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Knowing the Difference between “Particular” and “Peculiar”: A Key to Reducing Stress at Home and at Work

My wife has a part time weekend job and while she was at work yesterday, I cleaned the kitchen. Part of the job involved unloading the dishwasher and rinsing the dishes to get ready for the next load. I didn't load the rinsed dishes into the dishwasher. My wife likes doing it her way. I used to see this as “peculiar” and it bugged me but when I shifted to seeing this as her being “particular” my life got a whole lot easier.

My wife is an artist and stacking the dishes efficiently is an art form to her while for me it is a chore that I want to get done as quickly as possible. She clearly does a better job than I do fitting everything in and, by stacking the dishes towards the sprayers as opposed to me jamming them in, the dishes get cleaner. I understand it now and I see her desire to load the dishwasher her way as endearing. We all are particular about almost everything in our lives. I am, for instance, particular about my coffee. I like a certain blend with just the right amount of cream and no sugar. That isn't peculiar.

How does this play out in our work lives? Among other things, I manage an office building for a wonderful landlord. He wants the tenant rent checks deposited by the 5th of the month. I could see this as peculiar but when he explained that his mortgage payment is due on the 9th and he wants the checks cleared by then, I understood and knew why he was being particular about it. This teaches me that as a manager if I take the time to explain why things are done in a particular way, my co-workers can get on board and judgment and stress goes down. I call this going slowly to go quickly.

How does this play out in parenting? When my son was a teenager, he enjoyed playing his music loudly at times and I had a home office under his bedroom. When he was younger, it worked for a while to tell him to change his behavior “because I said so.” If I continued that stance when he was older, I would have come across as dictatorial and he would have had a peculiar “old man.” He understood if I was working that he could put on headphones or lower the volume and got it that I was being particular for a reason and that I wasn't being peculiar.

Back along the way I worked for someone who was over the top particular. Everything had to be done a certain way and there wasn't any rhyme or reason to it. To make matters worse, he was very caustic if I didn't do it correctly and doing it correctly constantly changed without notice. I quickly came to see that he wasn't particular, he was peculiar and I quit.

So knowing the difference between “particular” and “peculiar” can help reduce tension. Please note, knowing the difference between the two can also help your relationship with yourself. When I ask myself the question, “Am I being particular in this situation or am I being peculiar?” it can help me modify my behavior and get out of a rut. And finally, a modicum of “peculiar” can be endearing. Those differences are probably part of the foundation for the initial attraction in your primary relationship so try and remember to cut them some slack.