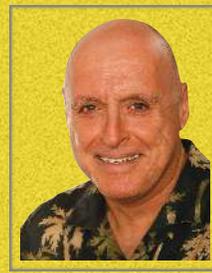


THE EXTRA POINT

BY JERRY ROBERTS



310 The Dangers of Labeling People

Question one, do you judge others? Question two, do you attempt to categorize them? If the answer to both was anything other than “yes,” we’ve got some work to do. I’m Jerry Roberts and let’s talk about labeling people, next on The Extra Point.

We label people by the characteristics they display and we’ve been doing it pretty much our whole lives. Let’s find out if you see any faces of coworkers when I mention these terms: bully...gossiper...sucks up to the boss...slacker...on their phone all the time. Or, try these: helpful...team player...reliable...friendly...delivers results. Did you see any faces?

Is labeling good or bad? It can be both good and bad. Before we dig into it let’s make this point — we don’t purposely set out to slap a description on someone. It takes place in our subconscious mind. We have a set of values and beliefs, what I call our personal OS — operating system — and anything and anybody we come in contact with is compared to that, either in positive or negative terms.

Problem # 1, labels may last a long time but people can change. Your label for someone could be accurate now, but may be an unfair reflection of who they’ll be a year from now, or several years from now.

Problem # 2, labels are limiting. Everybody on the payroll — your payroll — is a multi-talented, multi-dimensional individual. What you see at work may be, as they say, just the tip of the iceberg. Whatever label you lay on someone, it’s almost certainly going to describe one element of who they are at work, but they’re a lot more than that. Yet, we tag them with a word or series of words and that’s how they’re known. We stuff them into a compartment in our mind and that’s where they stay until something happens to change our opinion.

Problem # 3, if supervisors and even peers consistently apply a label to an employee, the employee may start to believe the label and act more like what the label implies. The more that others use the label, the more the label is solidified. This labeling can also create a biased perspective against the employee, which can lead to unfair treatment.

What we can do about this is to fight off any negative labels our subconscious generates. Try to acknowledge that the person may be more and better than the label we’ve put on them. If you describe a coworker as a jerk, maybe you should also mention other characteristics — that he works like a beast, knows the system like the back of his hand, and never misses a deadline. I mean, that’s only fair, right?

Some people deserve their labels, sure, but labels don’t necessarily tell the future. Walt Disney was called unimaginative and fired from a newspaper. Albert Einstein didn’t speak until age four and didn’t read until seven. He was called possibly retarded. Abraham Lincoln was called a total failure at life, until he picked up that last job. Oprah Winfrey was fired from her job as a television reporter because someone said she was unfit for TV. So no, labels don’t always tell someone’s future.

Maybe the best way to approach labels is to try to put positive ones on the folks you work with. Maybe they’ll feel good about those labels, and work hard to live up to them. Maybe they’ll also label you as the coolest coworker ever.

That’s The Extra Point. Get out there and make something good happen today. For 93.3 and the Ray Gibson Show, I’m Jerry Roberts.

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