

Wisdom in Not Knowing All of the Answers

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Q: I find myself facing situations where I just don't know what to do. I feel like I am out of my depth, but I have responsibilities, and people still look to me to have an answer. What am I supposed to do?

A: I find myself in this position all of the time. There are many times when I am supposed to be the one in charge, but I am painfully aware that I am not the smartest person in the room. I know a lot of parents who feel this way as well.

Do you remember when it seemed like your mom and dad had all the answers? Do you remember looking up at your teachers in school believing that they knew what they were doing? We can get the impression that, if you are going to lead, you have to first know everything and be absolutely qualified. We have the impression that we first have to be an expert.

I think that this can do more harm than good.

Of course, we ought to have some proficiency before we ask others to follow us. (We might have personal examples of parents or teachers or bosses who maybe ought to have had more competence.)

At the same time, there might be the impression that one has to be perfect in order to make a difference. This is never the case.

One of the biggest traps people who are in charge fall into is believing that they have to be an expert. Because of this, they short-circuit any possibility of becoming one. It seems like once a person is hired, once they have a baby, once they graduate and are out in the world, they adopt the strange notion that they have to act like they imagine an expert would act.

But no one starts out an expert. We all start out as beginners. And whenever we do something new, we are back to being a beginner. Therefore, if you are the kind of person who gets asked to do new things, you are a perpetual beginner.

If you are a new mom, then you are a beginner. If you now have three teenagers under your roof and you have never had three adolescents to deal with, you are a beginner. If you were good at your old job and got promoted, you are a beginner.

What do all good beginners have in common? First, they don't pretend they are experts. Second, they know beginners make mistakes.

When we see ourselves as beginners, we know mistakes are not a reflection of our worth, they are merely occasions where we can learn. Perpetual beginners are free to make mistakes because each mistake gets them just a little closer to the goal of being a great parent, boss, leader, pastor or whatever.

Third, beginners know they don't have to have all the answers, but they do need to be willing to ask questions and seek out the answers.

Beginners are learners, and learners ask questions. "Seek counsel from every wise man" is the advice from one father to his son (Tobit 4:18). When we pretend to have all of the answers, we automatically hamstringing ourselves. We are stifling our chances of learning anything new, and we are constantly on the defensive. I mean, if you are the one who has all of the answers (and none of the questions) then you can't make mistakes, can you?

Author and management consultant Pat Lencioni has pointed out that the old saying "never let them see you sweat" is flawed. In a talk to a large gathering of college students, he made the point of saying, "Let them see you sweat." Too many people live trying to hide behind the facade. But, he points out, if you are struggling, all of those near you can already tell. If you pretend to be an expert when you aren't, people know that you are not being genuine.

Allowing the people you are leading or raising to see you struggle is helpful to them. Not only does it give you credibility, but also you are implicitly giving others permission to ask questions, grow and have the freedom to fail. You are letting your children be learners. You are allowing your employees or parishioners to ask questions. You are letting those around you know that they can fail and still move forward.

Finally, we can only act on the information that we know; we can't do anything with what we don't know. Too often, people limit themselves and find themselves stuck worrying about "what ifs." While there is something to be said for gathering enough information to move forward, it is helpful to remember that all you need is "sufficient information."

We can confidently move forward, even with only "sufficient information," because we believe in a God who loves us. As Christians, we are absolutely confident in an absolutely certain God even when we are absolutely unsure of ourselves.