

Sandpaper People

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

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Reflection on the Theme by Deborah Willoughby

The Beloved Community Working Group recently hosted a training on the ladder of inference, which helps us understand how different people can look at a set of facts and draw completely different conclusions.

That topic rang a bell with me. In theory, I understand how I can contort myself to make facts fit into my preconceived notions. In practice, I've struggled to recognize when I'm doing it.

I once went to a work retreat to learn and understand our team's different communication styles and motivations. The topic was interesting, but it wasn't until several months later that I really understood its practical value.

I had been asked to help plan a new initiative for the company. The day of our task force's first meeting, I checked with a manager I'll call Robert to confirm the time and location.

I arrived in the conference room a little before the start time, and the room was already full. There was a conversation under way, and I joined in, although something felt off. I noticed our director, a board member, our government relations consultants, some well-dressed strangers and, oh, a prominent state senator. I was at the wrong meeting, discussing the wrong topic, with high-level guests. Is my face red now? It sure was then. I quietly explained I was supposed to be at a different meeting and made the long walk around the big table and got out of there. I was so embarrassed, and I felt I had made our organization look bad.

I found the group I was supposed to be with, and someone said they had started without me because they couldn't find me. I explained that I had accidentally crashed the site visit with Sen. so and so.

Robert laughed and said, "Oops, we changed the meeting site at the last minute because of the visiting politicians."

Now I was embarrassed and angry. Robert didn't bother telling me about the change, and he thought it was funny?

Later, I told my closest work friend how I was feeling.

"I don't think Robert did this on purpose to embarrass me, but he did manage to let everyone else know about the change in the meeting location. And he didn't even apologize. He laughed at me! He thought it was funny!" I said I had lost trust and respect for Robert.

My friend's response surprised me. "Robert wasn't laughing at you. You were upset, and he didn't know what to do. It was a nervous chuckle. You and Robert have completely different communication styles. He was probably afraid you were going to call him out publicly for a simple oversight."

It was true that Robert and I were different. If something goes wrong, I tend to let people know. I like to think that if people have all the information, they can make good decisions. Robert was a very gifted problem-solver, and he preferred to work alone. He handled things himself, and I believe he felt coworkers would feel more secure and trust the organization more if they were shielded from problems that came up.

So I climbed back down the ladder of inference. Peace was restored. It was a good learning experience.