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Stop Me Before I'm Keel- Hauled: Getting it All Done in 24 Hours

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by Meagan Johnson, CSP

Suzi pushed her way into the restroom. She was afraid that if she continued the confrontation with Elaine, she would begin to cry. Her hands were shaking and she felt sick to her stomach, almost as if she were going to throw up. She squeezed her eyes shut. She could not believe it had happened again. This time it had happened with a different person, but the end result was the same.

Suzi got along with almost everyone; she was known for her easygoing manner and light sense of humor. The trouble was that whenever Suzi tried to put her foot down about something she strongly cared about, it always seemed to backfire. If anyone ever tried to push back, Suzi and her argument fell apart.

Often after a confrontation, Suzi would reflect on what was said. She was aware that the conversation had gone all over the board. The end result was that Suzi felt confused and overwhelmed. She was particularly frustrated because it seemed the more passionately she cared about a cause, the harder it was to explain herself and get what she needed.

Could Suzi's problem be that she cares too much? We often end up on the short end of the stick when we are emotionally over involved.

This is not an article about looking out for number one. I won't tell you the answer to our problems is to stop caring. This is about unchaining your brain: practicing a different way of thinking for a better way of living.

The basis of "unchaining" is this: If we approach our challenges with a less emotional attitude, we are in a better state of mind to present our positions rationally.

When we become emotionally tangled in our situations, we have emotional barriers that will filter out rational responses. Said another way, we will disregard the evidence that does not support our feelings. For

example, think of a time when you met someone and immediately, for no apparent reason, you and the other person have a "connection," you "click." When that kind of connection happens in a romantic way, we call it LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT.

Now let's jump three months into the future. You have gotten to know this person better and you are beginning to notice small things this person does, little habits that you are positive were not there before. All of a sudden, this perfect person is not so perfect anymore. What happened? Well, all those habits that are driving you crazy now did not just suddenly appear three months into the relationship. Those habits were always there, but your emotional barriers filtered them out. You ignored evidence that did not support your "love at 1st sight" reaction.

We often ignore the evidence (rational thoughts) that do not support our emotional feelings. If we are going to be more successful in our conflicts, one step toward success is gaining control of our emotions. When we gain control of our emotions, we are able to more easily examine all the options and be open to possible solutions.

How do we do this when we have been taught that our emotions are beyond our control? We grew up with phrases like "Don't talk to her now, she is too emotional." We avoided people or procrastinated dealing with situations based on an emotional reaction we anticipate. We said things to ourselves like "I do not want to ask Bob for time off. It will make him so mad." Or "Gosh, I hate giving Nancy any feedback that is less than stellar. I always make her cry." These types of statements cement the idea that our emotions are beyond control, something that must be suffered through like an unwelcome spring blizzard.

Why do we respond this way? Many of our responses are based upon our signposts. A signpost is an event or set of experiences that affects our way of looking at the world.

For example, an only child may have different perception of space and privacy than someone raised with brothers and sisters. An only child probably had a bedroom, toys and his parent's time to himself; a child with siblings shared a bedroom, toys and parental time. This different experience of personal privacy is an example of a signpost.

Imagine now that an only child is working with someone who was raised with several brothers and sisters. These two share office space, but each has his own desk. The only child sees the shared space as confining; the other child thinks "What a great work environment! I have my own desk." To make matters even stickier, the worker with siblings may see no problem with "borrowing" supplies off the only child's desk. A co-worker raised with brothers and sisters would not even see it as borrowing — after all, "What is mine is yours." On the other hand, this would be a huge invasion of privacy to the only child. Her emotional reaction might be: "My co-worker is stealing my things!"

Over time, these small differences can make for huge emotional reactions. The emotion comes from the strength of our signposts. These signposts have been with us for years, and more importantly, they have worked for us! That is why it can seem overwhelming to challenge them.

Sometimes our bodies send us a signal that we should challenge our signposts. Like Suzi, heart pounding, stomach in knots, sweaty palms or a blinding headache are signals that something is going on. This comes from the fight or flight syndrome. When you sense these physical changes, it can be a signal to you that it is time to challenge those old signposts.

How can we do that? There are several steps. First, stop what you are doing and try to step back

from the situation. Ask yourself: "What am I trying to accomplish?" This question helps us to clarify and stay "on task" about what we are trying to communicate.

The next question to ask yourself is "Why is what I want so important to me?" This question will lead us to the signpost that is driving our behavior. If the only child who is upset over a co-worker borrowing his things asked himself why he found this action so upsetting, he might discover that the reason is his belief that "what is mine is mine, and yours is yours." There is nothing wrong with that signpost, but now he understands the "why" behind his behavior.

Next ask yourself, "Is this signpost productive for me now?" This question forces us to examine the productivity of our old signposts. Some signposts that are put in place while we are children are useful for us during our childhood, but cease being productive in our adulthood.

The final question you ask yourself is this: "What would happen if I replaced the old signpost with something different?" When we try to develop new habits, we need belief systems or new signposts to support them.

To demonstrate new behavior without a new belief is like trying to wallpaper the walls of a new house that only has the frame and no sheetrock.

When we question the driving force, (the signpost behind our reactions) we are able to think before reacting. Thinking before reacting gives you greater emotional control. Greater emotional control leads to clearer communication with others during conflict. Clearer communication will enhance our chances of getting what we really need from a situation instead of getting what we always got — which is tied up by the chains of emotional reactions.

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Bright, Funny, Insightful, and
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Meagan is not an Olympic athlete, (she even has a slow metabolic rate); she has never been a CEO or brought a company back from the brink of bankruptcy; but she has figured out why we can be our own worst enemies and what we can do about it.

Her clients include: Harley-Davidson Motor CO, Bubba Gump Shrimp, Goldwell, American Express, Loreal, Empire Beauty Supply, NamKung Productions, BBSI, and City of Phoenix

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