Pearls of Leadership Wisdom: The Power of Reframing

Welcome to my backyard and Pearls of Leadership Wisdom. This pearl is about The Power of Reframing. So have you ever been in a situation where you felt stuck? Or felt you were trying to solve a problem and you were totally at a dead end? Or felt that somehow a situation was hopeless? In those moments, that's exactly when you need to be able to reach into your toolkit for the process of reframing. Because this is somewhat more difficult to express in action ideas, I want to illustrate reframing by telling you three stories.

The first story comes from research and the research was about ultramarathoners. Researchers wanted to understand how is it that ultramarathoners can experience pain or negative circumstances, but still keep going, and how does that differ from ordinary runners like the rest of us—or some of the rest of us, at least. What they discovered, first of all, was not especially surprising, that is ultramarathoners were much more persistent and resilient than the rest of us, but the other thing that they had, that they did when something happened that was negative, was how they talk to themselves about it. They reframed the issue by how they talk to themselves. Here's an example, I want you to imagine that you're out running and your calf is hurting terribly and you're thinking about that calf pain and thinking maybe you can't go on and thinking maybe you shouldn't go on. What the ultramarathoners would do, would be to say things to themselves like, "Hmmm, I wonder whether I'm going to feel the same pain at mile 20 as I do at mile 19." or "That's interesting that it's hurting. I bet my trainer might have some stretches that will be helpful to me." or "I wonder whether if it will still hurt tomorrow after my day of rest?" See what they did? They reframed the issue by how they talk to themselves about it. Instead of focusing in on the pain, they focused on something that they could ultimately solve.

My second story is about a company, the company has a cool name—it's actually Cool. It is a company based in Malta, in the country of Malta, which is an island, and that company—which was started in July of 2019, so it's a very young company—was a kind of Uber of shared-ride services, the first of its kind in its country. When the COVID-19 stay-at-home, stay-in-shelter orders took place in Malta, they suddenly had no business. What they did, however, was instead of focusing on how to solve the problem of "we don't have any revenues anymore," they changed the problem statement. They said "How could we use our transportation resources and our technical resources to help the country?" That led them to a totally different solution. They began delivering supplies for small businesses, delivering supplies in general, delivering groceries to people who were shut in, and providing private rides to their healthcare workers to get them from point A to their work settings. In short, they reframed the problem they were trying to solve from how do we survive to how do we use our resources to help the country.

My third story comes from an executive coaching assignment. As in most coaching assignments, we do some 360 interviews and I had brought the information to the executive about how he was perceived. One of the things he heard was that people viewed him as intimidating. He was frankly offended, and even a little insulted, that people would describe him as intimidating. He said to me, "Sandra, I'm not an intimidating person. This is not me. We have to solve this." What he meant is he wanted to solve the fact that people saw him as intimidating and change their perception. After some discussion, I was able to help him see that by reframing the problem and thinking about: "How do people feel when they first meet you?" "How do people feel what's happening for them?" He began to see that both his own style, and title frankly, contributed to their feelings about him. He changed the narrative and framed the issue as "How do I help people feel more welcomed and comfortable around me?" Once he reframed the problem, he had a way of solving it. It is powerful.