

DEALING WITH MOODS AND ATTITUDES

It seems like no matter what area of life we are in there are always some people who are difficult to get along with. They are either exceptionally prickly, or don't seem to care less, couldn't be bothered, or are remarkably self-centred and inconsiderate. We wonder "What's with these people?", "What planet are they living on?",

"Do they go out of their way to be especially unpleasant and uncooperative?", "How can someone be so insensitive - are they blind? What needs to happen for them to get the message? What's wrong with them?" They have the potential to take up an enormous amount of our time and energy and we can find ourselves continually in conversations with others about their shortcomings. In doing so we use a lot of the planet's oxygen, and it doesn't change a thing!

Life is not happy for us when we are in their company. We find ourselves out of options, resigned that things will not improve, and experiencing continual frustration, which is not good for our own well-being. So what can be done? We want to suggest a different approach, one that concentrates on how we are observing. This is based on the following premise: *We do not know how things are, we only know how we observe them.*

Each of us has our own perspective on the situations in our life, and that's all we have - our perspective, our mindsets.

Our perspective is our interpretations.

We react, respond and operate from our perspective, but we are very rarely aware of the perspective we have of someone and how that drives our behaviour.

One of the most powerful forms of learning we can engage in is to take a look at:

- How we are observing things in the first place
- How come we see things the way we do

By being willing to inspect our perspective we are then in a position to address the following question: "What is it that makes someone difficult for us?"

But let's take a look first at what our perspective is made up of. Essentially it consists of assumptions, which is how we think things are, how they should be, and how they could be. The basis of these assumptions is the standards we

live by and how we expect others to be consistent with these. Our standards and assumptions are the basis of our opinions, and we knit our opinions very coherently into a story. But we rarely, if ever, observe this fundamental process of how our perspective is formed, and if we were to slightly adjust some of our assumptions, we would have a different perspective and different ways of behaving.

What makes someone difficult for us is that they don't live up to our standards and expectations, and we are not able to influence them to do so. That pushes our buttons, because our standards define our dignity and integrity and where and how we make a stand in life. And when our standards are "violated" we have an emotional response, which can become a long-term and entrenched response (a mood) that we live from all the time in our dealings with difficult people.

Moods colour how we see life, and we find ourselves in negative moods, which are powerful enough to trap us into always having the same perspective. Our moods live in our body, so we also have a physical reaction, reflected in our breathing, muscle tension and posture.

The traditional way of looking at why someone is difficult is to point the finger at them, and speak of the unacceptable characteristics of their behaviour. By being willing to take a look at our own perspective we can take another approach, one that begins with pointing the finger at ourself and acknowledging how we are observing things. It is critical to continually remind ourselves that what we observe is an interpretation, and whilst we may think we have the "right" interpretation, ours is but one of thousands!

We see and hear people do things, but our standards and assumptions have us form an interpretation. It is all too easy to fall into the trap of regarding our interpretations as "fact". Part of the reason we are deluded into this line of thinking is because others can have similar interpretations. But this only means we have consensus, which can blind us to developing innovative ways of dealing with tricky issues.

What can be done, how can we be influential in improving things, even with seemingly the most intractable of people? There are a number of things we want to suggest about observing our observing.

1. A "standards and assumptions check". Be very clear about the story you are running about this other person. What are the core standards, or criteria for acceptable conduct, that are being "violated". How important are those standards to you - do you want to stick to them and be uncompromising about them (which is OK if you do because they are the foundation of your dignity)? Perhaps the standard is non-negotiable, but perhaps how this

person goes about meeting that standard could be different. Perhaps we may be trapped in an assumption about how people should go about meeting our standard, as if there is a “right” way for me to match your criteria. The criteria by which we live play a paradoxical role in our lives - they are indispensable and define who and how we want to be, but they also can trap us into rigid and inflexible ways of observing situations, which can result in us doing an exquisite job torturing ourselves.

There is also another assumption worth inspecting with our standards, and that is that we may assume that this other person is as clear about our standards as we are. Or that this standard is as important to them as it is to us. In other words, that they would have learned this and it would be an integral part of how they view the world.

2. A mood check.

What is the fundamental mood you live in with this person: when you think of them, when someone mentions their name and you are in their presence? What would you say is the colour of this mood? What does this mood do to the quality of your thinking and relating, to your demeanour and quality of life? How much of this mood do you carry with you into other situations in your life?

Our habitual thinking about moods is that we are stuck with them and can't do anything about them. Where did we learn that? Who is running our emotional life? There is such a thing as emotional goal setting - what mood do you want to be in with this person so that you can be more resourceful in your behaviour?

3. A resourceful body.

The subtle ways we configure our muscles, which influences our posture, as well as our breathing, has a huge, but underrated impact on how we observe. A negative story and a negative mood becomes “embodied”, which contaminates our effectiveness in relating with others. How do you need to stand, with what degree of uprightness, without being rigid, how deeply do you want to breathe? How can that be monitored in a conversation? Any sign of the negative story and mood becoming prominent is a sign to shift position, posture and breathing, even by consciously taking a few deeper breaths.

4. Our self-image in delivering a message.

It is easy to assume that we are being clear about what we want, but from their perspective are we? Have our requests been clearly and unambiguously stated so that there is a shared understanding of what is required? Do we

Speak from our own concerns, about what is missing for us and why it is important, in the spirit of pointing the finger at ourselves, rather than being in a “blame frame” and pointing the finger at them? Is our self-image such that we can convey what we want, feeling valid and worthwhile, and in a “solid and definite” body, without being overbearing?

5. Our perspective of their perspective.

How do you think they are seeing things, especially yourself? What do they need to see and hear from us such that they will get the message? Should we deliver it directly, and if so, what words, voice tone, facial expressions need to accompany our speaking? Or, would that be too off-putting and are they more likely to “take on board” what we want indirectly, perhaps through a third party, or the use of prolonged pauses, or strategically placed but pertinent comments? What is going on in their world? Do they seem happy, do they have a positive opinion of themselves, what sort of mood and body do they live in? How can we incorporate these considerations into our approach?

One closing point. It is easy to underestimate the complexity of the dynamics of human interaction. We are not machines, but biological entities, sometimes highly unpredictable and, above all else, each of us is a mystery, both to ourselves and others.