

Members Quarterly

Winter 2015 Edition

Feature

Prerequisite for Strong Leadership: Noticing Without Judging

How to better lead, problem-solve and influence others



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We assume. We judge. We jump to conclusions. And we do it constantly. Our brain is designed to do this automatically to help us make sense of the world. The problem is that this is done through our unique, personal filters and biases and can therefore be subject to being wrong, biased or incomplete on a consistent basis. As a result, we risk frustration, misunderstanding, wasted time and more.

We don't need to stop making these judgements and assumptions which is good news since we can't stop it! We just need to recognize when we're doing it, what impact it's having and manage it more deliberately. It's not as hard as it might first appear. The many benefits include clarity, collaboration, influence, empathy and solutions that produce the results you want. Try these four behaviours to perfect your skills.

Focus your attention

Your ability to notice things came factory installed. Your brain notices infinitely more than it lets you know about. That's why it's so important to direct your mind to focus on things that are useful and productive. For instance, if you're worried about resistance to your process improvement idea, your unconscious mind will focus on making you aware of signs of resistance and disagreement. It will undoubtedly find them. It will also notice neutral and supportive reactions, but won't relay them to you because you've inadvertently told it that this is not important.

Try this approach. Before presenting your idea, remind yourself to look for signs of support and common ground on which you can build. Here's a secret—you'll still notice the resistance because that is your initial concern. You'll simply have a more balanced and complete view of the situation.

Remind yourself that "you don't know!"

People will always be doing and saying things that cause you to feel a strong reaction. In those moments of "how dare he be so condescending!", the best thing to do is to remind yourself that you may not really know the other person's intentions. You know how you feel at this moment, but you probably don't know precisely what the others mean or what they want. You'll think you know because your brain has already built a story about it. For example, "Sammy's jealous that I'm getting this promotion, so he's trying to talk down my ideas". You must keep in mind that this story is based on biased judgements and assumptions. So, remind yourself that all you know is your interpretation and proceed to...

State your observation

Removing judgement means sticking to observable facts. That's not always easy. One way to do this is to simply say what you noticed in factual terms, while taking full ownership that this is your observation.

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If what's causing your reaction is in the content of what the person said, play it back to them: *"I heard you mention you don't think this approach will really cost less."* *"You said it looks like I haven't really thought this through".*

If it's more the emotional reaction that's got you reeling, simply name what you observed: *"You seem frustrated."* *"I sense some hesitation."* *"You sound particularly excited."*

In both cases, your objective is to confirm that what you heard or sensed was accurate and to get them to expand on it in order to get a clearer picture of their meaning and intent. For this to be effective, you need to do two things: 1) your tone needs to be neutrally curious and, after stating your observation 2) you must stop talking. Just pause and listen. Then...

Probe to explore

Now that you have checked your assumptions, distinguished between what you know and don't know and played back your observations, it's time to dig. Whether your goal is to manage, influence, coach, correct or motivate, you will waste a lot of time and energy if you take action without a proper understanding of the situation or problem. This *must* include the other person's perspective. This is where the ability to notice without judgment becomes most important and difficult. The person may describe things in a way that makes no sense to you and/or that you disagree with, yet you need to park your agenda and ask yourself the following questions. What seems really important to them? Why? How is their demeanour changing through this conversation? What do they really want? Your focus of attention for the moment needs to be all about them because that's the only way to get to the root cause, desire or issue.

You are a probably a pro at active listening by now, so this is just a reminder to use those skills when exploring. We tend to notice *to confirm* instead of noticing *to understand*. If your questions are closed, you are in confirming mode. Use open questions to allow the other person to share their point of view, provide context and to explore their goals and intentions. Probe, listen, clarify and paraphrase. You don't need to agree, just make sure that you understand.

What's next?

While our instincts can be pretty good, we usually don't have an accurate picture of what others really think, feel or want. Your ability to manage your judgement while becoming an astute observer enables you to probe, build understanding and take collaborative and effective action because you can incorporate a full understanding of both parties' needs.

For the next week, focus on noticing how judgement creeps into the conversations around you and practice these skills to influence the situation. Happy exploring!

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