider the poorly written, hastily drafted email. You believe the sender is angry, unreasonable, out of line . . . you get the picture. Little did you know that the sender, perhaps like you, hasn't slept well due to stress, is juggling homeworking with homeschooling and aging parents. Or perhaps the sender is struggling to stay on top of everything, expeditiously dashing off emails. How could you know?

## THE LADDER OF INFERENCE NEVER LEADS ANYWHERE GOOD

The better question is: "What is the mechanism by which a lawyer transforms an email into an indictment of the lawyer's legal skill?" The answer is the "Ladder of Inference." The Ladder of Inference describes the cognitive steps we take from observing a simple occurrence (the email), to selecting a particular aspect of the email, to adding meaning to that aspect, to adopting beliefs about what the client meant. The climb occurs in an instant, and without analysis or even awareness that the climb occurred. The lawyer is typically unable to distinguish steps that lead to the added meaning. Instead, the lawyer unwittingly believes that the top of the ladder is reality.

Even more debilitating is that the fallacious reality causes the lawyer to take action, which then creates the very thing feared. It is a perilous paradox. Here the lawyer becomes anxious, stressed and defensive in the communication back to the client, annoying the client and causing the client to doubt the lawyer's confidence and skill. Note that it is the *lawyer*, not the client, who adds the negative meaning to the email, ultimately causing the client to doubt the lawyer. See how disempowering "taking it personally" can be? It undermines the lawyer's confidence, relationships and the ability to do the job because the lawyer's top-of-the-ladder behavior has caused the client to doubt the lawyer. The point is you can't assume negative intent without more than your own fears to confirm it.

## EMPOWER YOURSELF WITH CLEAR THINKING

You can stay off the Ladder of Inference by applying your analytical skills to your own thinking, maintaining your confidence and equanimity in the face of others', and even your own, doubts and stress.

**1. Challenge your own thinking.** Don't believe everything you first think. You need to think critically and objectively about your own thinking because much of our thinking comes from the self-protective fear of our own vulnerability. Accept

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BECOMING ANXIOUS, STRESSED, DEFENSIVE

CLIENT DOESN'T VALUE ME; I'LL LOSE CLIENT

I DID SOMETHING WRONG

CLIENT IS UPSET

CLIENT IS DIRECT

RECEIPT OF EMAIL



that your pessimistic thinking might be clouding your judgment of the circumstances, and that *your* judgment may not be accurate. Further, don't kid yourself that your obsessive rumination means that you've accurately analyzed the situation. Instead, use your objectivity and analytical skills on yourself.

**2. Ask yourself, "What did I make that mean?"** Recognize that you may have climbed up the Ladder of Inference, adding negative meaning to a flat email communication. Distinguish between the text and the meaning you've added.

**3. Be curious.** Engage the client in a conversation by phone or videoconference to better understand the client's concerns. Use this as an opportunity to reassure the client that you are on it.

**4. Ignore the noise, focus on the signal.** Everyone is committed to contributing and securing positive results. Ignore the noise—the poor draftsmanship, the frustration, anger and even the potshots. Focus instead on the true message and what's important to the client.

**5. Don't let others' stress trigger your own.** These difficult times can produce a defensive posture in communication, which can be read as an attack or criticism. Recognize that others' stress can come through in an unintended way and be triggering to you as the recipient. Don't let it.

**6. Choose your mindset.** Another's angst is an opportunity to be the problem-solver and demonstrate your value. Discern what is important to the client and focus on solving that problem. This is what the client wants; this is how you best

serve clients (and even colleagues) who are stressed and rely on you. Eschew blame and defensiveness—failure to do so will put you back on the Ladder of Inference.

**7. Create workability.** To say that the pandemic has created challenges is an understatement. The challenges at times seem insurmountable. After eschewing blame, lean into the challenge and find a workable solution to solve the real problem.

During these unprecedented times, it's important to remind ourselves that we are all committed to support, which means providing excellent service to clients, and being a dependable colleague, true friend and family member. By not taking "it" personally, you afford others the ability to communicate without having their fears and concerns distort the message, which empowers a discourse focused on generating workable solutions to the actual problem. **LP**



**Anne E. Collier** is the CEO of Arudia, a firm dedicated to improving culture, collaboration and communication. Collier is an expert leadership coach steadfast in her commitment to excellence and her clients' goals. She coaches and delivers programming designed to help

individuals, teams and organizations amplify accomplishments, improve financial stability, and achieve greater self-actualization; they perform well because they are confident, deliberate and resilient. **anne@arudia.com**