

The Case for Suspending Judgment

In my work as a coach of leaders, and in my general observation, I see many situations that get messy and contentious; and so often these situations are caused by or exacerbated by people's rush to judgment. Even when, and perhaps especially when they don't even realize that is what they are doing.

In Matthew 7:1 Jesus advised: "Judge not, that you be not judged." (ESV). Far be it from me to disagree, and I'm not; but I'm not even asking you to go as far as to *never* judge, but to at least suspend judgment (or suspend it longer) in a variety of situations.

An Example

A team member makes an error, and when you are made aware of it, you are upset, and immediately assign blame, point fingers at the person, decide they need to be removed, etc. (you get the idea). All of this is judgment, and little of it is helpful, at least at first.

And I know, you may be saying, "Kevin, I wouldn't say those things to people, I just need to vent." While there is truth in that point, and I would respond that while I would be glad that you held your tongue for a bit, I'd still warn you of implanting judgments in your head.

The truth is, the error was made. Your judgment about why the error was made is your guess, your assumption, your judgment. There could be many factors or reasons for the error, many of which you haven't considered when you immediately move to judgment (i.e. your "truth.>").

There is a classic example, told by Stephen Covey in the book *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, of a person on a commuter train observing a father with two children on the same train. According to the story, the kids are all over the train, disturbing people, being loud and in general "misbehaving." Covey tells of the observer thinking about misbehaving kids, a father who has no discipline, and more (i.e., all judgments!). As the father leaves the train, he apologizes for his children's behavior, explaining that they had just left the hospital after his wife, and the mother of the kids, had died.

That context changes everything about your "belief" about the situation and the kids' behavior, doesn't it?

And there is my point.

Human behavior is complex, and when we move to judgment, we have decided why something happened and perhaps (as you did in the example and the observer did on the train) labeled those involved. And once we have determined "the facts," it makes it hard for us to change our mind, see a new perspective and therefore perhaps make better decisions.

Suspending Judgment

There is more to this than I can unpack in the space I have left, but let me leave you with a couple of ideas and strategies that I have found helpful for me.

When a situation happens, rather than rushing to decide why it happened, ask yourself "Why might this have

happened?" Then make a list of possible reasons why. You aren't doing this to somehow magically determine the answer, but rather to recognize that there are other plausible reasons other than the one you immediately decided or "judged."

Once you have this list, you are in a better position to be open minded, have a broader perspective and therefore, coach better, understand more, and be more effective both personally and interpersonally.

Suspending judgment is most certainly a powerful approach and habit. I don't get it right every time, but when I do I get better results — and so will you.