



THE POWER OF ACCEPTANCE The Foundation for Effective Communication

By Catherine Dowling

My colleague, Janet, found it hard to say “no” at work. She took on project after project getting paid for eight hour days but working sixteen. I spoke to Janet about her work load and the inevitability of a breakdown if it continued.

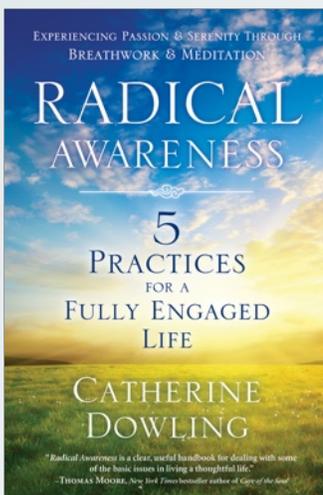
“It’s not so bad,” she argued. “I’m young and I’ve lots of energy.” Nevertheless she agreed to talk to her supervisor, Tom, about it. The same day a couple of other colleagues, worried about Janet, also spoke to Tom. He argued that she was a mature adult and should be able to manage her own schedule. But under pressure he agreed to discuss the matter with Janet.

The next morning at the weekly production meeting, Tom announced a new project perfect for Janet’s area of expertise. Janet’s hand went up to claim the project, but more tentatively than usual. Tom asked was she sure she could manage it. She told him, timidly, that at some point she might need assistance. He told her to ask for help when she needed it. And that was it. Both of them believed they had communicated effectively about a thorny subject. Six months later, Janet’s breakdown took the form of several botched projects at huge expense to the company.

So many times it seems our inability to accept what is undermines our ability to communicate effectively. Blinded by her own youth and energy, Janet could not accept her human limitations. She communicated with Tom tentatively and got ignored. Blinded by his belief that a mature professional could manage their own workload, Tom didn’t ask the probing questions that would have given him a true picture of what was going on for Janet. The results were disastrous for both.

Over the course of my work I’ve found that there are as many interpretations of what I say as there are people listening to me. I too hear what people say through the filter of my own mind and I’m often tempted to react with anger. I’ve learned to hold back, to sit on anger in particular, until I have the opportunity to assess what is really being communicated. It helps to ask more probing, clarifying questions. But to get to the point of asking those all important questions, I need to scrape away my mental filters, my own past experience and belief systems that color all communication. Behind those filters lies reality—the reality of an overworked professional who can’t say no, for example, even though she “should” be able to. When I push through the barrier of what I think is before me, what I *want* to be before me, and accept what actually *is*, then I can begin to communicate in a way that makes a positive difference.

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