

Dimensions of Respect

BY MICHAEL JOSEPHSON

I received a letter from someone who wanted to challenge an assertion I had made to the effect that everyone should expect and demand to be treated with respect. She said her boss was abusive, dishonest and not worthy of respect. What right does he have, she asked, to demand respect?

First, we need to distinguish between three aspects of respect: what we think of others, how we treat others and how we demand to be treated.

In one sense, to respect a person means to hold that person in high esteem. This type of respect must be earned. No one is entitled to our esteem.

However, the ethical obligation of respect also governs how we act toward others. People of character treat others respectfully whether they deserve it or not. I'm reminded of the politician who refused to get in a name-calling match with an opponent. He said, "Sir, I will treat you like a gentleman not because you are one, but because I am one."

Sure, it's hard to treat people better than they treat us, but it's important to realize what's at stake. If we allow nasty, crude and selfish people to drag us down to their level, they set the tone of our lives and shape us in their image.

The final dimension of respect is self-respect. People with healthy self-respect have a strong sense of dignity and self-worth. They set boundaries and demand respectful treatment as an absolute condition of a relationship.

My listener's ethical dilemma is not really about how she treats her boss, but how she allows him to treat her. It often takes moral courage. But whether it's a bad relationship or a bad job, whether the abuser is a parent, spouse, child or boss, self-respect ought to cause us to terminate any relationship that subjects us to continuous disrespect. ■

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