

Equality - by Nancy Kline

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**Advisor Blog Central**

You cannot produce this level of invitation and safety for your clients to tell their stories unless you regard them as your thinking equal. As the professional mind, you are not the superior mind. Your client's intelligence and ability to think about their life and future and legacy and plan are equal to yours. When you know that, really know that, you will listen differently and they will tell you different stories at deeper levels than if they sense the subtle disdain, infantilization and impatience, and need to show off that is the demeanor of the professional who assumes they are the client's thinking superior.

So for a moment let's look at Equality.

In fact, let's back up. Let's think about this: Do we really believe in Equality? Really? I mean really, as in cross our hearts?

Equality shows up in just about every official list of Values. Of course we believe in it. Equality, right at the top of the list. You know, the list of Values that hugely expensive consultants pull out of us and then print onto hugely expensive panels and mount along often hugely expensive walls.

Equality. Sounds good. Definitely looks good. And most days we think we mean it. But, for example, have you ever stopped yourself dead in your tracks on the way to a client meeting and thought, 'Hmmm, now, do I really believe in Equality? Really? Are my client and I actually equal as Thinkers?'

No, you probably don't stop and ask that. My experience of organizations and families and relationships is that they are not dotted with individuals suddenly immobilized by that question.

And, imagine, if we were to stop people in the halls ourselves and say, "Hi, uh, just a quick question - do you believe in Equality? I mean, really, really believe in it? Just curious." And smiled. How crazy would that look? (Actually, stopping anyone these days on the way to anything, even the bathroom, is regarded pretty much as an aggressive act. So add in that question and no telling how short your career there would be.)

So, do we believe in Equality? I wonder. I think we say we do, the way just about everyone said, "All men are created equal" and meant, "except for the slaves." And even if we mean it a bit, enough to march for voting rights and equal pay for equal work and equal opportunity (whatever that means), what we most likely don't mean is that we are all equal as thinkers.

When stopped in the hall, many professional advisers, if they didn't lock us up first for asking, would say, "Actually, no, I don't believe in equality of thinking; some people are simply better thinkers than others. And as a professional it is my job to do the thinking. I was educated to do that, and I get paid to do that. Now, please, have a good day."

Here is an analogy: let's equate the mind of our client with state-of-the-art equipment. Cost? A billion dollars. It has two switches, M and F. M for miniscule capacity; F for full capacity. Let's decide at every meeting with a client to switch it to miniscule. Let's waste 1 billion dollars every hour. How about it? This makes the nut in the hall asking the Equality question look pretty sane.

But, let's say you say, okay, I need my client's mind on full. "How then," you ask, "do I make that happen? Because, believe me," you say, "a lot of my clients can't seem to string two original thoughts together even when I ask them to, and when I ask them questions, there is usually not an explosion of light bulbs, I can tell you that."

No doubt. But do one simple thing, and light bulbs, both of ideas and of stories, will explode. Regard your client as your thinking equal. Really, really - as in cross your heart and hope to die. Because, once you truly regard them as your equal, you will listen differently, more deeply, more respectfully, with more ease, with no shred of impatience and no urgency to get the focus back onto your thinking.

Another word about us as Professionals. Our education simply does not prepare us for the critical fact that our clients are our thinking equals. If anything, our education nearly bludgeons us with messages of superiority, including the message that our future clients expect that superiority, too. That, in fact, is what they will pay us for. What is the point of the professional if the client can think and come up with answers just as well?

The point of the professional is to be a Thinking Environment for the client so that they can think for themselves brilliantly and discover the best way forward. The professional may also have information and experience to share that may be of great value. May be. Sometimes truly is. But that should be only about 30% of the interaction. Because when people go to professionals, whether for legacy and estate plans or a return to health or paths to reach goals, what they are really looking for first and most of all is a person who wants to know what they think, who they are, what matters to them, and what their life-shaping stories are. Only after all of that do they want to be given advice.

A professional's first job - a leader's first job - is to create the conditions for people to think for themselves, saturating it with implicit and explicit Equality. Professionals in all fields need to understand and act on this. Because, boy, can it cost, if it doesn't. Here's an example.

A surgeon, standing scrubbed with both gloved hands in the air, called for the scalpel. The faceless attendant handed it to him. The doctor settled the scalpel just over the left upper abdomen. His hand moved, revving before piercing. In spurts the voice of the attendant next to him squeaked, then spoke, "Dr. Jones, with all due respect, that is the wrong side." The doctor suspended his hand an inch over the body. He turned his head to find the head of the voice. He froze his eyes on the voice's eyes. "What did you say?" The attendant took the breath that precedes words. Before the words came, the doctor shouted, "I know what you said. And I caution you, don't ever, ever do that again. The attendant's hands began to shake. "But sir, it is the right kidney that is damaged." "I warn you, Ms. Reynolds. You are seriously out of line."

The doctor cut into the left side, removed the left kidney, ordered the patient sewn up, and then he returned to his rounds. The next day he was summoned to the hospital chief executive's office and dismissed. Six months later his medical license was withdrawn. He had removed the healthy kidney.

Now that was expensive. And at fault there was only one tiny thing: the assumption of inequality. Sprinkled of course with avalanches of arrogance. Not an unusual combination. Similarly, the still worst airline crash in history, Tenerife 1977, seems almost certainly to have been caused by the pilot's rejection of Equality in the cockpit. When, for the second time, the flight engineer questioned the pilot's decision to take off in dense fog without firm clearance and unable to see another jumbo jet still on the runway, the pilot shouted at the engineer and accelerated full speed, cutting seconds later into the body of the other plane, killing 583 people.

Again the divesting of Equality and the donning of arrogance. A literally deadly combination. This is what can happen when Equality and Attention are missing between people.

***Link to original article on Advisor Blog Central:***

<http://kline.advisorblogcentral.com/post/2008/10/The-importance-of-equality-of-thinking.aspx>