

Personal Legacy

Max hustled in. “Sorry I’m late,” he said, as he fumbled through his computer bag. “Let me get my notes. I spent time on those questions late last night.”

I paused and noticed that his mind seemed to be racing. He confirmed my perceptions. “There’s a lot going on today—especially, because we made the offer yesterday to the new guy. I also have a meeting with my boss later today I haven’t prepared for yet.”

“Let me guess: Did you go with the guy from Canada?”

“Yep, and he accepted, which we’re thrilled about. We just need to hammer out the details, including immigration.”

“Do you want to use some of our time today to prepare for your meeting with your boss?”

“Actually, we don’t need to. I’ll be OK; I actually want to focus on these legacy questions for the bulk of our session.”

“OK.”

Max started to read his responses slowly, with a little smile on his face. “First question—five most important values:

1. Hard work
2. Strive as high as you can
3. Integrity
4. Do more with less
5. Help whenever you can.”

“These are great. What did you come up with for the second question?”

“My greatest gift as a leader—decisiveness.”

“Did anything else come to mind?”

“Well, yeah, my drive and spirit. This, of course, is a double-edged sword. When we first started out more than three months ago, we talked about how my drive is good in order to get things done, but can be really negative because I can be hard on people.”

“Yes, and that relates to number three.”

“Yeah, what I am known for:

- Working hard (working too hard, actually)
- Setting high standards (too much of a driver, actually)
- Perseverance
- Problem solving
- Helping people see options

- Relentless
- Impetuous.”

I chimed in, “Sounds like you added in the feedback you got from your boss when we first started.”

“Yeah, I’ve been thinking this through more. I’m really ready to do something about my reputation. I get that perception is reality.”

I smiled to myself, because I could hear the shift in his voice. His attitude was catching up to all the new behaviors he has been trying out. “You have already made some inroads, don’t forget that.”

Max stared back at his notes for a couple of moments; he looked up at me andk down at the notes. He took a deep breath, started to speak, and then stopped. I waited and wondered what he was feeling. Then he spoke, “You know, before I tell you what I want to be known for now that I’m not yet known for, I have to let you know that I’m mad at myself.”

“What about?”

“Well, I know better. I shouldn’t have to do this kind of exercise to be more compassionate,” he divulged.

“Is that what you want to be known for, ‘to be more compassionate’ than you are now?”

“Yeah.”

I deliberated whether to stay with the legacy questions or address his concerns. “Go easy on yourself, Max. These exercises are just reminders—reminders to be more conscious. Most people in the world value compassion;

the hard part is acting with it, especially because speed gets in the way of our ability to be compassionate.”

“Definitely.”

“We’ll talk more about this. First, tell me, what’s the last legacy question?”

“Twenty years from now, I would want one of my friends to tell you that ‘Max is a wise guy.’”

He grinned, trying to make me laugh. It worked.

He continued, “My friends, as well as my colleagues, enjoy me because I’m a ‘wise guy’—I joke around with them sometimes, and I’m quick and witty. But I don’t want to go down in history as a ‘wise guy who got things done.’ Jeez! This has been gnawing at me all the way up and down the 101 freeway. What I really want them to say is he’s ‘a guy who is wise.’”

We sat quietly for a moment. More questions popped into my mind based on Max’s responses: How would he describe a wise person? How would being wise help him and those around him? How would he remind himself to be more compassionate?

“A guy-who-is-wise,” I repeated slowly. “You want to be wise; wiser than you are now?”

“I really don’t consider myself wise. I think I’m clever. Being wise and being clever are different.”

“Great distinction; tell me more about the difference.”

“I use my experience a lot like a wise person, but I get into things and out of things because I’m clever. Every day, people come to me with issues that have to be solved. I get into the problem by understanding the an-

gles; I get out of the problem by coming up with a few clever ideas and letting the person know what I think. It's quick and transactional so I can go to the next problem."

"OK."

He continued, "I guess I don't view a wise person as looking at the world through a series of problems."

"Instead, you see a wise person as . . . ?" I asked.

"I see a wise person being patient and empathetic."

"Do you want to be more of these things?"

"Yes, *and* I want to be clever."

"I like that, and I agree with you!" I paused and thought this would be a good time to delve a little deeper. "So, Max, what else do you think distinguishes wisdom?"

"Having vision, which is yet another reason why I want to spend time on this personally and with the team."

"How do you know someone is visionary?"

"They look toward long-term possibilities and aren't always caught up in the latest crisis."

"Hard for us driver types to do, right?"

Max nodded. "There are very few visionaries around here. There are strategists but not necessarily visionaries."

"How do you see the difference?"

"Strategy doesn't seem as innovative as vision."

"Say more."

"We're always talking about aligning strategy to the corporation; vision seems to be outside the box or, literally, outside the line," Max explained.

"I would agree with that. Another distinction is strategic planning and strategic thinking. Planning is something most companies do once a year; strategic thinking

is a skill that could and should be used every day. Most strategic thinkers are visionaries.”

“Yeah, that’s good. I want to do more strategic thinking every day.”

“Being a visionary definitely takes time. There’s something else that’s tricky about it. A visionary is usually thought of as someone who can see the future clearly, without controlling it. A visionary is able to see the future and stays present without being too attached to the future.”

Max interjected, “Pretty impossible in this results-oriented culture.”

I paused for a moment. Should I merely agree and move on here? I wanted to be empathetic; yet, I think Max needs to be stretched here. Results orientation is one of the characteristics that defines Max—it’s what he is known for and what he is good at. I could support him best by stretching him in a different way—to think about being able to reflect amid the chaos. I went back to a metaphor we had talked about a couple of months ago.

“I disagree, Max. I see people who actually get better results at different speeds. Think about gear shifts—remember we talked about that awhile back. Sometimes we need to be in fifth gear, most of the time we’re in third or fourth. And sometimes we need to stop and be still, you know, idle a bit,” I smiled.

“Yeah, I remember you talking about it. I don’t think it’s sunk in yet, though.”

“To think about the future and to be present—in either case—stillness is required. Thinking about future

possibilities requires quiet time at some point in your day. And presence requires a stillness of mind in the moment.”

“I can accept going slower—like being in first gear. But stillness, that’s stretching it.” Max said, “Come on, now, how are you able to do that?”

I paused and took a conscious breath. “Well, I’m doing it now. I’m focusing on my breath. I’m giving myself a tiny moment to gather my thoughts and to express what is most true for me. At the same time, my attention is on you and what is best for you in this moment.”

“Oh yeah, the breath,” he grinned.

“I use the breath to slow me down. Some say a word to themselves; others have a sticky note in front of them to remind them.”

I took another conscious breath and waited for Max to respond.

“Hmm. I think I still need a big billboard to remind me to breathe,” he declared.

I started to say something to match his humor and then stopped myself. I took another conscious breath. “I say all of this because of the theme that keeps popping up here: You want to be more compassionate. I thought you may want to know what I associate compassionate with.”

Max started to interrupt, stopped himself, and waited until I was finished. “I get it—you associate being still with being compassionate.”

I continued to offer a way for Max to find the compassionate part of him: “There’s both a wise part of you and a decisive problem solver part of you. There’s an im-

patient, task-oriented part of you and a patient, compassionate part of you. Thus far in your career, the decisive, task-oriented parts of you have served you best. You know this and it keeps reinforcing itself. Your compassionate side is there; you just need to practice.”

“Old habits die hard.”

“I realize this. That’s why attitude helps. What’s motivating you to work on the compassionate, wise part of you?” I asked.

“Well, two reasons: First, as you know, my results-orientation, hard-driving style is just too intense for people.”

“Yes, I understand.”

Max continued, “That question about what a friend would say about me in 20 years really got to me. I don’t want people to think I’m slick and witty. I want to be known for helping others. So far in my life I’ve helped others by giving money. That’s not good enough. I do need to give quality time. I’m just worried it’s going to be too hard for me to slow down. I really do need that big billboard flashing before me.”

I smiled. “Besides the billboard, what are you going to do to remind yourself to slow down?”

“Well, I like the idea of a sticky note, but because I can’t exactly put a sticky note on my Palm Pilot, I could program a word to pop up every time my Palm Pilot reminds me of a new meeting.”

“Creative. I like it—high-tech compassion. What word would be motivational for you?” I asked.

“*Compassion* seems too long.” Max paused for a second. “*Care* would work. I can put a sticky note on my folder that I carry to meetings.”

“And once you are in these slower moments, how will you know that you are acting with compassion, with care?”

“Well, we’ve talked about this before—I won’t be interrupting as much. I’ll pause more so I can really take in what the other person is saying. Compassion is about understanding so I need to understand more of what’s going on.”

I smiled to myself because in that moment, I felt Max really got it. In our three and a half months of working together, he had agreed to and started to change his behavior—to slow down, not interrupt as much, and ask more questions. Right now, I sensed that his deeper values now aligned with his behavior. He wasn’t acting differently just because his boss wanted him to.

“You are beginning to define more of who you want to be—more of your personal legacy. You know, Max, you don’t have to wait until you’re 60 years old to be considered a corporate sage.”

Max recited it slowly, “‘Corporate sage.’ That’s interesting. I like the idea of being more of a sage.”

“I thought it might resonate with you.”

“If it helps me feel less overwhelmed and be a much more effective leader, then yes it definitely resonates with me.” Max continued, “Thanks for all your help with these questions. This exercise has been good for me. I would like my team to work with these questions, too.”

“Great, that’s one of the exercises I had in mind when we get together in a couple of weeks.”

“By the way, I did tell the new guy we would like him here for a day on December 15. He was cool with it.”

“Good. Let’s spend next week preparing for that day, OK?”

“Got it.”