

Communicating at all Levels in our Organization: Part 3

Contrarians

On C-span's *BookTV* the other day, I heard Charles Sykes taking about his new book (January 2012) *A Nation of Moochers: American's addition to getting something for nothing*. I was listening with interest, since I see the mission and basis of our nonprofit as being the opposite of a moocher. We're the givers not the takers. We understand the economy is failing under the burden of government entitlements. We are creating a community that takes care of each other; that watches out for each other's needs.

At first I thought Mr. Sykes was referring to our welfare system but he includes and underlines our modern moochers: the corporations and banks. Toward the end of his speech, during the Q&A discussion, he made reference to the Contrarians. A perfect word, I said to myself. I have been trying in the last year to come up with a word that would help me understand and describe the typical communication behavior of most of us, staff and Board Members. For me to say there is "dissension in the ranks", sounds too harsh because I know everyone believes in our mission and is proud to be a part of this organization.

I've known people whose sole purpose in life is to be the devil's advocate. You know the type? It doesn't matter what you say, they never agree with you, and find it their duty to point out the other side of the issue. Devil's advocate comes close to describing people who constantly disagree or who are compelled to do things differently from how the team does it or how the boss requests things be done, but again devil's advocate is too harsh a word to describe our dedicated staff.

Contrarian is a perfect word. It describes those people who have a *habitual disinclination to accept orders or advice*; they reject authority. My enthusiasm over the word contrarian distracted me from the rest of the man's speech, but I think he was referring to the Wall Street contrarians who act in opposition to accepted thinking (or rules) in order to make a

profit on the stock market. How would someone profit from being contrary in our organization? I don't know.

We were taught to question authority, if we were lucky enough to have parents and teachers who taught us to be discriminating, to question what we are told to do, to not follow the herd. Remember the old recording: "Just because your friends are jumping off the bridge doesn't mean you have to." It is important that we all have a mind of our own and be discriminating. Habitually questioning and refusing to do what the boss asks or request you to do is being contrary.

My job is to provide the direction for this organization (get it? Executive Director) Yet, when I do, I often get an argument or a long discussion ensues because someone thinks it should be done differently. Sometimes I set the direction by example: organizing our space in a way to encourage productivity, to provide safety, or ease of travel. Yet, my direction isn't always followed. At those times, I stop and think, is it really necessary that we do it "my way"?

I ponder over it, because I want staff to be innovative; I'm interested in their ideas and input; I value their suggestions. Often, I say to myself, "Does it matter how we do it?" There are many ways to accomplish the same task, and sometimes I decide it's OK to do it another way. But there are times that I must stay the course. For example, when ADS moved to Dorchester House in 2011, I placed the clipboard with the sign-in sheet on the basket stand, but would find it moved to the dresser. I moved it back. I moved it back several times not understanding why my direction wasn't being followed. I pondered it. Does it matter where caregivers and participants sign in?

It took time, valuable time for me, to think about why I was so hard set on having the clipboard on the other side of the room. Does it matter I asked? This time it did matter. I did not want anyone scalded by a knocked-over coffee pot while signing in. Someone kept moving the clipboard to the dresser directly next to the coffee pot. Intuitively, I saw the danger of the coffee pot. Then, I had to go around to each person and explain and to insist that we follow my direction.

Now, I am weary of the constant pondering. It's a waste of time, it distracts from the attention we should be showing ADS participants, it disrupts meetings, and it diverts our attention from the important issues. From now on, when someone bulks at my directions, I will say "Contrarian." That will be your cue, to back off and do what you're told to do.

Be discriminating of course, and naturally if I've told you to do something that might endanger your safety or another's, then of course, stamp your feet and show me my error.

What I am asking, is that **YOU** stop and do the pondering the next time you don't like my direction. When you find you're bulking, or you feel the urge to ask me why, I ask that you pause and you ask yourself, does it matter? Please, save the drama and save time by simply doing what I ask you to do?