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The ABC's of Work & Life

O is for Objectivity



Katie Mehnert considers O as fairly as she can.



Objectivity. It's a big word today in such a small world. When was the last time you read something you thought was objective or were in a situation where you were with someone who demonstrated objectivity? According to Wikipedia, to possess objectivity, we must be impartial, lack bias, prejudice, and be fair.

Really? Fair? Don't get me started.

I can remember when I was a kid and I didn't like something my father would say. My cries for fairness were met with "I'm sorry it's not fair. In this house, we live by my rules."

Perhaps you're a parent or a child of a parent who said something similar?

I also remember the times I'd tell my parents I'd be nothing like them. Guess what? I was wrong. I'd like to think I'm a better version of them both, but their ways have definitely shaped what I've come to believe, know, and hold true in my own work and life, but it hasn't defined me completely.

Living and leading in an objective way is not easy. Thirty years ago, the television and newspapers provided us with news and information. Today, we're smeared with such a myriad of information and data that it's not always easy to determine what to believe or know what is factual. In some ways, I'm happy that social media has made information more readily accessible. It doesn't make it right, though.

Here are **three things** I believe lead us to more objectivity.

1. Just because it's in print, doesn't mean it's true. (Unless of course, I wrote it. Ha!) In all seriousness, don't trust what you read. We read a lot today. We also watch television and spend a lot of time online. Social networks have become

great sources for knowledge sharing and learning.

The only way to know something is real is to experience it first hand. When I was made a safety leader at Shell, I was fortunate to have leaders who encouraged me to get out to field locations to experience our business. That meant trips all over the world. I treasured these experiences because they taught me to be more open-minded when I made decisions back at the office that impacted our field staff.

So get out there and see the world you are reading about and experience it for yourself.

2. Be passionately curious. Albert Einstein once said, "I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious". Curiosity is very important in understanding the root of an issue, the heart of a story, and the essence of a person. Demonstrating curiosity allows us to suspend our assumptions. It shows that we are aware of our bias and willing to explore diverse points of view.

I was a curious child. I asked lots of questions. My parents really had their hands full. I look back on this, though,

and praise them for encouraging me to ask questions. They asked questions which in turn encouraged me to ask more.

So, I must ask you... Are you encouraging your colleagues, employees, children, or friends to ask questions? Are you asking questions? Are you asking the right ones? Are you exploring new ways of thinking and connecting with people different from you?

Here are my favourite question starters that show more curiosity.

- What if ... ?
- I'd really like to understand more about ...?
- How would it work if ...?
- What's your experience of ...?
- How would you ...?

When you ask questions, you find out all kinds of information. So try asking some questions.

3. When you are wrong, own up to it.

I'm curious about how you feel about this statement. I put it here on purpose.

My limited experience working in Singapore and many parts of the Eastern world has taught me some lessons. I realised that it's not always culturally acceptable to own up to being wrong

because it's sometimes perceived as a potential sign of failure. (I will caveat this sentence with the invitation for you to correct me if I am wrong.)

In Western ways, typically when you're wrong about something and you are open about that, it's a sign of strength.

But it makes me wonder. **Do cultural differences give way to objectivity or subjectivity?** *How do our cultural identities play into the equation?*

If we say it's the "right way" and "fair" in America, does that mean it's "right" and "fair" in Singapore? Does it mean we are impartial, and lack bias and prejudice? Michael Walzer, one of America's leading political philosophers, and a Professor with the Institute for Advanced Study talks about identity and cultural subjectivity on the web. Check out his video and let me know what you think.

Here's my objective (yet subjective) view.

We are born into this world with very limited knowledge and views. Over time, we are then exposed to experiences that form our unique identities, and conscious and unconscious biases. We approach the

world from the lenses we have to see through, and the ears we have to help us hear and understand.

Yet, it's within us all to develop objectivity. We should experience things first hand, show curiosity, ask questions, and learn about things and people we don't know. We need to seek the answers we don't have and test our abilities to go beyond who we are.

What's your experience? I look forward to hearing and learning from all of you.

Katie Mehnert is a global talent development and change executive with 17 years of helping people and companies get curious, connect, share, grow and perform better. She has recently been appointed CEO of Pink Petro; www.pinkpetro.com, a platform to connect women and men in the energy industry and advance females in her industry. Prior to her latest venture, Katie was a Director with BP, joining after the Deepwater Horizon incident and worked in various leadership roles worldwide with Shell. She's a dynamic speaker and author having been featured in LinkedIn, CEO.com, Business Insider, and Yahoo. As a work-in-progress marathon runner, wife and working mom, you can follow her musings on balancing it all on her blog at www.katiemehnert.com, or email her at katie@katiemehnert.com