Choosing Civility

The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct

Upon seeing the name of the book Choosing Civility one may understandably ask the question, “Just what is civility?” Civility can be described in many different ways, but Forni puts it best when he says that civility “means being constantly aware of others and weaving restraint, respect, and consideration into the very fabric of this awareness (9).” To me, civility is a form of ethics that shows respect and empathy for others. The book serves a guide on how to use civility in our everyday lives for our benefit and others. Forni’s book is based on twenty-five different rules to connect better with others.

Choosing Civility can also lead us to success in our current global society. The book explains how being civil is necessary in today’s society. We encounter people different from us every day. In class, we have discussed politics on many occasions. Presidential candidates basically need to be masters of civility. Without civility, they would not have the ability to reach out to people who are different than themselves. Skimming through Forni’s rules, it is obvious that our President must carry most, if not all, of these civil characteristics. If civility is so important for our President, there is no reason why we should not strive for it as well.

Three of Forni’s twenty-five rules had an immediate impact on me. The first rule that immediately jumped out to me when reading the book was to “Accept and Give...
Constructive Criticism (141-145).” I believe that I have struggled in the past to accept criticism much more than giving it out. Too often I have had friends give me constructive criticism and instead of being open-minded to the idea, I become offended. Some people easily recognize this and also point out that I get defensive when they are only giving me advice. Not only did this rule jump out at me from this aspect, but it is also of importance to point out that the reason for identifying these rules is basically to give ourselves constructive criticism.

Take this example for instance. I can remember a few weeks ago one of my friends simply told me that I need to smile more. Instead of thinking about the criticism, I quickly snapped back at her. Even though I knew she was right, I said something such as “I do smile a lot, you just don’t see it!” She made a comment that I get too defensive over comments like that. Of course at the time I even got defensive over that comment. So in essence, I was unaccepting of her criticism twice.

I look back at this now and I think about how I could have handled the situation better. Instead of accepting her “precious source of knowledge and wisdom (143)” as Forni refers to criticism, I quickly rejected it. I didn’t take the time to step back and think about whether or not she was right. Denying the fact that I need to smile more simply wasted time when I could have thought about changing and perhaps begin to smile more. Also, when she commented that I get too defensive, I should have done the same. This is a prime example of responding with counterattack, something that Forni strongly discourages (144).

The second rule that definitely stood out to me was “Refraining from Idle Complaints (136-140).” Lately, this seems to be something that I struggle with
frequently. I have found myself complaining to friends more and more. Forni says that one must identify any recurring themes of complaint (137). After thinking about this a little bit, trouble with girls (we will leave it at that) would probably be my recurring theme.

Understanding why complaining is bad is necessary to overcome it and Forni states this perfectly:

“It is bad because concentrating on problems rather than solutions reinforces a pessimistic outlook on life. And it is bad for those around you because it spreads your pessimism to them. Pessimism is like deliberate trudging in the mud. When you complain, you stick your unfortunate listeners in your own mud and you drag them along with you for no good reason. When you are about to yield to the temptation of going on a tirade about what’s wrong with your life or the world, just stop and think. Right now you are underestimating your power to influence your life – and that of other – for the better. Right now you have the choice to redirect your energies away from a futile exercise in negativism (137).”

It was not until I read this that I realized just how terrible my complaining was! Even though my life may be slightly disappointing right now, it could be a lot worse. Instead of complaining previously, I should have thought about just how blessed my life is. I am alive and I have a good life. I have plenty to be thankful for.
The third rule that I’d like to point out is “Speak Kindly (60-63).” Forni refers to this as “the heart of civil behavior (60).” This rule almost seems like common sense but after thinking about it, I started to realize that maybe I need to speak kindly more often. For example, recently I was having a good time with some friends. We were laughing and carrying on when one of my friends made a comment. Sarcastically, I made fun of him. It came off as a funny joke to me, but to him, it was a rude, unkind comment. After reading the book, I would have handled this situation differently. Forni suggests that I should have simply kept silent (60). It wasn’t really necessary for me to even say anything. I should have thought about what I was going to say first. If I had thought about it, I would have realized just how offensive the comment was, and would have refrained from speaking out loud.

Obviously there is always room for improvement in one’s life, and I am certainly no exception. Here are my top ten rules that I need to give the highest priority to in the future:

1.) Accept and Give Constructive Criticism (141-145)
2.) Pay Attention (35-40)
3.) Assert Yourself (110-115)
4.) Speak Kindly (60-63)
5.) Refrain from Idle Complaints (136-140)
6.) Listen (48-53)
7.) Think the Best (44-47)
8.) Keep It Down (and Rediscover Silence) (93-96)
9.) Respect Others’ Opinions (77-80)
10.) Be Agreeable (87-92)

When thinking about my top ten rules, I put what I considered to be the top three that I need for future success at the top. These three things not only are important towards our everyday lives, but they are essential qualities to have for any career, especially one as an Agriscience Educator.

“Accepting and Giving Constructive Criticism” I feel is by far and away the most important rule of Forni’s for a teacher to have. Teachers must be able to give constructive criticism to their students’ everyday without sounding condescending or negative. Whether it be on an essay question on a test or during practice for an FFA Demonstration, this is something I need to be able to do properly. Along with giving criticism, I need to be able to accept it as well, particularly as a rookie in the field. I will be getting constructive criticism frequently from school administrators, colleagues, and even students. Handling criticism from these people is vital not only to my success as an educator, but also to my job!

“Paying Attention” is also very important to my future and something I need to give priority to. Paying attention as an educator is important for many of the same reasons as accepting and giving constructive criticism. It is also important for me now to pay attention in my college classes to be as well prepared for my career as possible. My success may very well depend on it. Being able to relate to people (particularly students) is an essential role as an educator. Not paying attention to someone’s needs can have negative outcomes in every career though. I know that this is something that I personally struggle with from time to time, so paying attention is something for me to work on.
The last rule that I feel I should give priority to is “Assert Yourself.” I feel that I do my best to treat others well and to please others. However, sometimes I try to hard to please others and end up hurting myself. I greatly enjoy Gael Lindenfield’s quote in the book: “A good reason for not asserting yourself is, of course, that you think you are not worth the effort (111)!” At first I felt that this quote was silly but after thinking about it, it makes a lot of sense! In the future I feel that this is important for me, particularly as a teacher. While pleasing school administrators, parents, and students is essential, I need to set personal boundaries for myself and be assertive at times.

Overall I found this book to be highly enjoyable. As you can see, civility can take on many different forms. The book serves a great guide on how to use civility in our everyday lives for our benefit and others. Many of the rules may seem obvious at first because this is how our mothers raised us. However, we tend to lose sight of this. Forni manages to speak in a personable way where it seems like he is speaking directly to you. The rules he brings forth I believe are essential to future success in a career and in everyday life.