

Don't Poke Yourself in the Eye with a Stick

... and other favorite pieces of common sense advice I've picked up along the way.

By Beth Buelow, CPC

About ten years ago, my husband, Andy, and I were living in Milwaukee when an event was staged at the local convention center featuring Stephen Covey, Jack Welch and Anthony Robbins, among others. All were appearing via satellite to thousands of fans, each of whom had shelled out several hundred dollars to attend. I thought it was a cool event and said as much to Andy. He replied, "I was talking about it with Tom [a local music critic], and he was dumbfounded; all those people paying all that money to be told over and over, 'Don't poke yourself in the eye with a stick.'"

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"The three great essentials to achieve anything worthwhile are, first, hard work; second, stick-to-itiveness; third, common sense."

~ Thomas Edison



After I recovered from being slightly offended by the remark - and by the fact that my brilliant and successful husband seemed to agree with the sentiment - I started to think about what Tom had said. Why do we pay good money - for books, conferences, workshops, training sessions - to be told what we often already know? To hear (for the hundredth time) advice that most of us perceive as "common sense?" And how did a man who thinks most business success advice can be bottom-lined into "don't poke yourself in the eye with a stick" end up married to a woman who has dozens of books on that very topic?!

What I've concluded is that we spend good money to learn what we already know because we need to be reminded consistently and firmly that what we already know is true. We're seeking affirmation and reinforcement. And we want to hear the chorus of positive, common sense voices that will drown out the fears, uncertainties and doubts (FUDs) that are fighting for a starring role in the drama of our lives.

This cynical pronouncement also prompted me to reflect on my favorite "don't poke" advice. In the spirit of sharing what we already know and need to hear again and again to know it's true, here are a few obvious-but-nevertheless-challenging statements that resonate with me.

"If you are wrong, admit it quickly and emphatically."

This gem from Dale Carnegie's "How to Win Friends & Influence People" stayed with me long after I took the course in 1997. It's the right thing to admit fault when we make an error; how often do we take responsibility quickly and emphatically (and, I would add, calmly)? Putting this "don't poke" advice to work will diffuse many tense situations and almost completely disarm anyone ready to blame or become angry about an error. This advice reminds me to take appropriate responsibility, and move on.

“Differentiate your customers... Your ads (and products) should cater to the customers you’d choose if you could choose your customers.”

Whoa. This one from Seth Godin’s “Purple Cow” hit me hard. Since I started my coaching business, the loudest “don’t poke” refrain has been to identify my niche, no matter how tempting it is to try to be all things to all people. I eventually hit a wall. The pressure was too much. I rebelled and decided to ban the word “niche” from my vocabulary. It had become a “should,” and that was unacceptable. However, I acknowledged the wisdom of the advice and decided to find my own path. When I read Godin’s words, they reframed the issue and gave me the “duh!” moment I needed to shed the should (even though he uses that dreaded word). I’m now looking forward to processing through this essential personal and professional decision.

“The person who doesn’t make mistakes is unlikely to make anything.”

Paul Arden shares this wisdom - including the typo - in his creativity guide “It’s Not How Good You Are, It’s How Good You Want To Be.” We all know that failures and missteps are prerequisites to breakthroughs. And it’s easy to remind others of that and encourage them to cut themselves some slack when their best-laid plans go awry. But when it comes to remembering that for ourselves? Ummm... not so easy. That’s why I have this quote from Thomas Edison on my bulletin board: “Of the 200 light bulbs that didn’t work, every failure told me something that I was able to incorporate into the next attempt.”

“Everyone is a potential winner; some people are disguised as losers, don’t let their appearances fool you.”

Susan Boyle, anyone?! I really dislike the term “losers,” and I’ve been disheartened by the way the media has taken every opportunity to remind us that Susan Boyle is not our conventional model-perfect image of a singing sensation. However, I admit: she is an excellent example of what could be lost if we dismiss someone based on looks or presentation alone. This “of course!” advice comes to us from “The One Minute Manager” by Blanchard and Johnson. We’ve all had times when that first impression wasn’t so positive. We’re often proven wrong. If in our hearts we didn’t sometimes harbor assumptions about a person, place or thing based on appearances, we wouldn’t need to be reminded time and again of this fundamental truth.

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“Seek advice
but use your
own common
sense”

~ Yiddish
Proverb

Until these lessons become part of the fabric of my being, as natural as breathing, I’m going to need to be reminded of them on a regular basis. And I’m OK with that. I’m willing to spend time, money and energy bringing these basic messages into my life. Each time I do, they help shift my perspective and reconnect me with a can-do spirit that helps propel me forward. **The more I receive “don’t poke” messages from different people with unique perspectives, the more likely I am to receive exactly the right message at exactly the right time.** The light bulb will appear above my head, I’ll hear a “click” in my brain as ideas snap together, or I’ll have an “ah ha!” moment that makes it worth every penny and minute I spent.

There are times when my husband sees my energized attitude and decides “I’ll have what she’s having.” So he reads the books and goes to the workshops, and while he still declares, “Lots of ‘don’t poke yourself’ advice,” he’s always glad he took the time. [It’s become a running joke between us; he actually does highly value personal development, and likes to lighten up when it gets too serious.] Perhaps that’s why the sometimes-cynic married the personal coach: regular reminders that “common sense” isn’t always so common.

Questions for Your Consideration

- What’s the most basic - and best - advice you’ve acquired?
- How does that advice influence you?
- What are favorite resources that recharge your batteries?

This article was originally published on www.biznik.com in April 2009. Visit <http://biznik.com/articles/dont-poke-yourself-in-the-eye-with-a-stick> to view reader responses.



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