

Flip-flops and first impressions

by BROCK WEIR

It's often said you have just one chance to make a first impression.

That is, of course, undoubtedly true, but what does that really mean and why are first impressions held with such value?

In both professional and personal contexts, there have been plenty of examples where first impressions have been just that ? and not very informative.

Some people very adept at making stellar first impressions, making one feel welcome and appreciated, and maybe even part of some sort of kinship based on common interests or maybe even a common mission. But this feeling could change depending on a divergence of interests, a change in mission or alignment, or a change of perspective that doesn't necessarily dovetail with your own.

Back in 2003, for instance, when I left Newmarket for Ottawa to study journalism, my very first lecture was an experience I doubt I'll ever forget.

The professor strode purposefully into the lecture hall with a big stack of binders, found their place at the lectern, and slammed the binders down on the counter with such force that the hall's acoustics were put to the test.

They began the lecture with a few pertinent facts about themselves, each bolder than the last, some contradictory, and with each point brought to the fore I could sense my eyes, and those of my peers, getting wider and wider with every passing word.

?This isn't going to be easy,? said the Professor, getting down to the nitty-gritty of the course following that eye-opening introduction. No kidding.

It certainly wasn't going to be a walk in the park; they made that much perfectly clear going through the syllabus, digressing into sidebars about how tough each segment was going to be. I didn't think our collective eyes could get any wider, but I suspect by the time we were dismissed we all had eyestrain to some degree.

They were going to be a tough customer, we thought, and we weren't necessarily incorrect.

For the following three years, we didn't get anything to dispel this first impression, or the impressions made over the several months that followed the introductory seminar. So, by the time it came to pick my electives for the fourth year, one course particularly intrigued me until I saw who was set to lead this area of study. You guessed it.

But, I bit the proverbial bullet and signed up.

Here, there were about 20 students in the class compared to the 250-or-so in that first-year lecture, and despite the person at the head of the class it was an entirely different experience ? warm, personal, and it was clear how much they cared for each of their students.

Perhaps that initial course was designed to be something of a trial by fire, weeding out the students who couldn't stand the heat. Maybe respect, integral in any learning experience, was earned by how well one could indeed withstand it, and if you made it to the fourth of four years, you had passed an invisible test?

I never brought it up with them, but I suspect the points above hold some degree of truth. Nevertheless, it was a great feeling that late in the undergraduate game to discover that my first impression of them was just that. It was surface-deep, likely by design on their part, and the more information that was gathered the more complex and accurate the ?whole? became.

This, in my view, is how it should be.

I would hate to be judged by first impression alone, and I think we all would dislike it as well.

You've got to get to know someone before drawing any concrete conclusion, and everything you get to know about a person is another byte of information that helps form that.

It seems, however, that some hold this information-gathering process in less esteem than they previously had.

If you change your mind on anything, more and more often I get the impression that people somehow see it as either a weakness or a lack of conviction.

This was particularly evident at the height of the Global Pandemic when both so much and so little was known about the virus sweeping the world.

Given the novelty of the illness and what was causing it, precautions were initially taken given protocols on comparable viruses and, as far as the unknowns were concerned, best guesses and models of most likely outcomes. The longer we lived with it, and the longer the science and medical communities studied it, the more knowledge we gained and protocols were adjusted accordingly.

We had to re-learn a few things, adapt to new approaches to the procedures many of us were following in a bid to stay safe and healthy, and we adjusted to more 'new normals' than we ever cared to encounter. Yet, some cited these changing responses in light of a flood of new information as evidence we were being 'lied' to by the powers-that-be at the beginning of it all.

No, it was a matter of knowledge being power and, in a time where we all felt relatively powerless, it was important to gain as much as we could.

More recently in the United States, Democratic candidate VP Kamala Harris has been criticized by her opponents as 'flip-flopping' on a few issues. An article published last week by LeMonde following the Harris and Walz's first interview on CNN, was just one of dozens that zeroed in on the issues of immigration and energy.

Harris has faced criticism from Republicans after reversing an earlier opposition to fracking, a violently disruptive underground oil and gas extraction technique. Sitting behind a table with Walz beside her, Harris told CNN that despite that she believed the 'climate crisis was real' and she was looking at other ways of dealing with it.

On immigration, Harris defended moving towards tougher policies to stop illegal crossings over the Mexican border, as Trump hammers her on the issue. 'I think the most important and most significant aspect of my policy perspective and decisions is my values have not changed,' Harris said, but noted she would enforce the law for migrants illegally crossing the Mexican border, acknowledging that the issue, which Republicans have used to attack her, is a 'problem.'

It might, for some, be disconcerting on the surface to see a person who has wielded considerable power over the last four years change their position on issues issues which I will not weigh in on in this space but her views, and that of any other person who has held the VP position, has been influenced by the information they have on hand and that kind of evolution is not a bad thing.

In any context, I believe the ability to keep an open mind, assess a situation, and be flexible in re-assessing one's position is a strength rather than a weakness. If you intentionally set your views in stone, particularly in a rapidly changing world, you're dooming it and maybe even yourself to atrophy.