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Where Is Norman Rockwell When You Need Him?

Appreciating the Results of Challenges

By Larry Nash White, Ph.D.

Editor's Note: In the December issue, Larry White wrote a convincing argument about why he has chosen to take positions that seemed like losing propositions. He said it was worth the headaches to overcome workplace challenges because he has developed his leadership abilities and professional skills. We invite you to respond to this article.

In one of my more recent librarian incarnations, I served as a Library Director for a quiet, rural Midwestern public library. The library was an old Carnegie library building with all wood floors, a hearth fireplace, and a beautiful wooden staircase to the top floor. The town the library served was the picture of the middle class Mid-West, sleeping peacefully and lazily along the Ohio River. The library staff was convinced that their lives were full of hectic challenges like the office being too cold, or Mr. Jones always sneaking off to lunch early and leaving someone stuck on the reference desk by themselves for three minutes, or the worst: running out of coffee in the staff lounge. Yet, I was amazed at the peace and quiet in the building. To me, our library was like working in a library featured in a Norman Rockwell painting; everything was good and matched the classical description of what a public library should be.

Upon reflection, I think it was my previous experience in the work place that shaped my Norman Rockwell view of our library. My professional work experiences have allowed me to view a wide spectrum of library work environments and workplace challenges. Those challenges that have come in all forms; the good, the bad and the ugly.

Some of the good challenges have included:

- Rescuing a trapped baby bat from inside a library (where library staff were trying to kill it), nursing him back to health, and then setting him free again.
- Taking over a department in a public library that was so troubled that the library had to pay an organizational psychologist to help the staff communicate with one another and, in three years, turning it into the one of the best performing units in County government.
- Building a public library system (buildings, policies, staff, collection, etc.) in a calendar year for a county covering 1,200 square miles.
- Increasing library circulation 80% and visits 50%, absorbing insurance rate increases, and providing raises for staff without additional staffing *all while* losing 22% of overall revenue in three years. (yes, this was a good challenge.)

Some of my bad challenges have included:

- Firing others under the threat that I would be fired too if I did not play the "hatchet person" well enough.
- Directing a library where the staff were approached to become unionized.
- Not being able to take advantage of incredible service opportunities when the resources that would make the service a reality were removed from availability for political reasons.

Some of the ugly challenges have included:

- Catching and dealing with the peepers, grabbers, exhibitionists, etc., that wander the stacks.
- Pulling a child out of the library dumpster who had been put there by the parent and left to teach the child a lesson.
- Restraining a mentally ill patron who had seen herself in the bathroom mirror and had attacked her reflection to

- the point of badly beating herself and bleeding profusely.
- Convincing an elderly woman who had been run over by another patron in a car in the library parking lot that she really was not going to die.

When I was dealing with these experiences, there was always a mixture of stress, self-doubting of knowledge and ability, faith in the overall outcome, and sheer amazement of how weird the world can be. Regardless of the challenge and their results, I always have felt some degree of satisfaction that I worked through the new challenge, and I had made it through in one piece.

Successfully dealing with a tough challenge at work restores a bit of trust in your decision-making, re-affirms your training and skills, bolsters your confidence, and provides practical insight into why you should appreciate the small joys and challenges of life. After all, when you have experienced these kinds of challenges and numerous other things in between, little things like the office being too cold, or Mr. Jones always sneaking off to lunch early and leaving someone stuck on the desk by themselves for three minutes should not really seem like a “bad day” challenge to deal with.

I think the most important thing I have learned in dealing with workplace challenges is something my grandfather told me years ago: “Plan for the worst, hope for the best, and live in the normal reality that usually happens.” After carefully listening to each recanting of the latest (non-)hectic challenges faced by my staff in my Midwestern library, I would remind them of some of my experiences previously mentioned. I would then tell them that we really had a library that belonged in a Norman Rockwell painting, that they should enjoy it, and that I hoped they never experienced what a library could be outside of one of Norman’s paintings.

How about you? Do you work in a Norman Rockwell library or do you just think you do? What challenges have you had and appreciated once they were handled? How did you change or expand professionally? Please send your responses to the [Editor](#).

What’s Stopping You?

Achieving Success by Avoiding Procrastination

By [Julius Rhodes](#)

As a child I often heard my parents say, ‘never put off ‘till tomorrow what you can do today’. Unfortunately in our society today more often than not we are faced with a reversal of fortune that says, ‘never do today what you can put off ‘til tomorrow.’

Procrastination is not only rampant in our world but it has reached epidemic if not pandemic proportions. During our nation’s formative years and the many changes we have undergone, would any of you have thought that the very social structures upon which we stand would encourage procrastination? I for one would have certainly not viewed this as the case.

Now before you begin to think, “Hey that cannot possibly be the case!,” then ask yourself the following question: Why is it that every retailer in America and I am sure in many other parts of the world provides end of year or ‘door buster’ specials during the Christmas or observed Holiday Season? The longer you wait until you make your purchases the better price you will receive.

Not satisfied? Then how about this: each year at tax time our Federal Government regularly keeps its post offices open until midnight on April 15 so that ‘last-minute filers’ (i.e. procrastinators) can file their taxes. Don’t get me wrong, I have had an occasion or two where I was one of those ‘last-minute filers’ so I appreciated Uncle Sam’s efforts to allow me to comply with the law. That being said however, the fact remains that for far too many people, just in time has become just out of time.

If this issue is as widespread as I am suggesting then how are we to address this matter? You may be asking yourself, “Can any one individual really make a difference?” This question was once asked of Margaret Mead and her response was emphatic and direct. People will ask if a small group of people engaged in concerted activity can effect change? Indeed it is the only way that change can occur. All of us function in myriad organizations or groups throughout the day. From our families, to our common social interactions, to the firms we work for concerted action has to begin with individual principles.

In my former life I worked for a firm where there were de facto seat assignments. Mind you there was never any assigned seating but people just ‘knew their place’ and no matter what time Jeff (I use this name to protect the innocent. Their real names were Keith, Alan, Wayne and a few others) arrived for our 7:30 a.m. meeting no one dared sit in Jeff’s

chair. Being new to the firm I was unaware of this protocol. Therefore, when I attended my first meeting (on time I might add) I sat, unbeknownst to me, in the chair that was 'reserved' for Jeff.

Someone politely leaned over to me and said that chair belongs to Jeff and he would be upset if I sat there. I said thank-you and then asked when Jeff would arrive and I was told sometime between 7:40 a.m. to 7:45 a.m.

I don't know about you but I was always taught that if a meeting starts at a certain time then you cannot walk in at that time and if you do you are late. Further if it is your responsibility to be there at a certain time then you have to honor your commitment to be there by being at your seat (any available seat) and in place so that the meeting can start at its designated time.

As I prepared to leave Jeff's seat I said to the group, 'I can appreciate that this is Jeff's seat but in the future if Jeff is not here prior to the start of the meeting then I will not *honor* the Jeff rule.' As I moved to another 'non-assigned seat' I could see the look of horror on the faces of the people in the room. Some even said, loud enough for me to hear, 'I'd like to see him try that.'

Upon arriving at our next regularly scheduled meeting, Jeff was not there and no one was sitting in his chair. As the 7:30 a.m. hour clicked off I promptly walked over to the 'chair of honor' and sat down. When Jeff entered the room he looked at me and laughed. Then he said, "That's my seat!" I replied that any chair that is available when a person walks in is simply a chair and that I didn't reserve seats for anyone, especially if they were not on time for the meeting. Jeff looked at me curiously, surveyed the room then found another seat.

If this story leads you to believe that my actions were groundbreaking, then let me assure you they certainly were not. I should also mention that this was not a corporate boardroom. However, the regularly assembled group was comprised of senior managers for a Fortune 100 firm. If my actions made any statement or had any real impact it just showed people that often times we become too comfortable with accepting less than someone else's best and giving less than our best. Procrastination is a learned habit. While motivation gets you going, habit keeps you there and you cannot allow yourself and others develop habits that limit your ability to be the best you can be.

By now many of you are asking how to I overcome this self-imposed sickness of which I speak. I'm glad you asked and while I cannot make any guarantees, I can say that if you try the strategies that I am about to suggest and really give them a chance to take hold, your chances of making a positive change will be greatly enhanced.

To rid yourself of the stifling effects of procrastination effects of procrastination do the following.

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Take inventory of your procrastination habits (i.e. getting up late for work, school or scheduled appointments, waiting until the last minute to tackle assigned or identified projects at work, home, etc.). Once you have identified a recurring procrastination habit devise a simple, easy to use plan that you will implement over the course of the next 30 days. This could be as simple as logging the time you go to bed at night and the time you get up the following morning. To make it even more specific, list the things that you did two hours before going to bed to see if any of them are interfering with your ability to get to bed at a regularly scheduled time.

At your job set aside twenty minutes at the beginning and end of each workday to identify and prioritize tasks and then to follow-up to see which ones were completed.

No man or woman is an island. All of us know someone who always seems to be on top of things. Most of us have a love/hate relationship with these people. We love their abilities in these areas and we hate that we cannot be similarly inclined. Do not be afraid to ask them how they do it. Most people enjoy being sincerely complimented and if they believe they can help you, most will.

If at first you don't succeed try, try again. Ask anyone who has ever succeeded at anything and they will tell you they failed first. Don't be discouraged when your initial attempts do not generate the results you desire. Rather look at the causes of your shortcomings, refine your plan and try again.

Do not be afraid to recognize yourself. All too often we wait for other people to recognize us when we have done a good job or reached some milestone. It's okay to recognize and reward yourself. Again it can be something simple like leaving yourself a positive voicemail or it might be treating yourself to some small trinket you've been eyeing for a while. Set a goal for yourself and once achieved or you've shown measurable improvement, reward yourself and continue to move on.

Just because you are where you are doesn't mean you have to stay there. In life you will get knocked down and you will encounter problems. However, if you get knocked down ten times get up eleven times. Challenges will always be a part of all of our lives and the true measure of success is not what we accomplish but what we overcome.

Julius E. Rhodes, SPHR is founder and principal of the mpr group, a broad-based Human resources (HR) consulting practice that provides services in: training program development and delivery, project management, motivational and keynote addresses, need assessments, executive coaching and development, ethics consultation and other HR areas. Contact him at 773-548-8037, e-mail at j-rhodes1@neiu.edu or visit his web site at www.bossnetworks.com/mprgroup/index.htm.

American Library Association offers e-Learning Service for members

CHICAGO—The American Library Association (ALA) has contracted with the Southeast Florida Library Information Network (SEFLIN) to make more than 1,500 e-learning courses from Element K[®], the largest provider of Web-based courseware in the country, available to ALA members at affordable prices starting January 20, 2006.

The ALA e-Learning Services provides learning opportunities for members at all levels in all types of libraries. The courses from Element K[®] include those that are instructor-led and self-paced. Courses will be available in three different areas: office productivity, computer professional, and business fundamentals.

Office productivity courses include training on how to use standard Microsoft software such as Word, Excel, Outlook, PowerPoint, Access, Project, Publisher and FrontPage and other software such as Acrobat, FileMaker Pro, GroupWise, and WordPerfect. The computer professional courses include technology courses that range from Microsoft certification courses to Linux, Java, SQL, Flash, Photoshop and Dreamweaver.

The business fundamental courses offer instruction for supervisors and managers or staff working toward that level. Courses on motivating employees, conducting performance reviews, conflict intervention, and leading effective meetings are available.

The ALA e-Learning Services is a subscription service that gives members an Element K[®] access key for one year of unlimited access to all courses within a content area. To learn more about ALA e-Learning Services and the full range of available courses, visit www.librarylearning.org/ala.

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