

Surprised by the Turtlehead

Chris L. Johnson, PsyD.

This past Sunday was sunny, a windy warm 76°, nearly 20° higher than normal for April in the Midwest. I was itching to get outside, to check out the blooming crocuses on the parkway. Winter had seemed so long this year; like so many, I, too, was ready for this change of season.

I grabbed a rake and set out.

Given the winds it was a bit challenging to rake the crusty, covering of autumn leaves while at the same time remaining tender to the soft heads of the soon-to-pop tulips, or the deep purple bloom of the yellow-throated Japanese iris.

While raking I happened to spot something green and filigreed. I was surprised and delighted to discover a bit of turtlehead poking through, a shade-loving, native plant with delicate turtle-shaped flowers; my master gardener mom had dug some from her garden last year and shared it with me. It's now in the northeast corner of the parkway, though I nearly missed it in my frenzy to collect the leaves from the whirling wind.

Recently a client received a promotion that involved tripling the number of his direct reports. He's clearly in transition from one season of his career to another; he's also committed to doing an excellent job. The right tool to rake through his beliefs and expectations about his new direct reports would come in handy. Or, he, too, might just miss something, something essential.

For my client the 'right' tool involves what might look like something too simple, too simple to make much difference. (Is a rake too simple, or just right for the job?). His tool is to push 'pause'.

Pausing a moment provides for space to take in the whole, wide-angle view of the current garden. What's already healthy and growing strong? What died out over the winter? What's the state of the soil this year?

For my client this sounds like: Who is now on my team? How well do they work together? What are the best conditions for them this year?

Pausing provides for moments of reflection. After taking in the whole of my garden I may wonder, "Do I need additional compost to enrich the soil for the new perennials?"

Allowing new ideas, beliefs, and experiences to emerge from the soil of change, my client will need to reflect on what's actually required now too. That new idea, another's perspective, or the lone determining fact—all could still be there, but he might miss them, raking over each in haste to get the dirty job of clean up done.

Of course, pausing provides clarity in working with current conditions.

If you've ever battled the wind to fill a yard waste bag you'll know the futility in it. It's best to follow the flow, adjusting yourself in the moment, even playing with the leaves as they're bandied around by the wind as you corral them into the bag. It's easier than fighting, though you might get dirty and it may take a bit longer.

So too, with people.

Pausing to listen for motivations, observing the current skills, tapping into other's ideas in the organization—all these involve being in the moment, adjusting to the conditions, listening. It's easier than fighting, though you might get dirty and it may take a bit longer.

In transition, as with the change of seasons, it's important to follow these steps.

Begin. Use the right tool for the job. Observe the conditions; heed them. Know you'll get dirty. Be willing to be surprised.

Those initial thoughts of clearing my postage stamp yard in about 40 minutes had quickly dissipated; two and a half hours later four yard bags sat full of leaves just waiting for the compost heap. I felt satisfied, I was dirty, but had discovered the turtlehead.