

A Difference in Weight

People generally only see what they look for and
only hear what they listen for.

—Harper Lee

It was the start of a new year, and like a migrating goose I had made my annual return to our local health club. You know, to shed a few pounds and transform my average Hyundai body into a stunning BMW physique. No, really, I would.

My first trip back was invigorating, so to speak. There's nothing like the smell of a men's locker room to shock one out of the exercise doldrums. The aroma of sweaty towels spiced with athletic club-brand underarm spray brought back faint memories of my collegiate athletics days.

After leaving the locker room, I made my way to the stationary bikes for some cardio time. As I stood looking at the rows of bikes and bikelike machines, I marveled at human rationality. It takes a special kind of species to

develop contraptions that require significant physical effort but in the end take the rider nowhere.

Oh, for the days when one could hop on a bike and start pedaling . . . and actually go somewhere. Yes, I know, I could still do that, but *you* try riding a bike in a snowy Michigan January. Plus, it's so uncool to travel real miles in the twenty-first century when one can navigate virtual miles.

I was feeling good about myself as I approached my goal of thirty minutes on the bike . . . 29:57, 29:58, 29:59, 30:00! Done. As I stopped pedaling, I pressed the "Summary" button to reassure myself that there had been some result other than just the sweat flowing from my body and the pain pulsing through my legs. I wanted to know how many real calories I had burned. And there it was on the screen before me: I had ridden 4.7 electronic miles and worked off an amazing 150 calories. Wow! In the short span of thirty minutes I had rid myself of the twelve ounces of Coke I had guzzled in thirty seconds at lunch. The reality of that input-output equation, though depressing, would not deter me from my fitness goals. I went off to the place where serious body sculptors go—the free weights area.

I initiated my weight work with some bench presses to rebuild my atrophying chest.

I started off with 45-pound plates, which, added to the 45-pound bar, totaled 135 pounds. Not bad for a little thirty-five-plus guy like me. Though it was difficult, I was able to do ten repetitions with some strength to spare.

Feeling inspired, I put on additional 10-pound plates, for a total of 155 pounds. Again, it was difficult, especially the last three repetitions, but I pressed another ten reps. Surely, I could do a little more. I found some 5-pound plates and was now up to 165 pounds.

Grabbing the bar for my third set, I pushed with all my might to lift it off the rests. Breathe in, push up, down easy, air out . . . one. Breathe in, push up, down easy, air out . . . two. Breathe in, push up, down easy, air out . . . three. And so on to ten. The last four or five reps were extremely

tough. (In lifting terms, toughness is directly proportional to the facial contortions and guttural sounds one makes.) But I did it!

As I started to walk away, the chest-pounding maleness in me kicked in one more time. I figured I could do more. Surely, I could do 175. It was just 10 pounds more. I found two more 5-pound plates, and as I added them to the bar, I thought about getting a spotter—someone to be there just in case I was unable to lift the weight off my chest. Nah, I had just done ten reps at 165 pounds, and 175 was just a fraction more. How hard could that be?

Lying on the bench once again, I placed my hands on the bar, closed my eyes, and envisioned lifting a feather. I told myself it was only ten more pounds. I filled my lungs to capacity and, using my diaphragm for support, gave a tremendous push to get the bar off its launchpad. With 175 pounds above my chest, held up by two locked arms, I thought about the task at hand. Either I would successfully lift the bar or I would crush my chest. I couldn't turn back. I had to forge ahead.

I let the bar down slowly until it nearly touched my chest and then gave a tremendous push. The bar went up a few inches and stalled. "Uh oh!" I thought. "You're a volcano!" I told myself. "Erupt!" I strained to get the bar higher, but couldn't. I felt my arms weaken further. As they were about to buckle, a guy nearby came over and asked if I needed help. "Yes, yes," I stammered, as the thought of concave pectorals flashed through my mind.

After getting the bar back on the rests, I thanked the man for his help. As he turned to walk away, he suggested that I get a spotter next time.

How Much Are Your Employees Lifting?

This tale is about sensitivity to the backgrounds and experiences of others, about understanding that another's life journey affects how that person interprets the "weight" of events.

Every now and then an incident in the workplace appears “light” and innocuous to some but is significantly “heavy” and disturbing to others. You know what I’m talking about. It’s the “innocent,” “I didn’t mean anything by it” gay joke told in the lunchroom. It’s having a brand-new refrigerator in the air-conditioned main office area where mostly college grads work and an older refrigerator near the hot assembly line where many high school grads work. It’s having calendars of scantily clad women on walls and locker room doors. In the big scheme of things, and taken as singular, disconnected events, these things might be seen as trivial.

If you are the one who makes the joke, who has the good fridge, or who puts up the calendar, you probably would perceive your actions as innocent. If an offended party were to complain, you would tell him or her to lighten up, to quit being so sensitive. It is unlikely that you would think about why that person finds it so offensive. It is equally unlikely that you would think of these “isolated” incidents as links in a long chain of connected events. You would see “light” where others see “heavy.”

But my trip to the gym shows how the weight of an event can be differently felt. So-called out-group people, such as minorities, homosexuals, the homeless, and those in poverty, carry an accumulated weight of discrimination and exclusion. Years of being left on the fringes are like the thirty-minute bike ride. They tire you out. Often, you exert lots of energy trying to make your way up the societal or workplace ladder, but you make little progress because of built-in, systemic barriers.

Already tired, you then have to endure the reality that you don’t have access to the same doors others walk through easily. Maybe the barrier is your age, the color of your skin, or your socioeconomic status. Maybe it’s your gender or sexual orientation. Whatever your marker is, society has turned the things that identify you into that original 155 pounds of weight that limits what you can pursue and achieve. You press on while trying to make the in-group recognize the reality of the additional weights you are

holding up. Very few in-group members hear and see how tough it is. They let you know, through various overt and subtle means, that they think your pain is imaginary or blown out of proportion. The process of persuading others that the barrier in your path is real serves as the ten-pound plates that continue to zap your energy. Your muscles are now burning, but you don't give up.

Next, weight is added when others who you thought "got it" don't follow through on the commitment they so passionately made to do something. You find out that their passion exists only in attitude, not in behavior. They tell you to not make a big fuss because they don't want to ruffle the organizational feathers, to create a hostile environment for the majority. It's really hard now with an additional five pounds on either side, but you don't give up.

Finally, under the stress of being invisible, unheard, and marginalized, the last five-pound weights—the "playful" jokes about women's work, the "nice" comments about being "so articulate," or the "innocent" references to "those lazy people"—load on. You have no more energy to lift the bar, let alone hold it up. The bar comes crashing down and everybody sees. But people don't see the cumulative weight and burden. They see only the last little weights that you tried to lift. And because they are unable or unwilling to see the whole truth, they can't and won't serve as the much-needed spotter that all of us need when things get rough.

The weight of an environment that is not as inclusive as it could be is extremely heavy. It takes only a little incident to make the proverbial mountain out of a molehill. And when that happens, the whole organization suffers. Some companies are hit with lawsuits. Just ask Coca-Cola, Texaco, and Denny's. Others suffer because they have to take time away from core activities to deal with issues that could have been resolved using proactive measures—or by more people taking on the responsibility of being attentive spotters.

Do you have what it takes to be a spotter? Are you sensitive enough to others' viewpoints and experiences to understand how a molehill becomes a mountain? And are you strong enough to argue for the mountain when the majority of people around you see only a molehill? If your answer is no, you may want to make some new personal goals on this front. If you achieve your goals, I think you'll be pleasantly surprised at the image you see the next time you look in the mirror.

And you won't even have to smell a locker room in the process.