

Is Patience a skill that can be learned?

I've often been asked by leaders from various cultural backgrounds to coach them on patience. Interesting one, this. Is patience a skill that can be learned? Having worked with both very patient leaders and ones with a short fuse, I came to the conclusion that **patience is personality type related**. Patience is a virtue you can work on, but as such it is not a skill that can be learned. You can learn to hide your impatience. You can learn what **triggers your impatience** and **manage your emotions**. You can learn to **measure your reactions**. Inside though, you still have that simmering flame of impatience burning. If your stress levels are high, this burning flame might turn into a blaze. So it's important to know your triggers.

Triggers

When people are a certain way (in a Gestalt sense of being versus doing) and that **triggers a strong reaction** from you, that can usually be attributed to your values: It resonates with your value (let's say honesty) because either you **want to be more of** (more honest and outspoken) **or less so** (don't say the truth every time and be hurtful, but actually edit yourself more). Thus a good start for controlling your response is to **reflect on why something resonates strongly with you**. If it is indeed something that triggers because you want to be 'less of', here is a helpful experiment for you:

Let's say in your own culture you have the following attitude towards space: Personal space is protected and you give about half a meter to people you don't know. You respect their personal space and expect yours to be respected in return. Now you board an 8am underground train in Beijing. Guess what: nobody gives you any space, there is none. There is really no use to get upset about it, people will crush you, push and shove you and quite a few of them will probably also have a different attitude towards personal hygiene.

The experiment is now to instead of cringe and shy away from body contact, for 1 day you'll seek it out. You will consciously look for opportunity to shove people, get very close, also if it is not necessary. Try it out, and if you can bring yourself to overdo it, sit on someone's lap on the metro. After your day of experimenting is over you will probably still not really like to share your personal space, but the thought of your 'space invader day' will make you smile and you'll probably end up thinking: "I could join them right there and now."

Manage your Emotions

In order to actually identify whether something is a trigger it makes sense to **pay attention to your sensations**: How do triggers manifest, as a headache, tension in the shoulders, clenching your jaw? Whatever your **physical manifestations, first note them and then change your state**. Sometimes that means you have to not just shift your position, but also actually leave a situation and change environment. Excuse yourself from present company for a time out, when you feel anger or frustration rising. Changing the state will give you the needed distance to a situation to avoid gut reactions and give a more measured response. One of my coachees clearly got angry with a Chinese administrator who failed to get the office printer fixed. The girl laughed, which made my client

even angrier. He left the one sided argument and went out to grab a coffee. On his way back he remembered that laughing is a way for Chinese to mask their discomfort of someone showing too much emotion. Once he calmed down he went back to the admin and explained very calmly what he needed done, asked whether there was anything he could do to speed up the process and voila: he found out they had to pay an extra fee if they wanted the repair guy to come the same day. He took that as a big learning and now leaves the situation before he starts yelling, because he knows that makes him loose face, too.

Measure your reactions

When you react negatively to whatever trigger, it might help you to try and reprogram yourself. Rather than wallowing in guilt, try to do better next time. Be mindful. **Be aware of what's going on with you and your environment.**

If you for example **feel misunderstood** by your peers, because they have different priorities and motivations, try to **be more understanding yourself**. In this case you might try and understand one of your teams better and spend some extra time with them that day listening to their issues. And/ or listen to your peers issues, actively, with curiosity and real interest. Another example is if you feel unsupported, give someone else extra support for his or her project. It's quite easy, because by helping others you will instantly feel better yourself and as everything in life what comes around goes around. You are investing in your network and you will be able to call on it later (very much like Guanxi) and you will focus on someone else rather than pity yourself.

Create your balanced base line

In addition to expecting the unexpected you can use mindfulness to create a balanced base line for yourself. **Be grateful** of the things you have, rather than angry when things don't go your way. The gratefulness reflection is good in any situation you get worked up, because sometimes you just need to remind yourself of what is good and what works for you at the moment.

Show some humor: Having worked with leaders from different cultural backgrounds for over eight years it became clear to me that people who take difficult situations with a sense of humor fare much better than people who don't. Find the bright side and stay positive. That will also keep you in an open frame of mind where you can find the beautiful things in your current situation. Learn from your environment and ask lots of open-ended questions: **Replace your judgment with curiosity.** Find out what motivates people whose behavior triggers you to struggle with patience. Find out about their background, their interests and goals. You can learn so much by engaging in **active listening and questions.** Collect stories and you will see how people open up and you start **forming new alliances.** If you approach people with an **open mind and listen,** you will find something interesting and get a glimpse of **different world views** that can make yours bigger and more beautiful.

In order to successfully **build your tolerance levels** and display of **patience** you need to probably **use a combination of the above strategies.** You need to revisit your behavior quite a few times and just **keep at it.** Some things come easier than others. If you expect difficulties in certain situations you usually cope

better, it will be the little things that trip you up, when you don't expect trouble and are not prepared.

For success in building your patience it's vital not to just change behavior but **develop new supporting habits that stick**. Keep noticing when something triggers you, change your state when it does and know your values and what makes you tick. And don't beat yourself up when you slip: the flame is still burning, remember?!

Julia Atkinson is Executive Coach and Consultant with more than 9 years experience of living and working in China before taking her business to the US, Chicago. Prior to starting an executive development firm, Julia spent 10 years leading teams in the IT and Telecommunication industries. Julia can be reached at julia@atkinson-coaching.com, www.atkinson-coaching.com