

What Happened When I Lived by Dale Carnegie's Rules

Tony Rehagen July 6, 2016



Let's just say I know Aubrey.

Apple Store employees don't wear name tags, but I remember that name. That moniker and the wiry young man with thick glasses that belong to it were the unwitting foci of my frustration and anger three weeks ago, the last time I was sitting here at the so-called Genius Bar. Aubrey was the so-called genius who told me in some esoteric techie dialect that my old MacBook was out of memory or washer fluid or whatever, that three years of work I had failed to back up was essentially lost, and that I was a moron. (OK, I said that last part, but he didn't argue.)

Well, now I'm back, snarling for a fight after having been cast into the next-door Macy's for more than an hour, waiting to be paged. My brand-new MacBook won't start, and I'm certain that almost a month's worth of unbacked-up work is gone and my life and career are over. And Aubrey, of all name-tag-less messengers, once again drew the short straw. After a few minutes of poking and prodding the machine, he tells me that it might just be my display on the fritz, that all my data might be safe. But the only way to know, says Aubrey, is to plug the laptop into an external display. And the only one, says Aubrey, *in this whole entire computer store*, is currently being used by an hour-long Apple Watch tutorial.

I'm ready to blow—when certain words come rushing back to me:
Give honest and sincere appreciation, I think.

I hear the imagined Midwestern accent of Dale Carnegie reciting the second tenet of his "Fundamental Techniques in Handling People," the first section of his best-selling 1936 field bible for relationships, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, a building block for so much of the personal development content that has come since.

"Appreciation is one of the most powerful tools in the world," the passage reads. "People will rarely work at their maximum potential under criticism, but honest appreciation brings out their best."

It reminds me to take a breath and consider Aubrey: While I was waiting, I had observed him floating between customers, effortlessly untangling the power cable of one patron's computer as he talked someone else through an iPhone issue, somehow paying attention to both. Both had walked away smiling, their problems apparently resolved. When he came to me, he knew my machine intimately, had an instinct for what the simplest explanation for its malady might be and how to check. It occurs to me that while I have been furious with one person for *being so calm* while my world is crashing, he must be dealing with dozens of frustrated, frantic people like me every day. And yet he is reassuring and doesn't talk down to me. He is really good at his job.

“Look, I know you deal with idiots like me all day,” I say. “I can’t imagine what it’s like trying to solve a billion little crises, one after another. I honestly don’t know how you do it. My problem isn’t your fault—if anything, it’s my fault for not backing up my work. In fact, maybe you could help me with that once we get the machine working...”

Aubrey and I start up a little conversation. He tells me he [enjoys helping people](#) but eventually wants to move up to a more supervisory role. In fact, he says, he has an interview for a higher position later today. I tell him it must be hard to focus on trouble-shooting these little glitches with that event on the horizon. He smiles, shrugs off the notion, and mentions that he might be able to find another monitor in the back that can help us [solve my problem](#).

The assignment was simple: Read [How to Win Friends and Influence People](#), then live by its advice for an entire month. My initial reaction was one of incredulity. Of course I knew of the book, which has sold more than 30 million copies worldwide and was one of *Time* magazine’s 100 most influential non-fiction books of all time. But I’ve never been into [the self-improvement genre](#). It’s not that I’m perfect—I’ve just never thought to read an 80-year-old tome penned by a motivational speaker who died during Eisenhower’s first term.

There were grounds for skepticism: First of all, the material is a bit dated. Even after a second edition was released in the 1980s, leaving out the original sections on letter-writing for “miraculous results” and on marriage advice, the updated book comes off as a bit antiquated in places. For instance, the chapter suggesting that [effective leaders](#) use praise to sugarcoat criticism begins with an anecdote of President Calvin Coolidge telling one of his secretaries, “That’s a pretty dress you are wearing this morning, and you are a very attractive young woman,” before admonishing her for poor punctuation. (In 2011, Dale Carnegie & Associates Inc., which carries on the author’s teachings and training courses, put out a complete

reboot, *How to Win Friends and Influence People in the Digital Age*, with a 21st-century spin on advice and anecdotes.)

The second reservation I had was that I knew the book had been critically skewered, through the years, as a guide for manipulating people. But Carnegie evidently anticipated such cynicism. In the second chapter of the book, he explains, “One comes from the heart out; the other from the teeth out. One is unselfish; the other selfish. One is universally admired; the other universally condemned.... No! No! No! I am not suggesting flattery!... I’m talking about a new way of life.”

“Do unto others as you would have done unto you” might sound like common sense until you consider that 1) *How to Win Friends* was revolutionary in its time, practically inventing the genre of self-improvement books; and 2) When you reflect on your own daily interactions, the idea of taking a moment to sincerely appreciate where your counterpart is coming from isn’t all that common.

At least that was the case with me. And among the corny expressions (“Bear Oil!”) and dusty stories about William Howard Taft and Woodrow Wilson, I found real nuggets that I put to use almost immediately.

The difference between appreciation and flattery? That is simple. One is sincere and the other insincere.³

“Use encouragement. Make the fault seem easy to correct.” This one is a parenting must. When my 4-year-old failed to put her dirty clothes in the hamper, I didn’t yell this time. I bit my lip and told her she did such a good job putting away her toys that she just had to do the same thing with her shirt and pants. “If a desired outcome seems like a momentous task, people will give up and lose heart,” Carnegie writes. “But if a fault seems easy to correct, they will readily jump at the opportunity to improve.” And I was

sure to “praise every improvement” when she finally did it—two weeks later.

Carnegie also came in handy with the missus. “Whenever we argue with someone, no matter if we win or lose the argument, we still lose,” he writes. He was obviously married.

During this assignment, my wife and I happened to be buying a new house, and we had the occasion to meet the sellers at the property after we had come to terms. Haggling over the price had been a little contentious, and the inspection even more so. Still, I made it a point to “smile” and “begin in a friendly way,” as Carnegie instructs. I offered the sellers a firm handshake and a sincere appreciation for how they had kept up the property. I was a “good listener” as they talked about improvements they’d made to the place, picking up a few tips to store away for myself. I “talk[ed] in terms of the other person’s interest”—in this case one of the sellers mentioned the herb garden she had planted—and my wife and I followed her on a tour of the yard as she enthusiastically pointed out the tarragon, rosemary and sage that we’ll now know to harvest.

Carnegie also implores us to “make the other person feel important—and do it sincerely.” Before we left, we asked for the inside scoop on the neighborhood, and the sellers immediately spilled the names of the plumber down the street, two auto mechanics we could trust, and the best off-the-menu Mexican food in the ZIP code.

More than any specific tip, however, a quick read (at 276 pages) of this book was a reminder that the key to being a human among humans is to always stop and consider the other person’s feelings and perspectives. The only way to break down any barrier between you and someone else is through mutual understanding—and it often has to start with you².

So back at the Apple Store, when I cork my internal tirade and recognize

that Aubrey, my only chance at computer salvation, must be sick of my crap, I genuinely sympathize. I empathize. I try to connect on a human level. And when he returns from the back room with a newly rigged monitor, he quickly plugs it into my MacBook and establishes that it is indeed just a faulty display and that all of my files are fine. He indulges my paranoia and patiently waits while I back up my crucial data to a thumb drive, just in case. He tells me my machine will be ready in three business days. I thank him and wish him luck on his interview this afternoon.

As I leave, I'm happy, not only about my computer and files and the fact that the machine is still under warranty and the repair will be free, but that I might have made Aubrey's day a little bit easier. I sincerely hope Aubrey's boss recognizes and appreciates his skills. I sincerely hope he gets that promotion. And after I get my laptop back, I sincerely hope I never see Aubrey again.