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Teachable Moments At The Y

By Larry Bush
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By Larry Bush
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I came to understand how positive outcomes can emerge from chaos when I was an Army corpsman in Vietnam. I learned organizational skills in extraordinary circumstances. That experience was probably my first “teachable moment,” and it continues to be a good lesson, especially during difficult times.

Teachable moments are what came to mind when I thought about this column. What are those lessons I’ve learned in 37 years with the YMCA? Each place, each time has them. Several occurred when I first arrived in Hawaii and didn’t quite understand local style and culture. Having lived through my humbling moments of confusion, I now, especially for staff from the Mainland, require reading *Hawaii Business* magazine’s “Insider’s Guide to Local Style Business.” We also created a cultural immersion program for newcomers that includes participation in various cultural programs and assigning a mentor to help them in their initial months.

But the lesson is larger than a local “style.” It’s about listening, really listening - a teachable moment that transcends specific communities. Listening is the greatest of skills, one to be practiced and practiced and practiced!

Transitions take an inordinate amount of listening, and we are in a transition mode at the YMCA. We are moving from a program orientation to a membership model. We want our members to not just “buy” programs, but to belong to and be a part of a larger mission of helping others.

We also are responding to a new health crisis. For the first time in history, it's possible that children may not outlive their parents. Obesity is a critical issue, especially among children. With the support of a national YMCA initiative called "Activate America," our mission is to change that dire future. The YMCA is focusing on helping people live a healthy life - in mind, body and spirit.



YMCA of Honolulu management: Tony Pfaltzgraft, Monica Grant, Larry Bush, Mike Doss and Michael Chinaka

One of the things we learned by listening is that the YMCA was *telling* people how to live healthy. Now we need to listen more closely and find out *how* they want to do it.

Transitions take teams, and building our team here called on many of the lessons learned from past teachable moments. The first is focus. Most corporate "how-to" books talk about focus, and how right they are! You really need a clearly articulated focus that is repeated until it becomes the language of the organization. Focus keeps you from straying and getting lost in activities that do nothing to move the focus forward.

Over the years, I have also learned the importance of presentation. A plan is either going to work or be a complete disaster depending on the presentation.

You can have great focus, but if you can't present it in a way that touches your audience, it won't work. This takes diligence, time and an understanding of your audience.