

1

SO? . . . BUT NOT SO WHAT!



I was talking with a friend recently when he confided he was having a problem developing one of his talents because he was afraid he might be criticized by others for not doing it well. I introduced him to a powerful philosophy I have worked out over the years that I commend to you as well. Unlike most philosophies, it is simple, easy to understand, and easy to remember. It's one word: "So?"

Don't get me wrong. It is not "So what?" which is a very different philosophy. So what is a dismissive view of the world. It is aggressive and leaves no room for learning. So what just says you aren't listening and that you probably think you know better than the other person and you have no real interest in what they have to say. It is the verbal equivalent of putting your hands over your ears and repeating "lalalalalala."

So is a much deeper view of the world. So is based on two principles—discernment and detachment. Discernment is necessary because it is important to listen to what others say and think. That means you have to take in lots of information and then you have to consider it. That is particularly true in the work we do.

DISCERNING MINDS

Leadership is all about connection and the fastest way to break connection is to fail to listen to others. So listening and caring about

what you are hearing is crucial. But it is a good idea to use some discernment once that is done. I can't imagine everything you hear during the day is useful or even that it all makes good sense. A lot of what I heard in the superintendent's office was spectacularly idiotic and a lot more didn't really help me with my work. I have to admit some of that came from my own mouth. The point here is that all of us aren't wise all the time. You have to filter what is said and suggested.

I also can't imagine every criticism you hear is worth adopting or taking seriously. You have to discern whether what you are hearing is worthy of your effort to adapt and adopt. It has been my experience that some of what I get from others in the way of suggestions and ideas is valuable and needs to be taken seriously. Other thoughts are best left dormant. Discerning minds want to know, but they don't always feel the need to act.

Attachment comes when you take in what others think as the way you feel you should live your life. You choose to accept their judgments and views as better than your own and then you feel you need to follow their drumbeat. Detachment comes when you learn that others' ideas and judgments are just that—ideas and judgments. They are no better or worse than your own. Certainly, not much good can come from you taking them in and living your life based upon them. In fact, a lot of the unhappiness I have observed in life has come from an individual's inability to detach from what others think.

Detachment doesn't mean you don't feel. You don't have to be numb or dumb. You just have to refuse to own the junk mail that others send you. Do you save all the spam in your inbox? Detachment is simply a way of deleting the spam.

SUCCINCT PHILOSOPHY

So that brings us back to "so." When I laid out my philosophy, my friend laughed and suggested I might be on to something. He marveled at the economy of what I was offering and suggested it might be the shortest philosophic statement he had heard. In fact, it is one of the shortest words in the English language—bested only by "I" as the shortest. And that is the opposing philosophy to so.

The I philosophy leaves no room for listening because no one else is important. I (see, it is hard to talk without using the word) have observed too often I appears in the middle of superIntendent.

8 The Building Blocks of Leadership

It is pretty easy, when you are the big cheese, to think it is all about you. It also appears much too often in the middle of those the superintendent deals with.

If so is about discernment and detachment, then I is about selfishness and self-centeredness. It assumes Galileo was wrong and that I, not the sun, exist in the center of the universe. Sadly, many start out with a “you” philosophy, but when one is totally selfless, it often leads to feeling abused and used. The you morphs into I and selflessness becomes selfishness. While it starts with self-protection, it quickly becomes destructive to others.

MIDDLE GROUND

So there is a middle way—the so way. It can take many forms: “So, what can I do for you?” (being selfless with thought attached); “So, what’s so important about that?” (looking before buying); “So, let’s look at it another way” (opening the discussion to alternative ideas).

So is a conjunction or an adverb. It connects things—sews them together if you will—and it describes. It holds a place in the center of things, but it can also emphasize the quality of an experience. It can make things bigger (“it was so awesome!”). And better (“it was so wonderful!”).

So, where was I? I realize if we could master the concept of so, I really think folks would be freed up to do what they are capable of doing. They would not be hemmed in by the limiting beliefs of others. They would not get so distressed about the challenges life offers and they could become unstuck in ways that allow them to be powerful. You might recall the empowering orders offered by Captain Picard on *Star Trek*: “Make it so.”

Education has to be about lifting limitations on ourselves and on others. So what’s stopping us?