

Righteous Indignation

KERRY K. CARNEY, DDS

happened on some old papers and got caught up in reading about a moment in CDA history. It involved an episode of righteous indignation that escalated to the point of personal destruction.

I am not going to give any particulars because those are not germane. It was the unfolding pattern that struck me: the inevitable self-immolation in the flames of righteous indignation.

Does righteous indignation ever have a positive result? It is certainly not conducive to consensus building. Once an issue is framed in such a manner, it can only lead to a hardening of feelings. The emotional companions of righteous indignation are disgust, contempt, and perceived insult. It is easy to dismiss ideas in conflict with our own once that pilot light of righteous indignation has been lit. However, the resulting immolation can destroy careers, friendships, and organizations.

Working with people is difficult. People are puzzling. However, life is about working with people and in dentistry that is especially so. As dentists, we have to work with people on many levels and in various roles. Take the relationships we enjoy with our patients: Are they our friends, our market share, our customers, our partners in health care? The doctor/patient model has been analyzed employing all these perspectives and more. As dentists, we also interact with our colleagues both as part of patient care and as members of organized dentistry. It was in this latter context that the event under consideration occurred.

The first time I applied for a volunteer position at CDA, the application seemed a bit off-putting. I completed the sections on academic accomplishments, and I had been active in our local component. But when I came to the section on community activities, I had zero to report. I had been working six days a week trying to grow a



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new practice and had not reached out and connected with the community activities and local volunteer organizations.

It was CDA leadership training and experience that helped me become more involved in my community. One of the greatest advantages afforded by experience in the volunteer positions at CDA is a better understanding of leadership qualities and responsibilities. Each volunteer has the opportunity to learn how to “play well with others.” By that, I mean you can learn to work successfully with other people toward a common goal.

We have all been on at least one board or committee of some organization that was dysfunctional. People bring a portfolio of psychological baggage with them to every meeting. They can wear you down and steal precious minutes of your life with their enervating negativity. But when a group works well together, it is energizing and gives you the desire to achieve even more. In a well-functioning group, the members develop mutual trust and know they can rely on one another to take care of their own duties and find opportunities to facilitate the work of others.

I am a subscriber to the “Our Gang/Little Rascals” theory of group dynamics. “Our Gang” was a series of short movies made between 1922 and 1944. The kids in “Our Gang” predated organized sports and activities. For entertainment, they were left pretty much up to their own devices. But whenever they decided to do something, like stage a

play, everyone worked with single-minded devotion toward achieving that goal. Instead of the negative reception given to new ideas in a dysfunctional group, the kids in “Our Gang” saw each idea as a springboard for other ideas. Before the end of the movie, they would have everything they needed for their performance. It is this very creative and cooperative spirit that makes working on a project with others fun.

My involvement with CDA and ADA has taught me two important lessons. First, not every good idea will be recognized and embraced immediately. Second, not every new idea is good. It takes evidence, logic, context, time, and opportunity for people to subscribe to new, good ideas. It takes cooperation, trust, and hard work to build a well-functioning organization.

Transparency of information, clarity of function, openness to differing opinions, unity of purpose, and effectiveness of action are the hallmarks of a well-functioning organization. The process of keeping any organization healthy and relevant is ongoing and continually needs attention. But righteous indignation is a distraction that leads to nothing positive. The next time I feel that pilot light ignite, I think I will just take a walk and get some perspective. Bonfires of righteous indignation have a way of becoming pyres of the best intentions. ■■■■

Address comments, letters, and questions to the editor to kerry.carney@cda.org.