

How You Think About People Affects How You Feel and Act

By Marilyn Suttle



I broke free from a busy morning to grab a quick lunch at my favorite little sandwich place. While ordering a tasty broccoli cheddar soup and sandwich, I saw them - luscious chocolate brownies displayed on a crisp white dish behind the glass

counter.

I love chocolate too much for my own good, so I made some rules for myself to help limit how much I eat. One of my rules is to eat only the best, most appealing chocolate. These brownies qualified.

I watched the woman behind the counter take her metal spatula and slide it under a brownie wedge. I interrupted her, 'Could I please have the piece next to that one. I think it's a little bigger.' She put the first piece back and slid the spatula over to the piece I wanted, placing it on a paper plate. As she did, she said, 'Okay, but the piece I was going to give you is bigger than this one.'

The smirk on her face told me she wasn't trying to be helpful. I felt angry for having my exciting chocolate moment broken by her attitude. 'Oh,' I said, 'Then, I'll take the other piece.' The woman said, 'No, it's too late. I'm not putting this piece back.' Ouch. "She can't treat me like this. She can't tell me which piece of chocolate I can buy," I thought. I canceled my order and got my money back.

Making a less than mature decision, I moved to the counter person next to her and placed my order again. I told myself I was standing up for myself, not letting her get away with rude treatment. The truth is, I was power hungry. I wanted to show her that I could have exactly what I wanted, with or without her. I told the new counter person what had happened. She leaned forward and said, 'I'm so sorry. Customers complain about her all the time. She's becoming a real problem.'

I had always loved coming here, but the idea of being waited on by her again had me wanting to find a new favorite place to eat. As the new counter person slid my chosen piece of brownie into a bag, I felt smug satisfaction, and asked for that woman's name so I could write a letter to the manager.

Hearing that I wanted her name, she came unglued. She leaned into my face yelling, "You threw your coffee cup at me!?" What!?! When I canceled my order, I gave the Styrofoam cup back to her. It tumbled to the

floor, but I hadn't thrown it.

My quick stop for a stress free lunch had escalated into a big bundle of crazy. This woman had an obvious anger management problem and I had an obvious 'don't mess with my chocolate moment' problem, and neither of us wanted to be in this situation.

Problems are like seeds. They hold the potential for new growth. I wondered how I could grow from the problem I just had over the brownie. It was all her fault. Well, not all her fault. It was the manager's fault too, for putting an employee on the floor without adequate customer service training. I was struck by my attitude of superiority. Was I so innocent? Then, I had a funny thought. If I were a fly on the wall listening to my customer service person tell her best friend about me, what would she say?

I figured it would go something like this: 'During the lunch hour rush, I had a ridiculous woman wasting my time having me switch one brownie for another because it might be microscopically bigger. That ticked me off. So I got a little sarcastic and told her, my piece was bigger than the one she picked. Could you believe she had the nerve to ask me to switch the brownies back? How absurd! I wouldn't do it. I had other customers waiting to order. Then, she cancels her order in a huff. 'Fine,' I thought, 'Who needs her?!' But she didn't go away; she reordered at the next counter just to spite me! I was just trying to do my job, and the next thing I know, she's asking for my name so she could write a complaint letter to my manager. What's wrong with people? Why can't they just order what they want, pay for it and leave? She was so rude.'

I had to laugh AND cringe, as I imagined the conversation. I'm sure she thought I was as big a pain in the butt as she was to me. I wanted more respect and compassion from her. Could it be that she wanted the same from me? But isn't the customer always supposed to be right? I started thinking about all the things a good customer service person would know and do, and she didn't know or do any of them. Then came my light bulb moment: How could she do something she didn't know how to do?

If I judge her, I'd come away feeling bullied and angry. If I viewed her with compassion, I'd see her as a person in process, just like me, someone doing their best with the skills and experience they currently have.

With this new perspective my stress dissolved and I began to feel lighter. I still wrote a letter to the manager, but it was helpful instead of hateful, with

less judgment and more fact. That day, my opportunity for new growth had come in the form of a brownie.

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