

ACE WOMEN'S NetworkTM Michigan

Mentoring Mondays
April 12, 2021

The One Question You Need to Ask Yourself before You Say Anything

Reprint of Marshall Goldsmith article, March 23, 2021

Conflict is an unavoidable part of our lives, whether we're CEO's, entrepreneurs, parents, spouses, engineers or ditch diggers. In some cases, conflict stimulates us to accomplish great things. It can also drag us off course, eroding our relationships, stalling our careers and keeping us from becoming the people we want to become.

So which conflicts are useful and which are counter-productive? As an executive coach, I've been helping successful leaders achieve positive, lasting change in behavior for more than 35 years. My experience with great leaders has led me to develop a simple formulation, one that can help you avoid pointless skirmishes and help you take on the challenges that really matter. Follow it, and you will dramatically shrink your daily volume of stress, unpleasant debate and wasted time.



I phrase it as a question:

**AM I WILLING AT THIS TIME TO MAKE THE INVESTMENT
REQUIRED TO MAKE A POSITIVE DIFFERENCE ON THIS TOPIC?**

It pops into my head so often each day that I've turned the first five words into an acronym, AIWATT (which I find appropriately rhymes with "Say What?"). AIWATT doesn't require you to do anything, it merely helps you avoid doing something you'll regret.

Perhaps you're thinking, 'I don't need to repeat a simple question to know which battles are worth fighting.' But I believe that all of us – even the most brilliant and successful – need exactly this kind of help. In my book *Triggers* (Crown, May 2015), I make the case that relying on structure – even something as simple as the AIWATT question – is key to changing our behavior.

Why? Because in every waking hour we are bombarded by people, events, and circumstances that have the potential to change us – the triggers in the title of my book. We often fail to appreciate just how much these triggers affect us, and how difficult it is to fend them off without some kind of support.

AIWATT is just one of the tactics I suggest. Of course, it isn't a universal panacea for all our interpersonal problems, but it has a specific utility. It's a reminder that our environment tempts us many times a day to engage in pointless arguments. And, it creates a split-second delay in our potentially prideful, cynical, judgmental, argumentative, and selfish responses to our environment. This delay gives us time to consider a more positive response.

Let's look at the question a little more closely.

"Am I willing" implies that we are exercising volition – taking responsibility – rather than surfing along the waves of inertia that otherwise rule our day. We are asking, "Do I really want to do this?"

"At this time" reminds us that we're operating in the present. Circumstances will differ later on, demanding a different response. The only issue is what we're facing now.

"To make the investment required" reminds us that responding to others is work, an expenditure of time, energy and opportunity. And, like any investment, our resources are finite. We are asking, "Is this really the best use of my time?"

"To make a positive difference" places the emphasis on the kinder, gentler side of our nature. It's a reminder that we can either help create a better us or a better world. If we're not accomplishing one or the other, why are we getting involved?

"On this topic" focuses us on the matter at hand. We can't solve every problem. The time we spend on topics where we can't make a positive difference is stolen from topics where we can.

Like closing our office door so people hesitate before they knock, asking ourselves, “Am I willing, at this time, to make the investment required to make a positive difference on this topic?” gives us a thin barrier of breathing room, time enough to inhale, exhale, and reflect before we engage or move on. In doing so, we block out the chatter and noise – we make peace with what we are not going to change – freeing ourselves to tackle the changes that really matter in our lives.

Thank you for reading! I hope this is helpful to you and those around you. Life is good.
Marshall.