

Do You Act or React?

By Vicki Freer, EAP Coordinator

I walked with my friend, to a newsstand the other evening and he bought a newspaper. After thanking the newspaper vendor politely, I noticed that the vendor did not even acknowledge him. I commented on what a sullen fellow he was. My friend replied, "Oh, he is that way every night, kind of sad isn't it." "Then why do you continue to be so polite to him?" I asked. "Why not," stated my friend. "Why should I let him decide how I am going to act or how I am going to feel?"

Each of us owns our personal feelings. Though it might at first seem hard to believe, nobody else causes you to have the feelings that you have. Family members, fellow employees, friends and community members say and do all kinds of things, but in the end it is your perception – your interpretation – of their behavior that is responsible for what and how you feel. Think back to our friend in the first paragraph, notice that he is choosing to ACT toward other people; rather than REACT to them.

The mistake is often made of expecting other people to be "mind readers". In this day and age people are busy and organizations are strained with down-sizing, budget restraints and work overload. Co-workers, supervisors, managers and family are somewhat wrapped up in their own thoughts and problems, with very little idea about what is going on with you. Remembering this when expressing feelings, communicating and generally interacting with others will reduce the tendency to "take personal" other people's actions and words. In addition, this will help you to OWN your reactions rather than blame them on someone else.

It is entirely normal to experience and express feelings; they do not come "out of the blue." Feelings are influenced by your thoughts and perceptions and are affected by stress. Combining the number and severity of demands you face and the level of your coping skills will produce a wide range of reactions as well as affect your ability to control them. Please remember there are many influences that contribute to a person's attitude, thoughts and feelings.

A goal of this article is to help employers and employees gain a basic understanding of what "makes people tick". Knowing that people have different conflict and communication styles and personalities should also help depersonalize conflict, misunderstandings and other common sources of everyday strife. Home and work environments will improve if we ACT towards understanding, compassion and empathy and REACT away from anger, defensiveness and negativity.

"Serenity can be achieved when we become masters of our own actions and attitudes."

Quote by Sidney J. Harris