

THE BEAUTY OF SELF-CONTROL

“Life is 10 percent of what happens to me and 90 percent of how I react to it.”

Charles Swindoll, USMC, ret., and Chairman, Insight for Living

“Because the man worthwhile is the man who can smile, when his shorts are too tight in the seat.”

Judge Elihu Smales, *Caddyshack*

“Around this place, the less you say, the smarter they think you are.”

Committee Chairman, U.S. House of Representatives

You may be surprised to learn that many individuals in the Swamp have a very high level of self-worth. So high, in fact, that none of them feel eclipsed in this regard by anyone else. To be fair, it's a natural result of being publically judged and prevailing. But please notice I said “many.” Not “all.” The true essence of self-worth is ensuring very few know you have it. That essence is self-control and I was fortunate to work for a number of those rare individuals who had it.

In one of my four Legislative Branch posts, I served on the staff of a senior Congressman who had long-standing reputation for being an unmatched expert in the minutiae of legislation. In politics, like life, the rumors good, bad, true or false get around and if they don't prove outrageously wrong or are not shot down fast, they endure. This unusually good rumor about this man endured and I'd heard it before I even worked for him.

I served as the man's press secretary and late one evening during Floor votes, I was in his office telling him about a reporter with whom I'd just spoken in the House Press Gallery, who had repeated to me the legendary story about my boss knowing so, so much. Because of the late hour, my boss was loose and he laughed and said that the fact was, he knew about as much as any other Member. He went on to say that the most successful guys he knew in Congress – and in the private sector – were the guys who had strength of will to temper how much they said and to whom they spoke. Because my guy was circumspect in his words amidst the raging chorus of know-it-alls he was nearly always around, he had earned a reputation as thoughtful and attentive. Hence, his quote above.

To reiterate, this is the Swamp, a ten-square mile marsh-land inhabited by monster egos. Everyone is talking and chattering and swaggering and above all, completely assured of their righteousness. Because of this near universal elevated sense of self, many politicians respond immediately in any exchange, every one of which they are trying to dominate. They react without thinking, they reflexively question alternative ideas and they lose their temper in a flash. They alone know all the facts and angles and why not? They're the center of every room and every conversation, donchaknow. One question for you about your workplace: Does this sound familiar?

And yet, the politicians who consistently exercise restraint – like my boss pleasantly on top of the rumor mill and others for whom I've worked – are often perceived as the real authorities. That's because in any and every situation, they mostly hold back. They rarely say what first comes to mind, which is in itself a monumental victory of self-control. They exercise calm, they are content with silence and good-naturedly or stoically absorb whatever glancing or deeper verbal blows might come their way. They never lose it because they know the power of silence.

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The converse is, when they do or say something in error, they are forthright in acknowledgement. They know, as I once overheard a Member tell another, “Face it, you can’t outrun the heat.”

Above all, they know that survival in the fishbowl of politics requires adherence to the long game. That means not getting tied down in fruitless conversations, nor dodging failure.

In my experience, there are two central elements to Self-Control: A mastery of ego to Never say it and the integrity to Accept blame.

Never say it

“Sometimes it seems like fifty percent of my job is spent humoring people.”

The complementary – never complimentary – power center adjacent to the U.S. Congress is the Administration, whoever is President. This mass of selfless federal humanity at 1.9 mil-lion strong is led by roughly 3,800 Presidential Appointees. These range from exceedingly powerful Cabinet Secretaries to exceedingly essential functionaries. Like me.

Whereas Members of Congress have to win the support of tens of thousands of real Americans, Presidential Appointees only have to get the support of about a half dozen fast-movers. The official designation for the Appointee is Schedule C but the only schedule they are on is adhering to the agenda of the people who hired them. Loyalty, skill, and judgement are paramount in these appointees and most are top-notch professionals. I know. I worked directly for six of them.

The woman who uttered the quote above was a Schedule C – the chief of an agency with an annual bud-get of \$586 billion. Yes, billion. In the measurement game – in which she was skilled – she’d follow up the big number by saying, “Oh, or look at it this way, we spend \$1.6 billion a day. Every day of the year.” Oh, or look at it this way: She was in direct control of about one-fifth of all Federal government outlays and leading an organization providing health insurance to one out of every five Americans.

This woman was a superb administrator and as the job required, she was constantly out and about, all over Washington and the nation (I worked more than 130 events with her in dozens of cities and states).

Guess what comes with such massive spending power? Massive attention. Every stakeholder group in the vast health care cosmos wanted a piece of her and with such visibility, often came advice. While her quote above was a glib overstatement, it underscored one of her habits in handling a certain group of suitors. In a broader sense, her observation underlined a habit of all the senior officials for whom I worked. Such a mindset is vital within the public scene because the public sometimes makes scenes. Big ones. Hence, accommodation and patience are job requirements which to put in Fixer terms, comes down to three words: Listen, humor, leave.

Now, of course she met with a lot of thoughtful individuals with whom she had useful conversations, as did my other bosses. But then there are the other individuals, not so thoughtful and indeed thoughtless. They are often called “experts.”

The Swamp breeds them. It’s a cadre of souls who rise up like zombies from think tanks where yes, deep thinking goes on and from non-profit organizations which exist because of scandalous profits made elsewhere. Too often these individuals are marked by condescension, which is inexplicable. Because unlike politicians and Schedule Cs, few of the “experts” had to break a sweat to get here, unless you’re idea of hard labor is “writing” a “paper.” Sure, some have real-world experience. Too few. Nonetheless, here they all were – at events and meetings and in the corridors; in fact, they were inescapable.

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Below are some of the instances of what I saw and heard working for – and learning from – this woman. The advice directed her way was as priceless as it was worthless...

Well-meaning souls would inform my boss they had “robust” recommendations for “leveraging partnerships” of which she was surely unaware.

Did she know she was doing this and that wrong, did she know it all could be improved?

Alas, some of the people working for her were misguided, out of touch, inexperienced, they were letting her down!

Unfortunately, she wasn’t quite following the “inter-agency consensus.” That’s right, she who ran the place wasn’t on board with how the bureaucrats wanted it run.

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In the face of all this patronizing conceit, my boss remained rock solid. She would nod. Sometimes she’d put on her grim face, murmur acknowledgement and call over to me, “Hey, we need to get Joe’s /Josephine’s contact info for a follow up.” “I hear what you’re saying.” “That’s very interesting.” “We need to look at that.” “Thank you so much for your concern.”

She was a portrait of grace and a study in steel. That’s because she knew to respond with justified impatience or anger would be self-defeating. She had big battles to wage and wasn’t going to get bogged down in small fights.

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Her capacity for accommodating people manifested itself in other ways. When a person stated something obviously wrong or wide open to interpretation, she waited for others to contradict or challenge. When colleagues came to her in a lather about some matter, she patiently talked them down from the edge.

This habitual patience was virtually the same in all the principals I served. I saw up close the vital need to restrain one's automatic human nature: To be able to absorb criticism and sometimes tedium, to not retaliate or opine in the moment.

Self-control and accommodation; humoring people meant avoiding or at least very least diffusing needless confrontation. As another one of my bosses put it in matter-of-fact tones when departing a meeting where the ad-vice flowed like sludge, "You just hear them out and move on. The fewer people you alienate, the fewer enemies you have coming after you." Ultimate Swamp advice.

Accept blame

"It's my fault these guys weren't with me today."

The U.S. House of Representatives has 435 Members, of which 20 are Committee Chairman. That's a minuscule 4.7 percent of some of the most ruthless individuals in the Swamp. Being a Chairman is ascension to rarefied air and the Fixer was privileged to get a few breaths in a job as a Committee staffer. Privileged is not an exaggeration; it was a great job working for a remarkable man and it came after one of my "voluntary separations" of the Swamp variety.

One late afternoon, we had a high-stakes House Committee vote on a railway labor matter and my Chairman lost. It was as surprising as it was devastating. No Chairmen call for a committee vote unless they know they're going to win it – Politics 101. Nonetheless, three members on our side had crossed the aisle at the last moment and voted the wrong way. What's more, these guys had been person-ally selected by my boss to be on the panel when it was formed. My boss assumed the trio would stay with him, even though he knew it was a tough vote to take home to their districts. Wrong assumption.

Of course, gleeful reporters – addicted to divisiveness and jacking up the Majority – were going to have tough questions so I asked my boss, what do I tell them?

Publically embarrassed and privately livid, I knew from experience that virtually every other politician in this kind of predicament would have responded to the press with outrage – 'very disappointed...disloyal....reevaluate their positions...' But my boss, even after an all-day committee markup, weary and defeated sitting there in his Committee office, looked at me and smiled ruefully. "Give 'em this: 'All three remain highly valued Members of my committee.'" And then my favorite line, "'It's my fault these guys weren't with me today.'"

Talk about the ultimate exhibition of self-control. Talk about authenticity. No threats, no yelling, no excuses. But I wasn't surprised – the man was a class act, which is one reason he was a Chairman. When I passed this statement on to the cool kids club of reporters, they were noticeably deflated. Of course, gleeful reporters – addicted to divisiveness and jacking up the Majority – were going to have tough questions so I asked my boss, what do I tell them?

The Chairman knew what we all knew – he’d blundered. He’d asked for too much loyalty, placing these guys at risk in the next election. So instead of an ascent into public rage fueled by self-pity, he faced the truth. And in the eyes of everyone, including that always feckless press, he looked strong.

I saw this habitual fortitude again and again with my various bosses in the rare moments they experienced serious defeat. At their level, successful and respected, they knew the best way to handle failure was to accept the blame, and to be momentarily comfortable with discomfort. Their automatic response to turmoil was poise.

A corollary in accepting blame is to refrain from excuses. I learned that early and the hard way. In one of my first months in a political job, I fouled up by bringing the wrong paperwork for my boss to distribute at a Member meeting. He glanced at the material, looked at me and said “What the hell is this?” I instantly understood my error and said “I thought today was Idaho...you said...I must have mixed it up....didn’t understand...the Connecticut delegation...” ran back to the office and got the right material and hustled back. The event proceeded after the delay. In the office later, my boss said sharply, “Nelligan, excuses make you look weak. Just tell me how you’re going to fix it and do it.” The words stung then, and still do, but what a life lesson. It remains front and center in my mind even 25 years afterwards.

Ah, excuses. Everyone leans on an excuse. Excuses prolong the agony. No one in the Swamp or anywhere else is going to let you hide failure. So don’t try. As with my Committee Chairman – absorb the heat and move forward.

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In one of my stints as a campaign advance man, I worked on a Presidential contest and nine hours after the final moments of Election Day I arrived at Columbus (Ohio) International Airport. My guy had lost the state by 270,000 votes. Which wasn’t as bad as him losing the Electoral College vote 375 to 173.

Early for my flight, unshaven and wearing a wrinkled suit and tie, with my “lucky” camo Army rucksack at my feet, I was sitting outside the aptly named “Departure” terminal with a cup of coffee and a pack of Marlboros, blowing smoke rings and pondering my future. Oh, it looked great. My Schedule C appointment was about to become unscheduled and my job was now going to vanish like my first-hand smoke, leaving me hustling the streets of a town dominated by the other political party. I knew how well that was going to work out. I’d been through the exact same drill 16 years earlier as a younger and less savvy Presidential appointee serving on another doomed campaign. Unemployment is the cruelest, most despairing, and most deserved aspect of the Swamp.

Then it happened. A bus pulled up at the curb, the door opened, and the place swirled with excited young campaign workers wearing Levis and sweatshirts, jabbering with glee and mockingly thrusting campaign posters at each other like swords.

Hope and Change engulfed the air, choking the Marlboro man. In all the horseplay and bustle, a stack of Obama/Biden placards fell against my leg and ruck and a young woman, who had no idea that I was the vanquished force of evil, says, “I’m so sorry, sir.” Oh man, if you only knew.

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If there was ever a moment to lose my self-control and lash out, this was it. But I’d been trained by the best. Instead, I knew I had to humor them – and me! – and accept reality. “No worries. Hey, heckuva win for you guys.”

HABIT #2: Self-Control

Here’s a safe bet: You winced or smiled or both as you read about individuals who know everything and want everyone to know it. Just as you know firsthand the encounters with the tiresome person who proves it. You also know defeat. Everyone does.

The tales above recount uncomfortable episodes in the lives of high-level political appointees and Members of Congress. There’s no sugar-coating here. These were real-life sagas endured and ameliorated only by habitual behavior marked by steadfast patience and personal dignity.

In the Swamp, self-control was a rare behavior, which made it priceless. Always never say it. Patiently humoring others is often eminently wiser than burdening them with the truth. And in those hopefully rare moments when you do falter, summon and show your strength: Accept the blame.

The less you say, the smarter you appear – and the smarter you are. Human nature runs to vanity and the more people with whom you deal, the less chance you have of outrunning it. So don’t try.

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