



# Assume positive intent

Underestimate the power of curiosity and compassion at your own peril.

By Jackie Sloane

**A** business owner called me a while back to let off steam. He was livid. He continued to wait for payment for work completed six months back, and was about to dash off an angry letter. His client, at a global firm, presumably had the funds to pay the invoice.

I asked him a question. Was he willing to lose the client? His response: Obviously, I already have. I asked him if he was willing to have a conversation with his client instead of firing off a furious letter. He said he was. We discussed the situation. It turned out to be fairly complex, involving an error by a third-party vendor and the fact that a large shipment of the finished project was somehow lost at his client's site. So his client had a large bill to pay and no end product to show for it. As we looked at the problem from his client's viewpoint and then planned the conversation he would have, the business owner realized he was willing to "eat" one small charge as a goodwill gesture. He decided to ask the printer who had made the earlier mistake if he was willing to rerun the job at cost, given the situation. The printer agreed.

A week later, I got another call. I was told that something amazing had happened. The conversation had gone extremely well. My client had been told he would be paid immediately. And: His client told him that he was the most customer-focused vendor she had ever worked with, and gave him three new projects.

When we assume that the other person's concerns are valid and operate from a space of compassion for them, we see things that weren't apparent earlier, and we often can be far more creative about how to move forward.

Perhaps this is why one of the world's most respected business leaders, Indra Nooyi, chairman and CEO of PepsiCo, speaks about why she believes in assuming positive intent. Nooyi told *Fortune* that she had learned that from her father, and it was the best advice she had ever gotten.

It can take more time, but if you assume positive intent, you can avoid grief and gain information, flexibility and power.

To cultivate greater ability to assume positive intent: **Slow things down.** A frenetic pace can promote reactivity, impatience and stress response. Set aside silent time daily to breathe deeply. Really. Consider it a requirement for your well-being. Meditation and yoga can also be calming and promote health, compassion for yourself and others, and, surprisingly, creativity.

**Train yourself to think from others' experience and point of view.** Learn why they take the actions they take. Ask about what you don't understand. You'll become more strategic.

**Buy the book *The Essential Enneagram*, and take the assessment in it.** The Enneagram is a personality-typing system that was designed to support people in cultivating more compassion for themselves and others. It's very useful for developing greater self-awareness and noticing and learning from how other people approach things, based on where their energy goes. **ET**

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