

Professional insight

Dealing with those everyday issues

By Doug McCarthy

“‘Walk a mile in my shoes’ – is good advice. Our children will learn to respect others if they are used to imagining themselves in another’s place.”

This quotation from rabbi and author Neil Kurshan builds on an ancient proverb usually attributed to First Nations peoples; that we are not in a position to criticize another if we have not walked a mile in their moccasins. However, Kurshan takes it to another level. Not only can this piece of wisdom help make us less judgmental of others, it can also teach us to respect others.

Respect comes from recognizing that other people have a right to their own beliefs, values and mind set, resulting from the experiences they have encountered in life. Respect recognizes that each of us functions in the world according to our own perception or model of the world. In *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Steven Covey writes about the tendency of inserting our autobiography into a conversation and interpreting what the other person is saying on that basis. A more empathetic approach would be to first seek understanding of the other person’s perspective.

Respectful awareness may also be needed when we think that a conversation to resolve differences is being made more difficult because of the other person’s failure to engage in what we would consider a productive manner. In reality, the other person may be doing the best he or she can with the knowledge and skills available to him or her. What we may be observing is not resistance but adaptive behavior as the person tries to respond to a challenging situation. And, there may have been challenges in our lives when we have felt the same way and done the same thing. If we could step back from the points we are trying to make, we might find in ourselves the ability to empathize more with the other person.

Another reality is that the other person you are in conversation with might be thinking that you are blocking resolution of an important issue. In *Difficult Conversations*, Douglas Stone et al note that while we are thinking *they* are the problem, they are thinking *we* are the problem. To continue to argue without first developing some understanding of how each person “sees” things is unpersuasive and frustrating for both sides.

So, as adults, we can realize the truth from Kurshan’s quote, that we will learn to respect others if we are used to imagining ourselves in their place.
