

Am I Teachable?

By Tish Vincent

The room was very warm that day, with sunlight streaming in through the large windows. Listeners were gathering and the presenters were nervously positioning the computer, projector, and handouts as they prepared to start. As the room quieted down and the presentation began, one woman caught my eye.

She slouched sullenly in one corner of the room, a skeptical expression on her face as she fidgeted with the items on the table in front of her. Not 30 minutes into the presentation, she began asking provocative questions designed to put the presenter in a bad light. By the time the presenters were packing up, she had interrupted the presentation four separate times with challenges, complaints, grandstanding, and arguments.

“What was her problem?” the presenters wondered as they left the building.

In decades of public speaking, I’ve come to wonder the same thing. In every presentation I have ever given covering the topics of substance abuse, assessment, diagnosis, and referral to appropriate level of care, there is at least one such person listening.

As I prepare another presentation and anticipate speaking to the next audience, I remember the most remarkable displays: the graduate student who wrote me a five-page, single-spaced letter telling me I didn’t know what I was talking about; the state employee who slept under a table for two days and wanted an attendance sheet signed for his supervisor; the graduate student who jumped up and yelled out that the presentation was too negative; the law student who believed that if we talked about depression and addiction we were making people addicted and depressed; the attorney who kept asking questions off the point and then heatedly accused me of “not caring about addictions”; and the previously

mentioned sullen person throwing barbs at the presenter.

Law is my second career. I came to study law with years of experience as a clinical social worker. The most difficult aspect of becoming a student again was realizing that all the information I had as a social worker meant nothing as a law student. On day one of law school, I was unaware of what I needed to learn and had to put my other knowledge to the side. I had to become teachable! In Civil Procedure, Contracts, Criminal Law and Research, Torts, and Writing and Advocacy, I had to become teachable. It was humbling.

“It’s what you learn after you know it all that counts.”

What Makes a Person Teachable?

Merriam Webster defines *teachable* as “apt and willing to learn.”¹ When we attend a seminar or continuing-education presentation, what makes us ready and willing to learn and what makes us resistant, argumentative, and closed minded?

Sometimes we carry our knowledge like a shield. We fear we are not good enough, not smart enough, or just wrong somehow. We compensate for this nagging, upsetting sense of being “not enough” by learning new information, building experience, stockpiling knowledge, and making our way in the world, shield at the ready. If we feel at-

tacked, we counter-attack, shield raised high. It is soothing when we feel threatened, but at what cost? The more we move into our position of being “good enough,” we start crossing the middle line into “better than you,” then swerve over to “universal know-it-all,” challenging and provoking someone who tries to teach us something.

John Maxwell presents worldwide on leadership. His thoughts on teachability fit the discussion.

Teachability is not so much about competence and mental capacity as it is about attitude. It is the desire to listen, learn, and apply. It is the hunger to discover and grow. It is the willingness to learn, unlearn, and relearn. I love the way legendary basketball coach John Wooden states it: “It’s what you learn after you know it all that counts.”²

He makes the point that leadership thrives when we keep learning. Those in positions of power can often be the least teachable. They feel a need to know, decide, and appear confident. This can unwittingly work against remaining teachable.

Civil Procedure

During my first semester of law school, Civil Procedure was a daunting class for me. We started with pleadings then moved to injunctions and burden of proof—all in the language of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure. The professor used a strict Socratic method of teaching. I never knew what he was asking, and studying wasn’t helping. It was so aggravating. I imagine he did not find me very teachable at that time.

As aggravating and frustrating as this class was for me, and as angry as I sometimes felt at the professor, I sensed he was

teaching something necessary for practicing law. Years later, I see he was teaching us to think the law, and to know it so well that it was at the tip of our tongues in an instant and spoken in the language of a rule. He had a method and we did not know what it was. That's why we were the students and he was the professor.

Wellness

As daunting as learning the law can be, it's easier than learning how to face our own blind spots. What makes a person develop a negative attitude about learning how to identify whether he or she has a problem with addiction or depression? Is the unteachable person raising the shield of knowledge against self-knowledge? Has someone close to them hurt them with their depression or addiction? Might they be struggling with some of these issues, and fear admitting it to themselves?

No one can judge another and, though we may strive to understand why an attendee of a presentation seems to be reacting so negatively, only that person can speak to his or her attitude. Each of us must ask ourselves, "Am I teachable?" Regardless of the knowledge we already possess, I hope the answer is "yes." ■



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FOOTNOTES

1. Merriam-Webster <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/teachable>> [accessed September 28, 2012].
2. John C. Maxwell, *How do I maintain a teachable attitude?* <<http://johnmaxwellonleadership.com/2011/01/24/how-do-i-maintain-a-teachable-attitude/>> [accessed September 28, 2012].