

Into the Unknown

Taking Better Leaps of Faith

By Richard Pomerance, Ph.D.

Rehabilitation hospitals are filled with teenagers who took leaps of faith. Sometimes, they leaped into empty swimming pools and broke their necks. It was dark, and they were at a friend's house. No one bothered to tell them the pool had been drained - after all, technically it was only drained halfway. Now they're in wheel chairs for the rest of their lives.

Many of us wind up stuck in lousy personal or business relationships because we unknowingly behave in the same thoughtless, dangerous way when it comes to making people decisions. What do we know about him? Not much! Can what little we know allow us to feel comfortable hiring him, hooking up with him, marrying him? Our minds race. And then we have it, the hypothetical good outweighing the hypothetical bad. He's hired! We'll hop in bed and "learn more." We'll marry—"oh, the children will be so beautiful!" Later, when the decision proves to be a bad one, we pummel ourselves for making such a dopey choice without doing our homework. We lick our wounds. We heal. And then repeat the same mistake. *Why don't we ever learn?*

Why We Don't Learn: Going with the Familiar

Sometimes we leap because we're "sure" that the other person is compatible or trustworthy. Be careful! A feeling of absolute certainty often means you're heading into a blind spot, developed from experiences of your early years. And blind spots always lead to darkness.

Why We Don't Learn: Impulsiveness

Some people simply can't wait. Whether for psychological reasons or because of an attention deficit disorder, incomplete situations create terrible tension, like an itch unscratched. One client, Mandy, explained that if she saw an attractive man, she *had* to have sex with him. Sex was *not* the point. She never actually became aroused and didn't feel a need to control via seduction. The entire point was to feed the impulse, nothing more. Which led Mandy nowhere in terms of satisfying relationships. Impulsive action is random at best and dangerous at worst. To learn we have to STOP, pay attention, take in information and make inferences from it, and only then take action.

Why We Don't Learn: Wishes and Fears

Wishes or fears may also cause us to leap in the wrong direction. We may be so concerned with something happening or not happening that we don't stop to see what is actually going on. Wishes and fears run deep. Don't ignore them. Instead, figure out why they're there and

what unfinished business they represent. Then you won't distort your actions to fit an old script.

Why We Don't Learn: We Don't Do Our Homework!

A client came to my office for a first meeting. At the end he said "I like what you've said. I like your style. I think you can do the job and I think we can work well together. But I have to do my due diligence. Please give me your CV, copies of your publications, and three references. I'll get back to you." This man's problems did not include laziness!

Most of us, most of the time, don't want to do our homework to get crucial data. It's just so much easier to base our decisions on what we already know, then listen to our instincts, gossip, or the intelligent-sounding opinions of people who actually know nothing. Unfortunately, making a people decision on that basis is no less risky than simply throwing dice!

Into the Light: The Good Leap of Faith

Even with the best data gathering and forethought, all people decisions eventually require a leap of faith. That leap should be as free of bias as possible and informed by good data. A good leap of faith is:

- ▶ **accurate**, not distorted by wishes, fears, or failure to go beyond the familiar. This implies that we've thoroughly screened our choices and actions for these distortions. The more important the choice, the more effort we should put into the screening process.
- ▶ **informed** by *real* data (our "due diligence") gathered by *real* effort.
- ▶ **free** of the impulsive wish to declare victory, wrap up the problem and move on before we're truly ready to do so.
- ▶ **assessed** in terms of risk and reward. Ask: what's the worst that could happen? How would I feel if the worst actually happened?

One Summer Night

Imagine you're a teenager at a summer party at your friend's house. Someone suggests you go for a swim in the family pool. The lights are off, making the pool all the more alluring. There's the diving board. Oh, the water would feel so good. . . . What are you going to do?

Dr. Richard Pomerance specializes in helping individuals make better people decisions in their personal and business lives through a methodology called "Reading People Right." Contact Dr. Pomerance at doctorp@readingpeopleright.com, or for more information visit his Web site www.readingpeopleright.com.