

When caution takes precedence

By Jeff Davidson October 1, 2013



When my daughter Valerie was born, as with so many fathers, it was the thrill of a lifetime. After leaving the birthing room, they wheeled her into the baby nursery, with all the other newborns resting in the cribs.

As I peered through the glass, I could see that Valerie was a fine physical specimen. She had good strong shoulders, and, remarkably for a newborn, a muscular, arching back. She must have inherited these gifts from her grandparents.

Unanticipated Experiences

When we were ready to take her home the next day, I had a bevy of new experiences I hadn't anticipated. Valerie was in my wife's arms as they wheeled her from the hospital, out the front door, and down the walkway to my awaiting car. We had a baby seat already secured in the car's backseat. It took us the longest time to ensure that she was snug, fastened, and seated comfortably. Finally, I drove out of the parking lot onto the main road.

Cars motoring by at 25, 30, and 35 miles per hour seemed to be speeding as if they were on a super highway. Gingerly, I pulled into traffic with the realization that the most precious cargo in the world was in the backseat. Although I'd been driving for many, many years – accident free – it was as if I was driving for the first time.

I crept along the two-lane road as slowly as I could without disrupting traffic, allowing other motorists to pass me on the left. I rolled up slowly to every light and even appreciated the ability to stop.

Normally, it's about an eight to ten minute trip from Arlington Hospital to our high rise condominium in Falls Church, Virginia, but on this particular trip, it took us more than 30 minutes. Along every mile and every car length, I was preoccupied with the fact that nothing must happen to us on this ride home.

Looking Forward to Red Lights

I was thankful each time we came upon a stoplight turning red, which gave me the opportunity to collect my sensibilities, as well as prevent us from being side-swiped as we rolled through an intersection on a yellow light or even a green light.

About 20 minutes into the trip, my wife asked me if I was going to speed up a little. I couldn't. Never in my life had I so studiously purveyed the road. Both of my hands securely gripped the steering wheel, my right foot ever ready to alternate between accelerating and breaking.

Finally, mercifully, we arrived home.

A House not the Same

After a few moments, we extricated Valerie from the baby seat and placed her in the stroller that we had stashed in the trunk, ready to roll her through the parking garage, up the elevator, down the hallway, and into our condo apartment.

When we opened the door of the apartment and wheeled her in, our home took on a different hue. Suddenly, instead of my wife and I co-habituating in this rectangular space, a tiny little human being now dominated every square inch. Two had become three. Valerie was sleeping as we rolled her in. Later, she would awake, cry for this and that, and tell us, in not so many words, what she wanted.

We all took naps, as it had been a long and challenging experience. When we awoke, Val was still there, sleeping. It was a Monday morning, approaching noon, but unlike any other Monday we had ever experienced. Nothing would be the same, and it would be much finer.

When Caution is King

The caution I exercised as I proceeded down the road that morning later reminded me of the caution with which we all proceed when facing a major life change. In our careers and in our businesses, predictably, we move cautiously throughout the year.

Recruiting a top level executive? Preparing your taxes? Learning new software? There's no way to rush through these tasks. Generally, the slower you go, the more assured you are about what you're doing. Ordering new equipment? The more buzzers and bells the device contains, the more you study it before placing your order.

At other times throughout the year, it also makes sense to proceed cautiously. When you're devising your annual strategic plan, who wants to create a half-hearted, slap-dash action guide to what you'll be doing over the next 12 months? Caution here equals prudence, as it does when we make a major hire, acquire a new product line, or sign an important contract.

Against the Tide

The bigger and more momentous the event, the greater the need to apply our personal brakes. Yet this behavior is contrary to what all of society tells us to do these days, which is to rush here and there, and go even faster in some misguided attempt to "keep up" in our marketplace, our industry, or the world.

The paradox of being an effective HR executive is that to flourish in a rapidly changing world, often the first thing we need to do is slow down, exercise caution, and approach situations or challenges at a deliberate pace. We need to take time to analyze situations and make wise decisions.

After reading this article, if you jump back into fray, and on the fly, attempt to make important decisions too quickly, take heart – you're proceeding the way most people do in this fast-forward world.

Knowing what it takes to extract the best from yourself, however, enables you to slow down to apply your best thinking and make your best decisions. Recognize that the little time you surrender in the process will be more than offset by the benefits you gain from your well thought-out choices.

So, this choice is yours.

Jeff Davidson is "The Work-Life Balance Expert®," and the premier thought leader on work-life balance issues. He has written 59 mainstream books, is a preeminent authority on time management, and is an electrifying professional speaker, making 806 presentations since 1985 to clients such as Kaiser Permanente, IBM, Novo Nordisk, American Express, Lufthansa, Swissotel, Re/Max, USAA, Worthington Steel, and the World Bank. For more information on Jeff, visit www.BreathingSpace.com.