

What's the Real Story?

“There is nothing more difficult for a truly creative painter than to paint a rose, because before he can do so he has first to forget all the roses that were ever painted.”

-Henri Matisse

BY CAROL L. BROOKS, SR/WA

All too often, we form opinions about property owners without knowing the whole story. One negative experience can cloud everything, and before long, that one story becomes our measuring stick for all our future encounters. This can lead us to view situations through the eyes of judgment, rather than through understanding and empathy.

What are the dangers of not knowing the real story? That story, rehearsed over and over, becomes truth in the way we think. That one story leads to stereotypes, to half-truths. It gives us a distorted perspective of ethnicity, human behavior and misconstrued ideology.

The truth is we haven't walked in their shoes, and because of this, we have no idea what road they've traveled. We don't know their real story, so we're using our own frame of reference. We're quick to form conclusions and say, “They sure are unfriendly,” or “I don't understand why they're so difficult.” We need to hear their unique story with an open mind and take the time to uncover some of the challenges they might have faced before we arrived at their doorstep.

How do you decipher the real story? It's easy: Let the property owners do most of the talking! Listen. Listen attentively. Watch for non-verbal communication.

The longer the owner talks, the sooner you'll learn their fears, their anxieties, their needs and what brought them to “now.” Understanding the owner's “now” will help you escort them through the negotiation process and toward a win-win outcome.

I believe that 99% of the property owners are actually good people. If they say something to offend you, don't take it personally. For them, it's about the project or your company; not about you. Make allowances for their shortcomings. Be generous with your kindness. Help lighten their load. Give them the benefit of the doubt. Try not to be critical. Keep an open mind and see how you can be effective in moving things forward.

Here's something that's helped me: accept the owner's problem as your problem. No, you're not reading nonsense. If we believe the owner's problem is frivolous, petty and insignificant and ignore it—guess what? We'll blindly stumble down the path of failure and disappointment because the issue won't go away on its own. If the owner has a problem, then we have a problem. That wrinkle in the negotiation process can only be ironed out if we take ownership of it. And this course of action becomes second nature once the owner's real story is understood.

There are reasons why people do what they do and say what they say. It's important to take the time to get to know them. By being open to their stories, we find a thread of commonality that binds all of our stories—the need for safety, happiness and fulfillment. We are a melting pot of people and viewpoints with different stories and diverse life experiences.

Like the painter wanting to paint a rose, in the quote above. He must forget all the roses that were ever painted. Go beyond the one story and discover the uniqueness of the real story.



Carol L. Brooks, SR/WA

Owner of Cornerstone Management Skills, Carol is an internationally-recognized author and lecturer on conflict management, interpersonal skills and success strategies. She has nearly 20 years experience in the right of way profession and is a Master Facilitator for IRWA courses.

For more information, visit www.cornerstonemanagementskills.com or email brooks_cornerstone@cox.net.

© 2011 Carol L. Brooks All Rights Reserved