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I Have the Answers

It is better to know some of the questions than all of the answers.

—James Thurber

When Karnack, Johnny Carson's famous comedic creation, gives the answer before seeing the question, people laugh. That's the desired response if you're a comedian. For the rest of us, however, it is no laughing matter. It is a question of timing. We tend to think that we have to have the answers right away, even when we are not quite sure that we have asked the right questions. If we would wait a moment longer, take a breath and give someone else a chance to talk, we might find that we don't need to be a mind reader to get the answers we need. Looking at the overall situation from both the micro and macro perspective can often define the issue that really needs to be addressed. This takes time, patience and no emotional involvement in the situation (a series of circumstances not often found in real life). More often, when we find the alligators snapping at our vital parts, we don't have the time to contemplate how we were going to drain the swamp. Still, I tell myself, an effective leader should be able to handle multiple inputs and to find the time necessary for analysis. A recent example:

I was standing in front of the viewbox when Dr. Jones came in. "Have you seen the scan on patient Smith," he asked. I had not, but I would be happy to review it with you, I said. I found the scan (miracles happen every day) and gave it a quick inspection. (After all, if it only takes an average of six seconds to review an image as complex as a chest radiograph, how long should it take to review a scan?). Quick on the trigger, I blurted out, "Your patient has a ____." The color drained from Dr. Jones' face as he understood the full impact of my scholarly analysis. "This is a follow-up on an asymptomatic patient," he groaned. "Do I have to treat again?" I looked at the image again, realizing that this was not the time for erudite discussion, but for damage control. Could this be a normal variant? I rummaged in the folder, found a previous study and put it up to view. This time I spent more than six seconds reviewing the data. Lo and behold, the findings had not changed over three years. "It seems that the findings are stable and probably do not represent a recurrence," I said. Dr. Jones, looking very relieved, mumbled some words of thanks and left the room.

"The answer," Karnack says, holding the envelope to his head, "is a Tudor convertible." The question? "What does the Queen of England drive on weekends?" "The answer," Karnack continues, "is I'm not sure. Let me think about it and get back to you." The question? "If you could live your life over, would you do anything differently?"

H. William Strauss, Editor
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