

# PATIENCE: NOT FOR SISSIES



The deliberate and reflective path is often the fastest way to our destination.

*"I'm not as strong as I might be but I'm patient....Patience is very necessary in a leader,"*

Lord Toranaga advising a lieutenant in James Clavell's *Shogun*

Can anger be a good thing?

Anger is our enemy, we wrote in this column last month. Have you, too, ever been swept away by anger? Been hooked, gotten triggered? Found yourself screaming, slamming doors, even throwing something? Your harsh language may have caused people to avoid you, or may have stirred up trouble.

And yet, some people point to the upside of anger. Oncologists, for example, may urge patients to foment anger as a way of unleashing energy to fight their disease. In this vein, record-setting cyclist turned cancer advocate Lance Armstrong issued a press release in January 2007 that said, in part: "Impatience got me over countless mountain passes, across the finish line in New York City and through four rounds of ruthless chemotherapy 10 years ago." He embellished an argument in favor of anger: "Patience is a polite quality and often appropriate, but it rarely gets things done....Patient people may accept the status quo, but the status quo isn't working for us."

We see two problems with the perspective that disrespects patience. First, indulging anger is playing with fire. Life is an unending stream of sensory experiences transmitted by the five senses or emotions linked to our thoughts. We are designed so that we react to life's experiences in one of three states: attraction, neutrality, or aversion. Every reaction, no matter how much energy lies behind it, is simply our thoughts flowing faster and faster down a deep mental riverbed. As they move downstream, they pick up our story lines, our memories, our assumptions, and anticipations. Hence, a state of aversion can eddy into speech or action replete with aggressiveness. Once that escalation begins, there's no telling where it will end; but upset in other people and, sooner or later, our own suffering will be inevitable.

Even more important, we submit that patience has been given a bad rap. Patience isn't passivity or weakness; it's not lying down as a doormat. Patience is actually a powerful state of mind that leads to insight and vision. More than that, it takes energy and willpower. For a leader, patience is a synonym for "resolve."

Consider, for example, the CEO who recently came to us with frustration building toward anger. His firm has a bodacious goal. To make a giant leap in its industry standing, it has recruited senior talent and mapped a fantastic change strategy. And yet, the change initiative isn't really moving. The CEO sees that team members haven't engaged on the emotional level. He can't understand why not, and wants to get things rolling by "doing whatever it takes."

Open up the toolbox, and let's see what we can throw at the CEO's problem. Reorganizations. MBOs. Project management with stepped-up deadlines. Motivational workshops. Incentives with cliff provisions. Turn up the heat; push harder.

But before those plans roll too far downstream, reflect on the starting assumption: that the team should be emotionally engaged by now. Working against such engagement is the

universal truth: most people tend to be insecure when facing the unknown. Fear leads to anger, frustration.

Instead of being a spark for frustration, if not anger, the team's hesitancy should sound a call for the leader to show forbearance. He must exercise the dynamics of patience: set a clear intention, and direct his will toward that intention, holding the mental space into which others can step with confidence (or, at least, with fear in check).

But how does a leader harness the power of patience?

The phrase, "remaining like a log" re-orient's us. For it points to resisting action, avoiding ill-considered speech. It is not a question of "shutting down emotionally." Rather, it is a discipline of taming the mind of turning our backs on negativity. Of releasing frustration or annoyance. Refrain from giving voice to negativity; restrain angry action; regain mental balance. Escalation is never the solution; eruption is never the path to resolution. No matter how urgently we feel the need to lash out, to vent our hostility, the right response is to do nothing – to become a log – until we can regain our sensibility.

In other words, when we feel ourselves getting hooked by negative emotional energy, why not spit the hook out? That process of 'letting go' takes but a nanosecond. Suddenly, we find ourselves present.

Ever had a driver cut you off in heavy traffic? Fear or anger wells up, but the moment passes. Everyone is ok so long as we don't act on our reaction and keep going.

How does one cultivate this ability to be like a log in the face of the most upsetting circumstances? The first step is to simply to notice that you have become "triggered." Sense the emotional tensing, that urge to shut down, that welling up of urgency, that jolt of agitated energy. Or hear the common words for habitual reactions: so and so did such and such, and ticked me off. I felt hurt. He ignored me! I must be a bad person. He can never do anything right.

Right at that moment you have the chance to avoid a habitual reaction. Instead of allowing a conditioned response to play out, stop your train of thoughts.

Betsy lives among the redwoods in northern California. No matter how upset she gets, she knows that simply by putting her feet outside her back door, she is in the ageless, present forest. No matter where we reside, we can send our thoughts to the deepest glade in the forest where everything is still, quiet, calm. We can tap into the feeling of ageless quietude. Waiting for our minds to clear with patience – with resolve.

Even if a "trigger" overtakes you like a speeding motorcycle coming on your blind side, you still have a chance to stay on track. Sometimes that story line is so familiar that you'll feel compelled to act, to lash out. After all, aren't you justified?! Someone needs to tell the culprit to stop, to get his attention with a sharp word or pointed elbow. And yet, it is still not too late for you have a choice of not speaking or not acting. Granted, this takes tremendous discipline and practice. Habits of a lifetime are not changed overnight. Recalling the image of a forest or putting one on your desktop might be a sufficient reminder. Discover what works for you – perhaps just standing up, walking into another room, taking a deep breath creates the mental space to quiet you thinking, to allow the storm to pass.

Of course, sometimes an outburst overpowers your intentions. Even then, it is still not too late. Replay the event; discover the point when you felt the initial tug of impatience. That annoyance. That edge. Such perception can be enough to be an important step forward. Mere recognition opens the possibility that next time you will notice that tug at its first, most subtle sign. Plenty of time to stop, to lie down in the forest, to become like a log of wood. Silent, steady.

Leaders need to exercise the dynamic form of patience. When the leader's buttons are pushed, productivity of the organization is shot for the day, a week. Holding one's mental agitation in

check allows others to step in to situations with confidence and verve. To start slow, and finish fast.

When leader's work with their minds, they not only transform themselves. They have the chance to transform the world around them. To change the outer world in a positive direction by changing the way the leader relates to him or her self.

Can there be anything else as valuable?

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