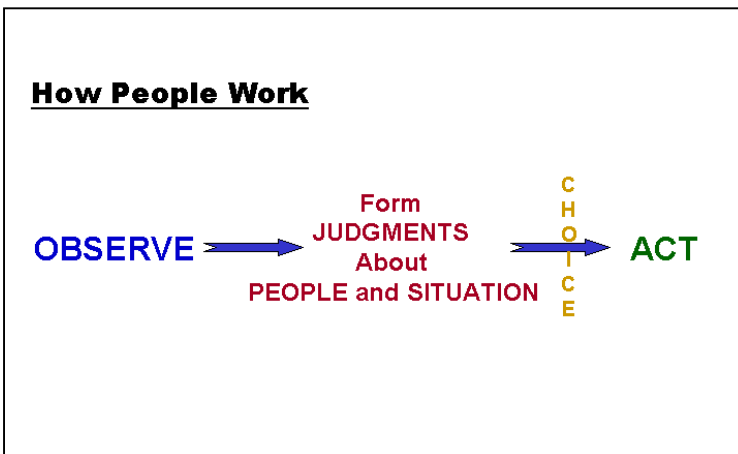


HOW PEOPLE WORK

This model anchors our workshop on Understanding and Valuing Differences. The workshop demonstrates to participants how individual differences are key creating a more accurate assessment of situations, develop more innovative and creative alternative actions, and increase our ability to do the right things for the business. People leave this workshop with an attitude of “it’s what is different about you that makes us more successful”.

I often start my workshop on Understanding And Valuing Individual Differences by asking people a direct question – How do you work? Most people respond with a glazed look as if I just asked them the meaning of reality. I go on to point out that when a company buys an expensive piece of equipment they usually receive training on how to run the equipment. They also get an instruction manual that answers their questions and explains the compatibility of the equipment with other equipment. I then turn back to

participants and ask if they have a training program I can attend on how they operate, and if I can have a copy of their instruction manual. They laugh.



The reality is most of us do not have a clue about how we work. Even though people are one of the greatest expenses to most business, they do not come with a training program or an

instruction manual. If people do not understand how they work, how can they improve? If we don't understand their compatibility with others, how can we know what is going to happen when we ask people to work with other people? It is this basic lack of understanding that creates so many problems on the people side of business and creates major performance problems for organizations.

The Human Process – Observe, Judge and Act

At the most basic level we were all designed to do basically the same thing – we walk into a new moment of time, we observe what is going on, we make judgments about people and situations, and we chose an action that is in our own self-interest. We observe, judge and act.

The process of observing, judging and acting is what separates us from lower life forms. A deer approaches a highway, sees cars coming down the road, sees food on the other side, and starts across the highway – and becomes road kill. People approach a busy highway see the cars, see something they want on the other side, and they chose to wait until the traffic is clear. Occasionally people make mistakes, but I have seen a lot more dead deer than I have dead people on the highways.

While this ability to observe, judge and act may seem mundane, it is the basis of our survival. We are the only species that can survive anywhere on the planet. Because no matter where we are, we observe, make judgments and take actions in our own self interest. It makes us extremely adaptable. We are not designed to do any job, we are designed to figure out what job needs to be done, and than do it.

The human process starts with observation. If you add up the nerve endings associated with our five senses we have about four million bits of information coming into our brains every second of our lives. That is a tremendous amount of sense data. It creates an information rich environment for making judgments about people and situations. It gives us the information we need to determine the right things to do, and the best things to do for our own well being.

Once this information reaches the brain it is organized and interpreted to make judgments about people and situations. We make judgments about people because they are critical to our success. As a species we did not all move to separate territories at the top of different mountains. Because of our need for others we formed socio-political entities – clans, tribes, villages, nations, and religions. Our extreme interdependence, combined with our aggressive, war like attitude, has made judgments about people critical to our success and survival.

We make judgments about situations to determine the right course of action. We have learned, “When it Rome, do as the Romans”. This situational focus allows us to adjust our behaviors to different situations. When hunting we learned to be quiet. When in battle we learned to scream loudly. This ability to adjust our behaviors to different situations makes us extremely adaptable, versatile and pragmatic. It allows us to maximize our performance in a range of different situations.

The quality of our judgments about people and situations is critical to our survival and our quality of life. For example, you are on vacation and lost in a big city. You are in a poorly lit, run down part of town. You see someone standing on a street corner with what looks like a gun sticking out from under their coat – you chose to keep on driving. In another situation you are on you way to give you boss some information that is going to really upset her. As you are approaching her office you observe that she is in a heated argument with her boss, she looks very upset – you chose to wait and talk to her later on. In the case of the guy with a gun on a street corner your survival was at stake. In the case of the upset boss, the quality of your life, and perhaps career, is at stake. In both cases, making the right judgments about people and situations is critical to your own self-interest.

We form our judgments by selecting out information from our observations, organizing that information in some logical way, and interpreting it to give it meaning. In other words – we think. Our powers of thought are tremendous. Our thinking is fueled by the four million bits of information coming through our senses every second. How we organize and interpret this information is driven by our personality, style, attitudes and

life experiences. Since we are all very different people, it is not surprising that we often have very different thoughts, and very different judgments about people and situations – even when we are with the same people in the same situation.

Once our judgments are made we form an intention – what we want to do. Unlike lower forms of life our behaviors are guided by our intentions, not by some internal instinct hardwired into our brain. In other words, in every situation we always have a choice. Our “free will” assures that we have a wide range of alternative actions to choose from in every situation. The more alternatives one has, the better chance one has of doing the right thing, and the best thing for each situation.

The truth is, we always have a choice. Sometimes we are faced with very unpleasant choices – but we always have a choice. A friend of mine was once given a gift of plaque for his office from a coworker that said: “God grant me the courage to change the things I can, the serenity to accept the things I can not change, and the wisdom to know the difference”. My friend respectfully declined to accept the gift saying, “I may not be able to change things, but that does not mean I have to accept them”. He refused to give up his power of choice.

We are all basically self-maximizing systems that chose actions that are in our own best interest. It is our power of observation, our power of thought, and our freedom of choice, that has allowed us to obtain our dominant position on the planet we call earth.

Variation Within The Process

While all people run the same process – observe, judge and act – there is a tremendous variation within that process between people; even people in the same exact situation. Policemen know this from experience – two eyewitnesses to an accident often have significant differences in what they report.

In my classes I demonstrate this variation in observations by having everyone look around the room and then write down what they observed. When each person’s list is shared in the large group there is very little overlap in observations. While some people will have some items in common, there are typically more differences in lists than commonality.

One of the factors that drive these differences in observations is the process of perception. We select out what we pay attention to based on our expectations, needs and wants. When we expect something, need something or want something, we look for it; and we are more likely to see what we are looking for. Because people have widely different expectations, needs and wants, they routinely select out different information to pay attention to.

We also make different judgments about the same people in the same situation. This is because we use different criteria when making our judgments – different criteria leads to different judgments. In the classroom I demonstrate this by asking people to list the characteristics of the ideal boss. Not surprisingly, this activity always yields significantly

different lists of criteria. And because these criteria often come from life experiences, people can become very passionate about them.

We also make different judgments about situations. One of my favorite activities is to ask participants to estimate the odds of their company having a layoff in the next three to five years. I ask them to pick a percentage between 0 and 100. It is not at all unusual to have these estimates range from 20% to 80% - at which point I tongue in cheek ask if they all work for the same company. The reason for this variation in judgment on a situation is the different logic we use to make the judgment. One person's logic might be – “we had layoffs before, therefore we will have them again”. Another person's logic may be – “we had layoffs before, therefore we will have learned how to avoid them in the future”. Our logic is often driven by past experience and learning, therefore people can become passionate about their judgment of a situation.

Understanding And Valuing Differences

Although we all run the same process – observe, judge and act – there is a great deal of variation within that process between people in the same situation. This variation is driven by our individual differences. We have different expectations, needs, wants, personalities, styles, attitudes, education, values, morals, beliefs, learning, experiences, and physical and mental capabilities. All of the things that make us unique individual also assure we make different observations, judgments and actions.

These individual differences are key to human performance. When they are understood and valued they are a source of innovation, creativity and performance. When they are not they are a source of unproductive conflict that damages relationships and minimizes performance.

Valuing differences in observations allows us to develop a larger and more detailed database for making our judgments. The world is extremely complex. In the activity where I have people write down what they observed in a room, the reality is there is an infinite amount of information in every room. From the macro level (tables) to the micro level (scratches on each table) to the molecular level (atoms) there is more information in any one room than we could ever observe in a lifetime. The chances of anyone person gathering all the data at any one of these levels is virtually nil.

But, because of our differences, we can build lists to come up with a more detailed database. If the room in our example was a quality problem, we could create a tremendous database for problem solving by building one list from all of the individual lists. In a situation where no one person can have all the information, our differences assure that as a group we will have access to more information than any one individual within that group. If we were all the same, we would have one list, and one view of the quality problem. But the fact that we are different means we will have different lists, and a better understanding of that quality problem when we share out lists with each other.

We make different judgments about people because we have developed different criteria based on our life experience. If we have had communications problems with our boss in

the past, communications will show up high on our list of criteria. If a boss's support has been critical to our success in the past, being supportive will be high on our lists of criteria. When we share our lists of criteria we are learning and benefiting from everyone's experience, both good and bad. Benefiting from each other's learning increase our chances of success and reduces our need to re-discover what other have already learned. By sharing our lists of criteria we can make better and more accurate judgments about people.

We make different judgments about situations because we have different logic; if we share that logic we can make better judgment about situations. Logic is how we organize out thoughts to make a conclusion. The following is a logical syllogism: "All blonds are dumb. May is a blonde, therefore Mary is dumb". As this logical argument demonstrates, we can be logical and wrong. Logic is not a guarantee of being right. In fact many times people use logic to rationalize something they want to do rather than to determine the right thing to do. Building lists of our logical conclusions allows us to avoid rationalizing and increase the odds of finding the right logic to drive our judgment of a situation.

The difference in our observations and judgments assures that we will choose different actions, even in the same situation. When we build lists, we develop a range of actions that is typically beyond what any one individual may see. The more alternatives we have, the better our chance of finding the right thing and the best thing to do.

It is what is different about you – your different observations, judgments and actions - that make us more successful. When we share our different lists we learn from each other and we spark innovation and creativity. Access to other people's lists often changes our thinking and opens up ideas and possibilities that were unavailable to us before. If we think of our own lists as our personal box, than sharing our lists gets us thinking outside the box.

The Down Side of Differences

When we fail to understand and value individual differences it often results in unproductive conflict that reduces performance and damages work relationships. Instead of valuing differences and building lists, we often get sidetracked into arguments about who is right that lead us into an unproductive conflict.

One example of this phenomenon is arguing over opinions. The argument starts when each person presents their case in support of their opinion. Both opinions are based on different observations, criteria and logic, therefore each sees the wisdom in their own opinion, but fails to see the "logic and wisdom" behind the others. Therefore neither side is typically swayed in this first exchange. They listen to each other, but as they listen they are thinking - "Ya, but that is wrong!"

Because they are arguing and not building lists, neither side is able to prove themselves right, so they do the next best thing – they try to prove the other person is wrong. Since every action or opinion will have strengths and weaknesses, arguments against any opinion are easy constructed by anecdotally focusing on the weaknesses of the other

person's opinion. This selective use of information typically gets an emotional response as each side feels they are being "set up" by the other.

Unable to resolve their conflicts both parties now turn to others for support. This forces others to become involved in the conflict by choosing up sides. If the arguments gets intense, and it often does, it creates a situation where there is no middle ground, you are either for us or against us, but you can't sit on the fence. It is not unusual for an argument over opinions between two individuals to divide an entire work group into opposing camps.

When looked at objectively and rationally, these arguments over opinions make no sense at all. People have different opinions because they have different observations, criteria, logic and intentions. I demonstrate this point in class by asking how many people routinely say things so that other people will really think you are dumb – people seldom raise their hand. Then I ask them how many of them have ever listened to somebody and the first thought that crossed their mind was – that's dumb! Typically everyone raises his or her hand. It is not that other people are dumb; it is that you just don't yet understand the database, criteria, and logic they used to reach their opinion.

When we fail to understand and value differences it not only creates unproductive conflict that damages work relationships; but it blocks out other possibilities. When two people are busy arguing over "A" vs. "B" they block out the ability to see other alternatives that may be better than either A or B. They fail to realize that it is what's different about you that make us more successful.

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