**Why First Impressions Really Do Matter**

By Lovett H. Weems, Jr.

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Lovett H. Weems, Jr., says people’s first impressions are often shaped by assumptions and stereotypes. And the early information we get about a person influences how we interpret and remember later information, simply because in dealing with so much input our minds default to cognitive shortcuts.

One spring day a few years ago, a graduating student stopped by my office to tell me that he had just learned of his first appointment as a United Methodist pastor. He was being sent to three churches that had been separate appointments, but due to decline, were now forming a multi-church pastoral charge with one pastor. He was preparing to travel to his home conference for his introductory meeting with leaders from the churches and the district superintendent. His excitement surrounding forming first impressions was high.

When he returned, I asked how things had gone. He thought they went well. Then, a few days later, he returned to my office quite concerned. He had heard that the church members were resisting his coming as their pastor.

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Here’s what had happened. During the introductory session, the district superintendent reported a savings of several thousands of dollars with the three churches coming together, and they would need to consider how those funds would now be used. To that, the seminary student had said with a laugh, “I guess you’ll have to add it to the pastor’s salary.” He thought no more about it.

Apparently, the members took from that statement that their proposed new pastor was interested only in money and his personal advancement. In truth, that was not at all the character of the student as we knew him. He was actually quite humble, and his identity was not about status but service. The fact was he was nervous and, trying to be funny, said something that was misinterpreted. He returned for another session. They gave the new pastor a chance, and all went well.

**Cognitive Shortcuts**

How do such things happen? How can people be convinced they are right about something based on such limited information? It happens all the time, and you and I are as guilty of it as the members in these churches. Here’s why.

We are all “cognitive misers,” a phenomenon studied by psychologists Susan Fiske and Shelly Taylor. In describing their findings, Heidi Grant Halvorson (No One Understands You and What to Do About It, chapter 2) describes our tendency to think only as much as we must and no more because so much is going on around us. Therefore, we trade speed for accuracy in our judgments. There are favorite shortcuts we use to avoid the time and careful analysis required to make more objective assessments. Some of these include assumptions, confirmation bias (we see what we expect to see), stereotypes, past experience, and “the primacy effect.”

**First Impressions Really Do Matter**

The primacy effect means that the early information we get about a person influences how we interpret and remember later information. That’s why it is absolutely true that you never have a second chance to make a first impression. In the case of the seminary student, had his off-hand comment been made three years later, after people had a myriad of different experiences with him, it would barely have been noticed. However, a new person is a blank slate, so anything said at the beginning explodes to fill the entire slate.

So, what does this mean for a leader entering a new situation? Recognize that people will make judgments based on what is most apparent, even if they are as open-minded and fair-thinking as we believe we are. We do it all the time, even when we think we do not. All that we bring to those first encounters — attitudes and feelings about gender, race, accent, stature, education, appearance, dress, and other factors — will shape various impressions that “cognitive misers” use to get a take on a new person. Yes, this includes stereotypes, confirmation bias, and past experience. It’s not a pretty picture, but neither should it be a shock. Numerous experiments show that we all use inadequate shortcuts to shape initial judgments. To ignore this reality can be as harmful as ignoring any other factor in a leader’s context. We can regret it while still understanding the reality.

If you are responsible for assessing someone new and think your first impressions are purely objective, consider this. Those who selected musicians for symphony orchestras were convinced that their selections were based strictly on the quality of the applicant’s performance and nothing else. But, when there was a curtain between the musician and the judges, the percentage of women selected increased dramatically.

All of us are cognitive misers. There is simply too much all around us for anyone to receive information in a totally objective manner. So it is wise to be careful and attentive to this dynamic, to share differing perspectives within a community of discernment, and to be willing to revisit our first impressions.