

It Takes More than Just 'The Thought' to Really Count

by Chip Eichelberger



We have heard this phrase our whole life: It's the thought that counts.

Sometimes that might be the case. However, I feel that we frequently offer this statement as a diversion, when we really are giving a poor effort and want to cover our inadequacy.

An example all of us can relate to happened in a familiar setting—traveling on an airline. As I was flying back to Atlanta from a speaking event in Raleigh, NC, I sat near the plane's entrance. I noticed several children boarding the flight, obviously excited. I watched as the flight attendant reached into a drawer and handed wings to the children as they boarded. At first, I enjoyed the scene.

But then what hit me was the way the flight attendant performed this simple task. She showed no emotion, didn't speak, and didn't even offer a smile. Instead, she kept a blank stare as she handed the children the wings. Soon the parents broke the awkward silence, explaining the symbolic meaning of the gift and unwrapping the wings as they went to their seats.

I couldn't remain silent. I groped for the right words, hoping that my comments would go over well, instead of labeling me as a meddling jerk. As it turned out, my hopes were overly optimistic. I was probably thinking of how grateful I am when people approach me at the end of a talk with a kind word, and simple tips for improving that presentation. Invariably, I appreciate their interest.

Standing to stretch as the flight attendant handed out

another pair of wings, I gave it a shot.

You know, I fly this airline a number of times a month, and enjoy the good service. By the way, where did you start your flying today?

She responded cordially with small talk. Then I moved to my main idea.

Here's something I bet you know already. The value the children place on these wings is based on what you say and how you say it when you hand them the wings. While that might get to be routine for you, I couldn't help but notice that you just placed the wings in their hands without saying anything. To be honest, I don't think you really connected with these future frequent flyers.

She looked at me and said (you guessed it): It's the thought that counts.

I have to admit I was momentarily speechless processing this response. Then I countered: Oh, sometimes that may be true. If you gave a gift to a good friend or your mother and you handed it to them without a word, a card, or a smile—that will get one reaction. What if you added a heartfelt smile, a hug, and a declaration about why they are so special to you? That would prompt a more positive reaction.

I could see I was getting nowhere. So I posed one more question:

How do they train the new flight attendants to give these wings to children?

She didn't answer, and for the rest of the short flight she ignored me. Her attitude was very different from the enthusiasm I usually see among trainees on some of my other flights out of Atlanta. They convey what I call a switched on attitude. People who are switched on exude energy, warmth and a glad-to-make-it-happen spirit.

The incident reminded me of something I often mention in my talks: The Law of Familiarity. The more you are around something or someone, the more you take it or them for granted.

Through repeated exposure to a task, a job or a person, sometimes you lose your fire and get switched off. The tendency is to focus on what you don't like instead of what you do like, enjoy, or admire about the task, your job or the other person. This jaded attitude can happen to anyone, and apparently it happened with this flight attendant.

The danger is that one person on the team just going through the motions can drag the whole team down to that level. So look at yourself now. Where have you stopped giving your best effort? Where have you let yourself off the hook by

saying, It is the thought that counts? Does this happen with your customers, your teammates, your spouse or your children?

People cannot read your mind and figure out your good intentions. They look at what you do! As Emerson wrote, What you are speaks so loudly, I cannot hear a word you are saying.

On another flight a few months later, I happened to sit next to a woman who was in charge of training the flight attendants for this airline. I couldn't wait to share my story with her. She loved it, saying she would use it as a how not to example.

She explained, I consistently preach to the new flight attendants that 'good is not good enough.' To deliver exceptional service, you have to go the extra mile.

The extra mile. I like that phrase because it says you should strive to do ordinary things in an extraordinary way. Being average and just satisfying customers today isn't sufficient.

What can you do to exceed the expectations of those who count on you? First, you could take a few extra moments to connect with the reasons why you will give your best effort. How could you have more fun and create more joy in common everyday tasks?

The second key is to get switched on before you take action. Ask yourself, Where am I now on a scale of 0-10? 0 is for comatose and 10 is for your best. How do you stand, breathe, smile, and move when you are at a 10? Get into that state, and keep asking yourself that question so you'll stay in that state throughout the day. A simple way is to look up, smile, think about why you are switched on, give it a good fist pump and say YES with energy!

Remember, it does take more than a thought to count and to truly have a lasting impact on others. ■



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