



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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# Do You Know What You Are Doing?

By Meg Weber

**W**hat we personally experience is a far greater teacher than what we read, watch, or hear. Fortunately or not, a *bad* experience is easier to recall; not so much, the “unforgettable sunset” you swore that you would always remember. Don’t be too concerned. Risk is not the only opportunity for actuaries. These bad personal experiences can transform management, parenting, or teaching skills.

Those who have dozens of these memorable, aka “bad,” experiences may be fortunate in a way. Maybe they can make a living writing about them! For this issue of *The Stepping Stone* I have just one.

My first summer job (I was 15) was in the local bank. I was too young for my “dream job” of being a teller. I was in the area where all the checks were prepared in the afternoon to go to the Federal Reserve. In the mornings, we processed what came back from the Fed from the prior day.

Day 1. After orientation in the morning, I started my regular work in the afternoon. A dozen of us encoded, sorted and filmed checks for their trip to the Fed. Knee deep in Sortkwik and rubber bands, we processed thousands and thousands of paper checks. The following morning, tens of thousands of checks came back from the Fed. The head bookkeeper told me to film them all.

What she did not tell me is why I was doing what I was doing, or what happened next to the checks. Because I started in the afternoon, I didn’t know what I didn’t know. I was happy. I figured the Fed had done whatever was important and all I was doing was making a record of what we got back. I filmed those checks in fistfuls from the top of the pile, the bottom, wherever was handy. I was halfway through when a co-worker saw what I was doing. I think she thought I was as responsible as Lucy and Ethel at the chocolate factory.<sup>1</sup> The checks needed to stay in order for the next process. Everyone was extremely upset and unhappy with my performance. It meant a lot of rework for everyone. Day 2 was nearly my last day.

As a manager, I have found it really pays off to make sure team members know their work fits into an overall process, how they contribute to the overall product, and what happens next. This also gives them the opportunity to ask questions before they start. They can ask questions as part of a dialogue and not have second thoughts about coming back to ask a “stupid” question.

When I am the one receiving the assignment or answering a question, I try to remember this as well. This is harder to do. The busier I get, the easier it is to become transactional. Email requests for numbers on this, who served on that, pile up. Turning them around quickly sounds easy. Resist the urge. Without the right information upfront on what happens with those answers, the answer may be quick but incomplete or wrong.

In summary:

- Ask and tell.
- Sometimes you think you know what you are doing (but don’t).
- Everyone makes mistakes. Try to make new ones. ●

## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> A classic episode of “I Love Lucy” readily available on YouTube.



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