



# The Politics of Hope Newsletter

## *“Helping Ordinary Citizens Become Extraordinary Public Leaders”*



### **The 3 M’s That Will Derail Your Leadership**

By Donna Zajonc, July 2009

My teenage son recently said to me, “Mom, I didn’t tell you a lie. I just didn’t tell you the whole story.” Since he is my third child I have had a few years experience with the teenage brain. Nonetheless, I winced when I heard him say that with a straight face (You can be sure this was a parent-child teaching moment!).

**His statement is an excellent example of “minimizing” - one of the 3 M’s that could derail your success as a leader.** Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar, professor of Positive Psychology at Harvard University teaches an online class that I am enjoying this summer. (provide link) He presented the 3 M’s in the class which I have found very valuable in my own life and in coaching others. Let’s analyze each M and see how they apply to leadership.

When we minimize, we distort or underplay our reality, which can lead to tunnel vision. I often do this when I receive evaluations from a seminar that I facilitated. I may receive forty-eight positive evaluations out of an audience of fifty but I focus on the two people who rated me poorly. When I minimize the positive results from the majority of participants, I am not able to see the value that others received.

Conversely, if I ignore the forty-eight people who are asleep and only speak to the two individuals who are enthusiastic about my presentation, I have minimized the forty-eight bored participants. Fortunately I have not experienced this example!

**Minimizing the positive or negative feedback distorts my ability to see the situation as it truly is.** It also prevents me from honoring my success or may lead me to obsess about my modest shortcoming. Either situation distorts my view of reality and causes me to lose my self confidence.

**The second M is “magnification.”** Think of a pair of binoculars. Depending on which lens you are viewing, you are either blowing things out of proportion or shrinking them. Magnification is over-generalizing one event and concluding that similar experiences will always turn out the same way.

Using my son as an example again, several years ago he magnified his experience as a young baseball player. The first few times up to bat in Little League he hit a home run. He magnified this home run experience and thought he would hit a homer every time he came to the plate. Another child struck out his first few times up to plate and magnified his experience to believe he would always strike out. Either view is a distortion of reality.

My son became disappointed with his inability to hit a home run every time up to bat and later quit baseball. The other child gave up on baseball also, believing he would never get a hit. **Magnifying our view of reality seriously harms our ability to persevere and push through challenging situations—which is an absolute essential ingredient to successful leadership.**

When we magnify we see the situation as all or nothing. “I failed at this or that, therefore I will always fail.” We cannot see the possibilities in a situation. Or we may say, “I am successful at this or that, therefore I will always be successful.” Becoming overly optimistic, we may take things for granted and not pay attention to the details of a new situation. Either form of magnifying will surely derail your leadership.

When we combine minimizing and magnifying together we get what I call “catastrophizing”. Here are the steps that lead to catastrophizing:

1. We have an experience
2. We minimize what went well and magnify what went poorly
3. We magnify (over generalize) this experience and conclude that all similar experiences will also go poorly



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4. We loose hope and spiral downward
5. We catatrophize and expect the worse
6. We interpret events as evidence that things aren’t working. “See, I knew it wouldn’t work.”
7. Cycle repeats

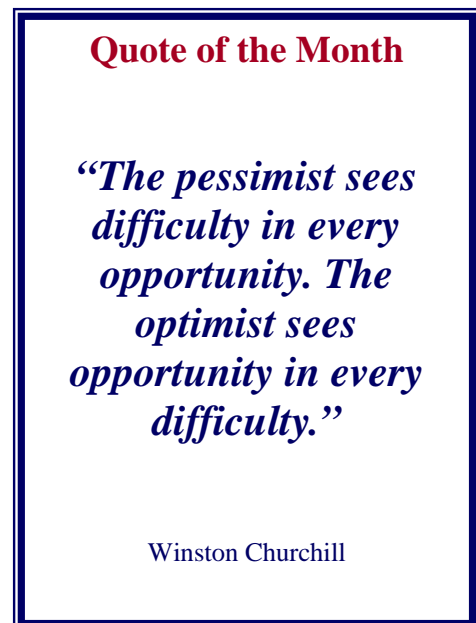
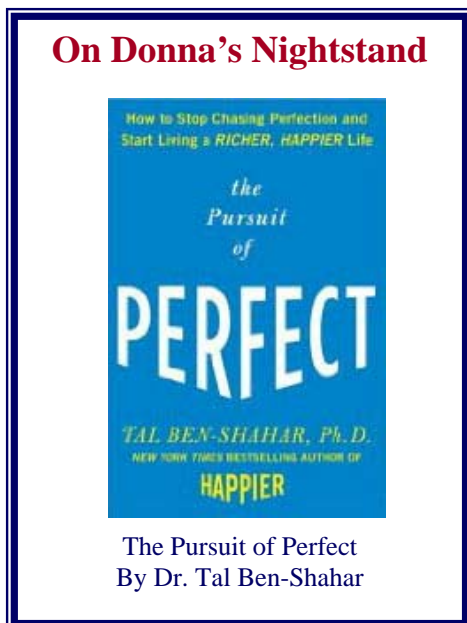
**As you can see, the combination of the first 2 M’s can be deadly and may set the stage for the third M--- “making up” or fabricating reality.** Obvious examples of making-up are women who are in a domestic violence relationship and blame themselves for the abuse. Children who experience child abuse often make-up their reality by telling themselves that if they were a better child the adult would not be so angry at them.

These are extreme situations to illustrate how magnifying, minimizing and making-up can distort our reality. However, the 3 M’s do not need to surface as extreme situations for them to begin to take a toll on our effectiveness. As leaders we may notice the 3 M’s surface when we are under pressure to perform or when we have early successes and we conclude that our efforts will always lead to success. Balancing how we see reality is essential for any leader to achieve sustained and long term success.

**Everyone experiences negative ups and downs. Our goal is to see reality during both the ups and the downs.** Our challenge is to restore our rationality and as Dr. Ben-Shahar says, “get real.” Here are a few questions that Dr. Ben-Shahar recommends that we ask our self. These questions are also applicable to a work team that may be experiencing the 3 M’s.

- What am I magnifying? What is our team magnifying?
- What am I minimizing? What is our team minimizing?
- What am I doing well that I am ignoring? What is our team doing well that we are ignoring?
- Am I ignoring anything that is not going well? Is our team ignoring anything that is not going well?
- Is my conclusion tied to reality? Is our team’s conclusions tied to reality?

I am a chocolate fan and love M and M’s. When I think of M and M’s now, I have a whole new meaning. Guess it is time for the bowl of chocolates to go!





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**Comments?**

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