

Big Mistake 1 } Not Being on Your A-Game

Yesterday's home runs don't win today's games.

—Babe Ruth

What difference does one degree make? If you're hot when it's 95 degrees, you'll still be hot when it's 96 degrees. Water is extremely hot at 211 degrees, but at 212 degrees it boils. Boiling water creates steam, which is strong enough to power a train. That one degree changes the game. Imagine what it would take for you to change your game.



Thought and planning are the keys to making a difference in your communication style and approach. You have an opportunity to either make a difference or be the

same as everyone else. Is it worth it to think things through a little more? One degree more? Or is the status quo easier?

Being on your A-game is a mind-set. It's an overall positive attitude toward the differences you want to make in your own life and in others' lives. Think about it: If you took a step back to be solution-driven every time there was a conflict, wouldn't you be a difference-maker? Wouldn't it make life easier for you and for others around you?

You may recognize the following scenario. The plane is delayed and someone—maybe you—is not going to make his or her connection. Not only is the flight delayed, but it is also overbooked and a passenger has lost his seat. He is yelling and screaming at the airline representative. The representative looks back and says with a short and rude tone, "There is nothing I can do. Please have a seat." The passenger is furious, and the fight is just beginning.

If either the passenger or the airline representative had been on their A-game, the situation would have had a completely different sound and feel. The outcome may not change, but if the conversation was composed, empathetic, and professional, there is an 80 percent chance that either the representative would want to help or the passenger would calm down.

On the Side

"Recently I was thrilled to get on an earlier flight, which meant I was going to get home earlier after a long week away. The plane was oversold and I was put in the middle seat in the last row of the plane. I was standing in line and the woman in front of me was arguing with the gate agent about her seat. She was arguing that she was a valued customer and how dare the agent not give her a better seat. The agent was very polite and repeated, 'I'm very sorry but we have no open seats.' The lady stood there for five more minutes trying to get her to come up with another seat and the agent kept repeating the same

sentence. The customer finally walked away. As I walked up I gave the agent a smile and we looked at each other with that silent acknowledgment of ‘I get it; what a hassle she was!’ I then talked to the agent and said with an apologetic smile, ‘I’m so glad to be on this flight and it sounds as though you have no open seats, but is there any way I can get into a better seat?’ The agent looked at me, smiled, and said, ‘It’s all in the approach,’ and gave me a great bulk head seat. You really do catch more flies with honey than vinegar. Another lesson in how you communicate to reach your goal.”

—Kim Zoller, Image Dynamics

Having a positive attitude doesn’t mean walking around with a big smile on your face all day, every day. It means taking a breath when something goes wrong. It means looking at worst-case scenarios and thinking about the solution rather than focusing on the problem and who caused that problem. It means being open and present, not closed to what is going on around you. It also means knowing that you can’t control everything. Ultimately, it means controlling your reactions.

The bottom line is that people do not want to be around negative people. They do not want to work with people they cannot communicate with in a positive way. Things go askew at the worst of times, for instance, when we are rushed or have a deliverable that was due yesterday. We have a choice during those times to be kind to others and to not react negatively. During any meeting or seminar in which we discuss reacting versus staying calm and being kind to the people around us, the common thread is that those who are moody and reactive are perceived as less professional. No one wants to work with people who react when things go wrong.

According to a study conducted by the Carnegie Institute of Technology, 15 percent of the reason you get a job, keep a

job, and move ahead in that job is determined by your technical skills and knowledge—regardless of your profession—and 85 percent is determined by your people skills and people knowledge, including your enthusiasm, smile, tone of voice, personal responsibility, and moral and ethical excellence. The outcome of our communication is driven by our ability to get along.

There are best practices throughout this book; we challenge you to use them on a consistent basis. At the end of the book, there is an action plan for continued success with a metrics checklist for you to implement. If you do implement the tools, the outcome of your interactions will change. We have tested these practices ourselves, we have observed the communications of others, and we have interviewed thousands of people about what they believe are the keys to effective communication. When we handle things while playing our A-game, we always have a positive outcome.

There is no one who describes being on your A-game better than legendary football coach Vince Lombardi, who was known for his thoughts about winning and losing. Lombardi stressed that winning was a habit and people had to play with everything they had—not only their bodies, but their heads, too. He equated the game of football to business, and in order to win in business, people need to play with their hearts, their heads, and every fiber in their bodies. That A-game was about giving it all you've got. It was about not just sticking your toe in the water, but about immersing yourself.

It makes a difference when there is a coach motivating us and getting us to think about playing to win. On a daily basis, we have to be our own coaches who motivate and drive us. Take the time to think about the outcome you are trying to achieve and always be on your A-game by following best practices. Observe others and take note of additional A-game behaviors and actions.

Best Practices

- ▶ Eliminate your own negative self-talk. Only say kind words to yourself. “I tired hard,” “I learned from that,” “I give my all in situations.” (We found that negative self-talk happens at every level and every age. The most successful people with the most successful communication are mindful of this and turn it around as soon as they realize it is happening.)
- ▶ Be aware of how your mind can create a negative situation that does not really exist. Keep those thoughts in check. (See Big Mistake 10: Making Assumptions.)
- ▶ Be aware of mental distortions that hurt your A-game. (See Big Mistake 10: Making Assumptions.)
- ▶ Monitor your tone. Avoid sounding sarcastic, dictatorial, condescending, or arrogant. If you are not sure how you are coming across, ask someone you trust for feedback. Or better yet, become aware of how others are reacting to you.
- ▶ Try to understand where the other person is coming from. Empathy is asking yourself, “How would I feel if I were in this situation?”
- ▶ Listen to others. Can you remember what someone said five minutes after the conversation? Stop thinking and start listening. Avoid thinking about other things while others are talking.
- ▶ Be prepared. Spend time planning communication so that you utilize the “intellectual” part of your brain, which allows you to evaluate. Avoid using the “reptilian” part of your brain, which allows you to react without thinking.
- ▶ Set goals for your interactions with others. Before going into any interaction, plan out how you will behave to meet your own A-game goal.

- ▶ Focus on things that make a difference. Pay attention to where you are spending your internal energy. If you are emotional about something, ask yourself if it is worth all the focus or if the energy could be put into something constructive.
- ▶ Try to offer help to others. Remember that the more you help other people, the more you will get back in return. It is not all about “me.”
- ▶ Stay calm. Create techniques that help do this. Breathe in and exhale out in twice the time you spent breathing in. Relax your shoulders and facial expressions.
- ▶ Plan out hypothetical worst-case scenarios. This includes any potential risks that may occur or key insights from past experiences.

Ask Yourself These Crucial Questions

- ▶ Have I seen an outcome turn from negative to positive based on the way I handled the situation?
- ▶ Am I affected by someone else’s negative attitude? Have I communicated differently because of that negative attitude? How has that affected my A-game?
- ▶ Have I ever lost a job or a promotion when I thought my skills were a perfect fit? What am I not seeing?