

A COVID REFLECTION.

During these past several months during our collective “Pause” my past and current experience in the CUNY workplace revealed certain qualities I needed to change.

1. Resistance to new ideas is a common workplace problem. But embracing data-driven approaches can leave you better prepared for the future.

There is already good evidence that if people are in the office half the week, you can get more productivity, more satisfaction, higher retention, and no cost to collaboration by letting people work from anywhere the other half of the week. I would like to suggest running a remote Friday experiment, to give people one day a week to work from wherever they want. Many Managers, Chairs, CEOs I have spoken to about this laughed or turned me down.

With the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, these same people I spoke with have since pivoted to permanent remote work or a hybrid model. I wondered If [they] had rethought [their] resistance in 2018, [they] could have had all of 2018 and 2019 to figure out how to make remote work, work, before we were going through a global pandemic, that for all points and purposes killed the workplace as we know it.

2. Do not be a “logic bully.” I had to acknowledge my own shortcomings (which was not easy) and ask questions to learn about the other person’s perspective.

I have noticed a personality quirk of mine in which I tend to double down and argue harder when someone resists my point of view. I did not really realize that that was a mistake until I had my first of many disagreements when a part-time college assistant student called me a ‘logic bully.’ I remember I was in the middle of a discussion with this CA making a big technical decision related to our classroom; I thought that she was very clearly leaning in one direction, and I was worried that she might have some blind spots, so I gave the most passionate argument I could in the opposite direction.

“She pushed back, and I pushed back again. Eventually she said, ‘LaRoi you’re a logic bully.’... You just keep bombarding me with data and with facts and with reasons, and I don’t agree, but I don’t feel like I can fight back.’ It was at that point that I realized that this tactic is not an effective way to communicate because it leaves the other person to defend, to attack, or to withdraw.

Now I like to come into a disagreement, and as soon as I realize that somebody has a different point of view, I acknowledge my own shortcoming. It invites the other person to commit to openness, too. And then we are both agreeing to learn something from each other. It completely changes the way that I have debates today, especially with colleagues at work, family and friends.

3. Let go of knowledge and opinions that are no longer serving you well.

I recalled back in March 2020 when I had to challenge many of my assumptions. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, I had strongly resisted the idea of teaching our Instruction classes to an online teaching environment, believing that the energy of an in-person classroom would be lost. I resisted every single form of online LibGuides we were doing, but I have completely re-thought that. Student reactions have been positive; teaching faculty who teach after 5pm are extremely grateful for these online guides. I had

the richest conversations that I have ever had in a classroom, or one-on-one with students teaching over Zoom these past seven plus months. For the first time in my career, instead of calling on a random hand that is up I could see what perspectives were coming into the conversation, and then I could choreograph a discussion where people built on each other, where they challenged each other, and there was so much depth and so much inclusion of diverse voices because I was able to see what different people were thinking. I want to bring that back into our live classroom experience.

4. Success depends on your ability to make other people successful. That is why investing time into learning effective leadership skills is so important.

One of the things I hear very often since the Pandemic, especially when I work with many of our students is this: they are at a point in their educational journey where they say, 'I wish I had paid more attention to building my knowledge skills earlier.' And my goal (though at times, extremely hard) is that when somebody finishes a class of mine that they never have that thought again — that they invest in studying and working hard to build the skills that are going to be relevant to amplifying their impact; even though their individual and collective life experiences come with, at times extreme difficulty.

Our students who will be graduating soon are about to re-enter a world in which disparities and injustices based on income, wealth, race, and religion continue to weaken the fabric of communities around the globe. Divides along lines of race, class, religion, and ideology are rampant and our basic ability to speak with, and to hear, those who differ from us seems to be getting weaker, not stronger.

My father instilled in all of us when we were growing up that, "No matter how high you climb in your career, you cannot succeed alone. In fact, the higher you climb, the more your success depends on the ability to make other people successful. And if you do not invest with the same discipline and the same analytical rigor in figuring out what effective learning, knowledge and leadership skills look like as you did in any department or unit you work in, then you're actually limiting your ability to succeed in your career."

"Every circumstance is different, and it requires your own level of emotional intelligence, intellect, and interpersonal savviness to be able to get the best out of the people that you're working with." –Erika James

Finally, these past four years have been a year of surprises, to say the least. Perhaps the biggest one of all was a startling come-from-behind victory that left me and a lot of others throughout our country both shocked and disappointed. I mean, who would have guessed that the New England Patriots would win the Super Bowl after their poor performance in the first half. Equally shocking were exploding Samsung Galaxy Phones, United Airlines handling of overbooked planes, the death of Fidel Castro, and the World Series victory of the Chicago Cubs. It was the year of Donald Trump's presidential victory, of course, but also of so-called fake news, the Dakota Access Pipeline protests, the appointment of Neil Gorsuch to the Supreme Court, the leaking of John Podesta's risotto recipe, the opening of the Boy Scouts to transgender boys and just recently, and tragically, the continued questionable death of "Black Men and Women" with encounters of the police; the current Asian -hate fever sweeping our City perpetrated by the very same people who have themselves been victims of racism; the continued strife between Palestinians and Israelis. Our very own biases and opinions regarding reopening.

I for one, hope that our return to our workplace is one of ease-well sort of. I think we all know there will be issues within and outside of our department. One thing I am extremely grateful for is that my wife Ana is still here; I am extremely grateful for that; We have been One since 1980; she has been my moral compass; truth be told, she would say otherwise; but we are Two distinct individuals sharing the same space; some of you may know of her condition but knowing and experiencing are two very different things. Life is so very uncertain. I have since learned to appreciate 'life' every day.

Godspeed,

LaRoi Lawton, Assistant Professor
Bronx Community College | Library Department