

The True Livelihood Series



Reflections from...

Denise Bissonnette



Denise Bissonnette is an internationally renowned writer, trainer and keynote speaker. For over two decades, she has inspired people and organizations throughout North America to look beyond traditional concepts of career development and to craft livelihoods rooted in the individual "genius" of each person. Her work is a rich tapestry of her talents as a poet, writer, storyteller, teacher and career developer.

Moving Past Stuck: Getting Real and Changing It Up

"What do you do when you feel at the end of your rope, at a dead end, or at best, your wit's end, with a person you are supposed to be helping? You feel as if you have tried everything, but nothing is working. What then?"

Anyone in the helping professions can relate to this question, as it conjures images of situations that caused emotions ranging from mild frustration to outright aggravation and the infinite variety of vexation in between. I believe this question is relevant to anyone attempting to be of assistance to another, be it an employee, a client, a customer, a co-worker, a student, a friend, a neighbor or a family member. Despite our best intentions, at some point we begin to doubt our effectiveness in the relationship, left to ponder questions like the following:

- Am I being more of a hindrance or a help to this person?
- What is the difference between being supportive and being co-dependent?
- What are the proper boundaries in this relationship?
- How do we recognize the difference between being useful and being used?
- What is the fine line between care-giving and care-taking?
- How do we discern when to hold on, when to let go, or how to alter the dynamic in order to hit the "re-set button"?

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Obviously each situation is unique and influenced by a myriad of factors, not the least of which is the personalities of the individuals involved and the particular context in which they find themselves. Even so, as I reflected on what I have practiced and taught over the last few decades regarding employment counseling, I believe that there are some basic tenets and fundamental principles that remain constant across the board.

With the intent of presenting these ideas in a simple and straightforward format, I offer two pieces for your considered reflection: **Part One: Getting Real**, and **Part Two: Changing It Up**. As you read through these ideas, keep a person or two in mind with whom you feel challenged or nearing the end of your rope, and see if they help to bring clarity, insight, or discernment to the situation. Likewise, recall a time when you were on the receiving end of someone else's failed attempts to help you move forward in your life/work. See if you can pinpoint the challenge in that situation, from your point of view, from the questions below.

Part One: Getting Real

A problem well-defined is half-solved. Until we are clear on where the true conflict lies, we cannot entertain ways of resolving it. Perspective is everything, but when in the midst of a difficult situation, it is not easy to see it from multiple standpoints. Here are eight angles from which to get a better grasp on the bigger picture, each offering questions for excavating the core challenge(s) in the situation.

1. Most conflicts are not between two people, but between the values and/or commitments that each holds in the situation. Considering the personal agenda, hopes, fears, and unique viewpoint that each of you brings to the relationship, it is important to ensure that you are working towards the same end.
 - What is your intention in this situation, what are the values you are bringing to it, and what do you see as the end-goal or the primary objective? What are you most committed to in this situation? (How would the other person respond to these same questions?)
 - Are you working towards the same goal and bringing similar values? Is your intentionality in sync? Are you committed to the same things, or are you working at cross-purposes?
2. All communication is context-bound, greatly affected by the roles and relationships in which we find ourselves. Multiple factors such as culture, race, age, gender, religion or economics come into play which can

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- profoundly influence the efficacy and/or quality of the relationship and your ability to be helpful.
- What role(s) are each of you are being asked to play in this situation?
 - Is the person involved in this relationship by his/her own volition or by someone else's authority?
 - Is the person you are helping free to speak his/her own mind, or are there other factors coming into play? If so, what might those be?
3. With the desire of bringing humanity to our work, we bring the whole spectrum of "being human". While we would like to think that we respond purely professionally, we can never fully extract our personal reactions to any given situation. In the same way that we perceive each person's gifts differently, we also respond to individual faults and foibles in a way that is distinctively our own.
- What exactly about this person/situation has you feeling fed up or at the end of your rope? What trait or behavior is this person exhibiting that is driving you crazy, and what precisely is your emotional/mental reaction to it?
- Sample traits/behaviors:* Not listening; Makes excuses; Rudeness or disrespect; Not following through; Changes mind; Unrealistic; Demanding; Victim mentality, etc.
- Sample reactions:* Frustration; Anger; Helplessness; Disappointment; Confusion; Waste of time and energy; Going around in circles, Exasperation, Annoyance, etc.
4. The field of psychology tells us that we tend to judge ourselves by their intentions, but others by their behaviors. Interestingly, the same behavior holds different meaning depending upon the intentionality behind it. For example, what one person experiences as "demanding", another may mean to be "assertive"; what one sees as "flighty", for another is an attempt "to be open to possibilities".
- Considering your response to the question in #3, could there be a flip side to that trait/behavior that would more accurately describe the other person's intention/experience?
 - What word do you think the other person would you use to describe your behavior in this situation? What is the word that more accurately depicts your intentionality?

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5. It's not so much our circumstances that we respond to in life, but our narrative about it. With the intent of being objective, we need to own our spin. By going bigger than the story we are telling ourselves about it, we treat it not as fact, but as subjective fiction. This helps us to zero in on our perceptions, judgments, and attitudes, along with our blinders and/or our blind spots.
 - What is the story you are telling yourself about this person/situation? Are your thoughts and judgments about this completely true or is it possible you are operating with partial information? Where there have been missing pieces, to what extent have you filled them in with assumptions, lending power to your imagination rather than to your most rational thinking?
 - What story do you think the other person might be telling him/herself about you and the situation at large? Under what false assumptions might he/she be operating? Can you give this person the benefit of your doubt, and do feel that you are on the receiving end of theirs?

6. Depending upon our response to it, any given situation could result in a variety of possible outcomes. While we have little power to control the various events and circumstances that come our way, we can greatly affect the outcomes of those events through our choice of response.
 - What do you see as the best possible outcome for the highest good of everyone involved in this situation? How is your current response to this situation helping or hindering that outcome? (The same question should be asked of the other person.)

7. There is a big difference between having *input* into another's situation and having actual *influence*, which is why being in a position of authority does not always translate into effective leadership. Even when we do wield power as a result of being in authority, we need to be cognizant of the quality of the influence we are having; like fire it has the power to warm or to burn.
 - To what extent do you feel your input is actually having *influence* with this person?
 - Who or what does have influence with this person, and how is that affecting the situation for better or worse?

8. In every situation there are things that are within our sphere of control, and other things that are not. Distinguishing between the two, we have the discernment to keep our focus and attention in the areas in which we have control, and let go of those aspects of this situation in which we don't.
 - Where are you investing your focus and attention in this situation? Are there aspects of this situation in which you need to let go? (The same question should be asked of the other person.)

Part Two: Changing It Up

Once you have gotten to the heart of the matter and excavated the core challenge(s) you are faced with, you have a choice of how to respond. Mark Twain once espoused, when you get to the end of your rope, tie a knot, and hang on! In that spirit, I would suggest that there are different ways to tie the knot, four classic choices we have in any challenging relationship: Avoidance; Altering some aspect of the situation; Adapting to the situation by changing our perspective; and Acceptance. Here is a brief overview of each of these choices along with suggestions for applying them in an employment counseling situation. Consider each of these options with your particular situation in mind.

1. Avoid the person/situation and hope it goes away.

And who hasn't tried this scenario? Think back to the various situations/people in your life in which you used the avoidance method. In how many of those situations, did the person or the problem simply "go away"? In our dreams, right?

While we'd like to think that dodging the difficulty or evading the proverbial enemy provides an easy escape from having to make a choice at all, we know in our bones that avoidance itself is a decision – it is a choice to not act. Avoidance can be a very tempting choice, but it often results in both prolonging and worsening the problem rather than resolving it, rarely working towards the highest good of those involved.

In an employment counseling situation, just because you're not making headway with a person, doesn't mean that someone else couldn't. In the best case, connecting them with another counselor or finding a way to change up the situation could bring surprising results. In the worst case, the person may be having an adverse effect on others in the program, on the job, or in the classroom. Either way, one of the other three choices is probably a better bet.

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2. Change the situation by altering some aspect of it.

Even if we can't avoid difficult relationships or situations, we can work to alter them. Rather than perceiving the situation as "fixed", apply a healthy dose of curiosity and imagination, brainstorming ways to modify the circumstances or the way in which you operate. Here are some examples of altering an employment counseling situation in which you feel fed up and at the end of your rope.

- Be totally open and frank about your experience and why you are finding it challenging. Explain that you trust that you are not working with a complete picture, and you don't want to make false assumptions. Ask for clarification about the traits/behaviors at issue. (For example, "You're saying you want to go to work, but you have turned down three offers in five days. What am I missing here?")
- If relevant, express that there is a difference between care-giving and care-taking, between being useful and being used. Communicate how you feel those lines have been crossed in this situation.
- Ask the person to identify what he/she thinks might be keeping them stuck - Denial, Confusion, Fear, Avoidance, Procrastination, Overwhelm, Waiting for the perfect time/option? (The spirit in which this question is asked will profoundly affect the outcome - take care to pose it the spirit of inquiry rather than judgment.) Once they have identified the core challenge, ask pose this question in relation to it, "What would have to happen in order for you to move beyond or through this?"
- Move from a counseling model to a coaching approach. Assign the person a task, making them accountable for the next step in the process. If and when it is not accomplished, you have the opportunity to give feedback on their behavior, which is always better than comment on their character! Be totally clear about the rewards/effects for following through on commitments made to you, as well as the natural consequences of failing to do so.
- If the person is not responding well to your advice or suggestions, consider who they would listen to, setting up an advice call or an informational interview with someone from their targeted industry or vocational area.

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- Suggest a change of roles. "If our roles were switched, what would you say or do to inspire me to consider going to work (stay on the job, volunteer for an internship, etc.)?"
- Propose that you invite a "fresh pair of eyes" and a new perspective for the next meeting – a colleague or two, or perhaps someone who you know has influence in the person's life.
- Ask point blank: "My time and energy are limited and I have a lot of people to serve. I don't feel like we are making headway, so I am asking you – how do you think I can help you?" (Remember the scene in the bathroom in Jerry McGuire when Tom Cruise is pleading with Cuba Gooding Jr., – "Help me help you!")
- Request their honest feedback. What would he/she like more of, less of, or in addition to what you are offering at present?
- Suggest that perhaps another counselor (program, services, etc.) might be of help as you feel at an impasse. In the case when the only option left is to cut him/her loose, state it as such, and discuss what steps might be taken to restore your faith in him/her before you make that cut. Propose a timeline with certain goals to be accomplished, at the end of which, you either proceed or somehow sever the connection.

3. Change your reaction to the situation by adapting to it:

Sometimes we don't have any level of control with regards to the situation – the person is going to keep showing up, and there is nothing you can do to alter that fact! Even when we can't change the circumstance, we always have the choice of changing ourselves in relation to it and regaining our sense of control by changing our expectations and attitude. Here are some ideas on adapting to the situation by getting a different perspective.

- Situations or relationships that challenge us are always "wake-up calls" of one kind or another. Reframe the problem with the opportunity or lesson it offers. If you feel "at the edge", ask yourself, "At the edge of what? What lies on the other side?"
- See everyone you meet as a teacher, each offering a unique tutorial. The greater the difficulty, the deeper the lesson. (Stubbornness is the test of your patience, another's rudeness has put your pride on trial,

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and the sheer dishonesty of another is the experiment in strength of character in yourself.)

- What quality or trait is this situation requiring from you in order to bring about the desired outcome, or possible resolution? (e.g. Patience, kindness, flexibility, tolerance, assertiveness?)
- When we are knee-deep in a challenging situation, we tend to respond emotionally, causing us to lose connection with our deeper wisdom. Rising above our personal stake and inquiring from different perspectives can help us reconnect with our instinctual knowing. Think of a few of the wisest people you have ever known or read about. What do you think their advice would be to you in this situation?
- Our everyday thinking has the power to either renew or deplete our spirit, to nourish the best in us or to steal our thunder, to bring clarity to a situation or to distort it. Have you reduced some complex reality to black and white or have you made room for shades of gray? Is your thinking limiting and restrictive, or creative and expansive? Are you stuck on the problem, or are you constructively seeking solutions? Are you reacting in a way that is impulsive and emotional, or are you responding calmly and reflectively? Is your thinking more defeatist or strategic?
- One way to steer your thinking is to become aware of where you are placing your focus. Is your attention on what is wrong in the situation, or on what is right? Is it invested in what is probable, or in what might be possible? Are your thoughts fueling the fires of your hope or your fears? Are you betting on what is strong in the other person, or on what is weak? Optimism and pessimism are both self-fulfilling prophecies, so take great care in the direction in which you lean.
- Another way to "mind your mind" is to pay attention to your language. Words such as "always," "never," "should," and "must" are telltale signs of self-defeating and distorted thinking. When you hear yourself utter the word "loser", replace it with "underdog". Replace "user" with "survivor". You will never regret giving people the benefit of the doubt.

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- Remind yourself that no conclusion should ever be foregone. Replace certainty with curiosity. When tempted to describe things as they "are", consider describing them as they "seem".
- Help the other person change his/her reaction to the situation by having him/her shift perspective, like putting on different pairs of sunglasses. What does this situation look like through the lens of melodrama? How about comedy? How will this situation appear to him/her a year from now? What previous transitions has this person been through in his/her life that lends a different view to the present transition? Has this person been in a similar situation before, and if so, how did they succeed in moving on?

4. Change your reaction by accepting the things you cannot change:

In situations that are unavoidable and completely out of our control, the best way to cope is to accept things as they are. Acceptance may be difficult, but in the long run, it's easier than railing against a situation you can't change. In that spirit, I offer a three-part poem entitled "Like it or Not", which speaks succinctly to accepting the realities presented by three categories of people we face in our business: those we cannot help; those we help in spite of ourselves; and, those we help, but never know. It is my hope that for any situation in which you feel at the end of your rope in trying to help someone, you will find consolation in one of the three parts of this poem. Please share this article and/or this poem with others who you think might need that extra bit of encouragement or solace in a difficult situation in which they have begun to feel ineffectual in helping another person, in or outside of work.

In the meantime, in the face of anything and everything that we find challenging, let's take to heart the simple wisdom espoused by Theodore Roosevelt who said: "Do what you can, with what you have, where you are."... (and I would add)... in the best spirit possible.

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POETIC REFLECTION 

Like It or Not

Written by Denise Bissonnette

(For those we cannot help)

For some, our words strike a chord that has long been silenced.
Inside, we take the bow of a humble conductor.
For some, we are the teacher they have long awaited.
We stand taller as a result of having been useful.
For some, we plant hope and cultivate faith.
We stand in awe at the beauty of harvested dreams.

For others, whether we like it or not,
Our words fall on deaf ears.
Our guidance is ignored.
What we plant fails to take root.
It is not for our want of trying.

Whether we like it or not,
Some remain stuck or lost,
Grieving, or sieving with anger.
Others remain paralyzed with fear,
Or hypnotized by the hope of old dreams.
Some don't want to change, others aren't ready.
Some don't want our help,
Others need a kind of help that we can't offer.

Whether we like it or not,
Every person remains a mystery,
both to oneself and to the world.
We don't know all things, we don't see all things;
We have no basis upon which to pass judgment.

Try as we may to hold them up, build them up, or prop them up,
Inspire them, wire them, or light a fire beneath them,
The truth is that we are not the authors of another's story,
or the redeemers of one another's fate.
Lord knows, it is work enough to manage our own lives
without trying to play God in the lives of others.

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Whether we like it or not,
everyone's life is lived as a puzzle
without the benefit of seeing the picture on the box.
While we love to fill what's empty,
bring order to chaos,
and make whole what we see as broken,
Humility reminds us that we do not always hold the missing piece.
We don't hold the key to every door.

Wisdom points us in the direction of an enduring truth:
"For everything there is a season..."
For everyone, a conductor who may sound the silenced chord.
When the student is ready, the master will appear.
When the seed is ripe, there will be no stopping the inevitable flower.

Whether we like to or not.

Like It or Not – Part II

(For those we help in spite of ourselves)

Be assured, as soon we sit astride the High Horse of Outcomes -
those quantifiable results upon which we pride ourselves as a bureaucracy -

Someone is going to show up whose eligibility is questionable;
whose demographics do not fit the specifications of the program;
whose needs do not fit in a "one size fits all agenda";
whose story will bring us to our knees,
and beckon from us gifts we forgot we had; and,
whose brave movement or inspired change will not be quantifiable.

This someone will cause us to let loose of the reins we'd held so tightly.
We will topple off that horse headlong into the dust of our own humanity.
As we struggle to regain the ground under our feet, we will remember:

We are not in the business of using people to meet program outcomes;

*We are in the business of using the resources of a program to enrich the lives
of people.*

Like It or Not – Part III

(For those we help, but never know)

Whether we like it or not,
some things take time.

Words spoken in one moment
can mean something totally different
when remembered later.

What once felt like an affront or a challenge
can be experienced as a gift
when perceived through older eyes.

A gesture or deed that seemed insignificant,
can have enormous power to heal, affirm or inspire
upon recollection.

Counsel that is given to one who is not ready to hear,
can be recalled as the most profound advice!

It takes decades for an acorn to become an oak tree.
Sometimes it takes becoming an adult
to appreciate the joys of childhood.

Every word or deed is subject to the ripple effect,
Like a stone tossed into the water.
Even when you feel powerless to affect another,
Give what you can in the best spirit possible.
Throw that stone into the water.
Then, step back, and take heart in knowing,
Once placed into the Hands of Time,
Even the humblest of offerings
May be transformed into something sublime –
like kindness, or truth, or medicine.

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