

When You don't Know Why, Ask Questions!

When my daughters were in high school they wore a uniform to school. As part of the uniform, it was mandated that the girls wear rubber soled athletic style shoes.

For years I did not understand why in the world they had to wear such ugly clunky shoes with their skirts. Why couldn't they wear ballet flats or loafers? I really thought it was a petty and, frankly, a stupid rule.

Finally, one day I was talking to a teacher from the school, and I just decided to ask the question: why no loafers or ballet flats? She explained that because the school is almost exclusively floored in ceramic tile that the hard soles would make a terrible amount of noise when girls walked in the halls distracting from the learning environment. Additionally, hard sole shoes tended to slip in the tile, posing a safety concern particularly because the school has many flights of stairs. Finally, the option to wear ballet flats and loafers would allow too many choices in what is designed to be a uniform. So, the administration thought it best to limit the shoes to basic athletic sneakers to reduce noise, to keep the girls safe and to retain the integrity of the uniform policy.

Suddenly, the "stupid rule" seemed incredibly smart and the only subject to which the word stupid needed to be attached to was me...for waiting seven years to ask the question.

Yes, in the grand scheme of things, the style of shoes my kids wore to school and my annoyance with a dress code rule are not a big deal. But the metaphor of the shoes is relevant in keeping in mind how frequently we jump to conclusions when we fail to ask the "why" behind policies that we don't understand. Furthermore, if we assume good faith of the part of the rule maker, instead of assuming that a rule is random, stupid or designed to irritate us, we might just come to figure out the reason behind it ourselves. Finally, when the shoe is on the other foot (pun intended) and we are the policy maker, it is always best to be clear and transparent as to why we are making the decision we are making.

All of which leads me to one of my favorite life adages: in the absence of information, people will make things up.

And the things they will make up seldom are flattering or sympathetic.

Not surprising, at JAG we have several policies for our staff and clients that help keep our business running smoothly, efficiently and safely. Sometimes it is easy to understand why we do what we do, and sometimes less so.

For instance, at JAG we ask that all girls wear leotards to their lessons. As a convenience we do have a pro-shop that sells leotards. Yes, we do make a small profit on each leotard we sell, but it is quite small and hardly the core of our business strategy. Instead it is offered it as a way to make parents' lives easier by having the option to get their gymnastics gear at the site of their child's gymnastics lesson. So, while a misinformed parent might think that we have the leotard rule to make an extra buck, that is simply not accurate. First, and foremost, the leotard rule is for the safety of the athletes and their coaches. When girls tumble in clothing that is loose fitting, they can become tangled in the clothes or their coach's hand can be caught in the extra fabric, causing injury. Second, we have it for the athlete's modesty. (I think that is self-evident.) Third, in order to give the best coaching feedback, the instructor must be able to see the gymnast's body line. Loose clothing does not help in giving that feedback. Finally, to play any sport, an athlete wears the attire of that sport. You wouldn't go swimming in a dress, to play soccer in snow boots or baseball without a helmet. Wearing a leotard puts the gymnast in the proper frame of mind for participating in class.

Another policy that is often questioned by clients is the "no parents in the gym" rule. As a parent, I get it. I love to see my kids perform up close and personal. But, there are some good reasons behind this rule. First, our insurance policy does not cover adults being in the gym unless they are participants in a parent and me class. This, in and of itself is sufficient to ban non-participant parents from the gym. But, even if we were able to get insurance to cover parents in the gym, think about what the result would be. There would be so many adults in the gym that it would be difficult to move around. The coaches would have a hard time instructing and the students listen because of the distractions the parents would provide. Kids would be wandering over to their parents instead of listening to their teacher. Parents' conversations would make the level of noise in the gym unbearable. It would be far from a good learning environment!

It reminds me of another of my favorite adages: if everyone did it, would it be a good thing. If every parent who wanted to be in the gym simply came in, it most definitely would not be a good thing.

On the flip side, from time to time, it is important to re-evaluate policies and procedures that no longer serve a purpose (or maybe never served a purpose to being with...). For instance, a couple of years ago, we re-wrote our make up policy. Previously, we had followed what is practically a universal policy in the gymnastics community: kids could make up one lesson a month and if the child stopped taking classes, make-ups were lost.

After thinking a lot about the policy, I realized that as a parent I would like more flexibility and tested the idea of unlimited make-up lessons and that make-ups would be held until a child re-enrolled. In fact, we went so far as to stop counting how many make ups a child had and just trusted our community members: if they said they had a make up class, we found a time that would work for

them in a class that has space. We implemented the policy (and many of my gym owner friends from across the country thought I was nuts).

Well, guess what? It works just fine. Parents are happy to have the flexibility, since make-ups can only be accommodated in classes where there is room, it is of no consequence to the students who attend that hour and as teachers we are delighted to have the kids in class, keeping up with the curriculum.

So here is the moral of the story: In the absence of information, ask questions instead of making things up. Assume good faith. Think about the unintended consequences of everyone doing something—would it be a good thing? And, reevaluate your own rules and policies to see if they are serving the purpose you intend them to or if there is a better way. Rules and policies exist to make things run more smoothly, safely and simply. If we all decided for ourselves on which color traffic light we stopped and on which we went, there would be chaos on the streets. But if you don't know why a rule exists: don't be like me and wait seven years, just ask!