Chapter 2:
Interpersonal Learning

"Oh wad some power the giftie gie us,
To see ourselves as others see us!"
Robert Burns

What is "Interpersonal Learning"?

There is a difference between personal learning and interpersonal learning. Personal learning is individual and can occur when I am alone through reflection and introspection. Personal learning focuses on developing a better understanding of my own motivations, needs, the influences of my past in shaping who I've become, and who I consider myself to be in the present (identity issues). Personal learning asks "why" and "what" questions — e.g., "Why did I have that reaction to so-and-so?" "Why do I consider myself a difficult person to be around?" "What do I really want from this course, this colleague, and why do I want it?" I might even enhance my personal learning by reading a book or talking to someone else about, say, my motives for doing such-and-such. But this kind of learning does not require the presence of another to be maximally effective.

Interpersonal learning, on the other hand, focuses on "how" questions: how I influence others, how I handle conflict, how I get my needs met (all the interpersonal competencies listed in the preceding chapter.) Interpersonal learning, to be most effective, does have to involve others. Learning how to learn with others, how to build effective interpersonal relationships and teams is not just about how to deal with people interpersonally, but the very process of learning involves others. It is virtually impossible to develop interpersonal competencies by oneself. This is because "we need others to know ourselves."

We Need Others in Order to Know Ourselves

There is an interesting paradox in that it takes two to know one. That is, in order for me to understand myself, I need you! This is due to the following three-fold distinction:

There is a part of me that I am the expert in my needs, motives, and intentions.

There is a part of me that is public; known to both (behavior). Behavior can be verbal or non-verbal; silence or inaction is also a form of behavior.
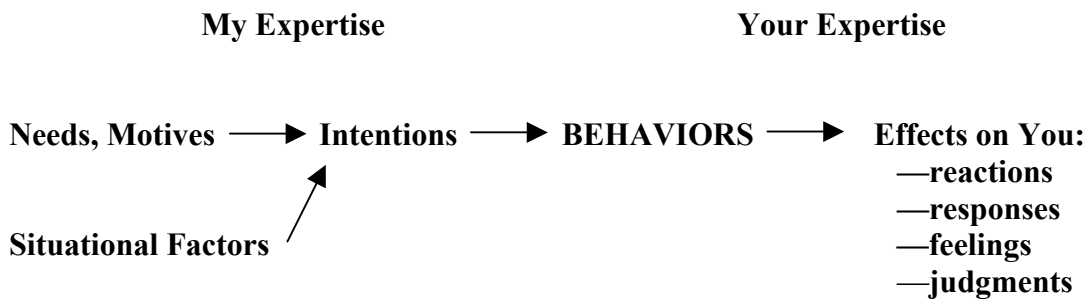
There is part of me that you are expert in (the effects of my behavior on you).

Figure 1 illustrates the premise that there are at least two realities: "What I know about myself "and "What you know about me." In terms of the former, even though I might

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fool myself at times, I am the one most aware of my needs and motives. These (plus the situational influences) lead me to intend to behave in a certain way.   Needs, motives and intentions are the parts that I am expert on myself. For example, I'm the only one who knows why I just gave you a compliment— you may wonder about my motives — ("Should I take that at face value? Is she/he trying to score points with me somehow? Is she attracted to me? Does he want something from me?") — but I'm the only one who really knows my motive.

Behavior is the only part that is public to both; it is the only thing that can be seen. Remember that even if I were to describe my feelings or intentions, that is still (verbal) behavior.

Figure 1. THE INTERPERSONAL CYCLE

| **My Expertise** | | **Your Expertise** |

Needs, Motives ⟶ Intentions ⟶ BEHAVIORS ⟶ Effects on You:
    —reactions
    —responses
Situational Factors ↗   —feelings
    —judgments

What I don't know about myself is how my behavior affects you. That is, does it have the outcome that I intend?   In the example above, I gave you the compliment because I wanted you to know that I admired what you did, because I could never have done it. Did my admiration register with you? In addition, does it have some costs that I do not intend? I never intended nor do I know, unless you tell me, that you wondered about my motives for giving you a compliment. The effect or impact of my behavior is the part of me that you know best.

The effects can be many-fold. One effect, as in the case above, is your reaction and response — or lack of a response, which is a response! Second, in many cases, you are also likely to have some feelings about what I said or did (more about that as the course goes on). Third, as our reactions increase over time, you build up impressions of me; you make judgments. The sum of these effects will influence the nature of our relationship.

Interpersonal learning is very inexact and error-prone

Interpersonal learning goes on all the time. In everyday interactions we have with people, we use others' responses, both verbal and nonverbal (facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, etc.) to gauge and modify how we behave with them. Yet despite the fact that we are constantly engaged in interpersonal learning, such learning is full of several kinds of ambiguity and error:

A. We don't get an (accurate) response.

People often disguise or distort their reactions to us, for fear of hurting us, looking silly themselves, or because of injunctions such as "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all" or "Don't say anything you might later regret" "Be diplomatic." It is difficult to decipher the signal to know the real meaning when we aren't given all the information.

B. Even when we know the outcome is not positive, we may not be sure what   that is due to.

 It is difficult to determine how much of someone's negative response to us is really a statement about them ("He's having a really bad day today and that's why he got mad at me") or a statement about us ("He's right —I was inconsiderate"). In the confusion about where to draw the line between what belongs to us and what belongs to the other, i.e., where we stop and the other person starts, we can take on things that aren't really ours, or conversely, we can too quickly reject the learning that is there for us in the feedback we're given.

C. We over-generalize from one or a few situations.

When we try to raise a difficult issue in a meeting or with a colleague and it doesn't turn out well, we are often inclined to say, "Well, I'll never do that again!" This overlooks the very real possibility that there may be other situations in which that same approach would be appropriate.

D. When we do get specific feedback, it can outlast its usefulness.

On those rare occasions in the past when we received concrete and specific feedback, it may have made such an impression that we sometimes continue to hold on to it as true when it no longer is. For example, a first boss who commented on an early work behavior that we worry about today, even though we long since stopped doing it, or a searing remark by a parent 15 years ago about how selfish we were, even though we have never heard similar remarks from intimate others since then.

Each of these factors contributes to our learning a clouded picture of ourselves. The fact that interpersonal learning is so inexact and error-prone in these ways also makes us tend toward "safer" and "more sanitized" disclosures in an effort to minimize the confusion and mistakes. That is, we err on the side of concealing more parts of ourselves than we might have to. This is apparent in that most people don't reveal much of themselves in the course of normal conversations, and certainly not parts that they have previously received negative feedback on.

Why is interpersonal learning so often distorted?

      A.   There is ambivalence on the part of the learner

As mentioned above, we frequently conceal certain parts of ourselves and present an image that may be different than who we really are (e.g., pretending that, as managers or students, we know what should be done when we don't, feeling we have to be cool when we feel anxious, etc.). Insofar as we hold parts of ourselves back, thus creating discrepancies, there can be concern about learning of our impact on others, because we will learn whether we've succeeded or not in our presented image. "What if that presented self isn't successful, isn't convincing?" "What is I've been fooling myself into thinking that I am seen a certain way, but in fact, I'm seen completely differently?" I may not want to know this.

I may also worry that accepting feedback will put me in a one-down position, and that I will be seen as less competent and less respected. Furthermore, there is the fear that accepting feedback may mean that "I will be forced to change. But what if I am not ready to or, even worse, what if I am unable to change in ways that others may want?"

      B.   There is ambivalence of the part of the other

For the person sharing "impact data" with us, there are concerns about what that impact says about them: "Jack will think I'm too thin-skinned, if I tell him about his impact on me." There are also worries that they'll hurt us or damage our relationship, or cause us to get really defensive and angry with them.

There is also a concern on the part of the other that "what is good for the goose may be good for the gander." Also "if I give you feedback, does that commit me to receiving it from you as well?"

      C.   It's the way we give feedback

When we move away from our own area of expertise (sharing with the other what their impact is on me) and go over into the other's expertise (their motives, intentions, etc.) when we are giving feedback, the interpersonal learning that occurs gets distorted. This is the focus of the next section.

The Implications of This Model

Part 1: Misusing the model hinders learning

First, it helps explain why <u>most feedback has low impact</u>. The problem is that most people don't stay with their expertise but, instead, move to their area of ignorance! How does this work? Most of us act like amateur psychologists in that we try to figure out why others act as they do. If you interrupt me (a behavior) and I feel annoyed (the effect on me), I try and understand why you would do that. So I make an attribution of your

motives (it must be that you are inconsiderate). This is a normal process because it allows me to make sense out of the world. Now with that label that I have hung around your neck, I can "understand other parts of your behavior.

As common as this attribution process is, it also can be dysfunctional. Note that my sense-making is a guess. That is my *hunch* as to why you act the way you do. I am "crossing over the net" from what is my area of expertise (that I am annoyed at your behavior), to your area of expertise (your motives and intentions). My imputation of your motives can always be debated, (You don't listen" "Yes, I do" "No you don't") whereas sticking with my own feelings and reactions is never debatable. ("I felt irritated by your interruption just now." "You shouldn't feel that way because I didn't mean to interrupt you." "Perhaps not, but I feel irritated nonetheless.")

Second, <u>most feedback creates or increases defensiveness</u>. Attribution-based feedback is very invasive. It is one thing for me to comment on your behavior, but it is a totally different thing to comment on your motives and intentions (your personality). The fact that I can be wrong and that I am invasive is what causes much of the defensiveness around receiving feedback. Another reason why interpretations cause defensiveness is that they tend to over-simplify the situation ("you act that way because you are insecure") and we all hate to be reduced to someone else's formula.

Third, crossing over the net <u>encourages us to hold back and collect data on the other person</u> because we are (understandably) afraid that our attributions may be wrong. Not only does a lot of time pass before we say anything about our experience, but we also begin to "build a case" and our conclusions harden as we begin to selectively hear things that confirm our assumptions and conclusions.

Yet most of the feedback that occurs in organizations "crosses over the net." Think of what is commonly said (in performance appraisals and in confrontations). "You don't listen" "You want to empire build" "You only think of your area" "You don't want to be a team player" "You just want to have your way and dominate" "You are scared of conflict" "You don't want to confront the boss" and so on. All of these are guesses as to the other's intentions and motives.

Part 2: Using the model facilitates interpersonal learning

The interpersonal model, when used appropriately, provides clues as to what produces effective learning. This has several aspects:

(a) If Person **B** stays on his/her side of the net, that <u>feedback is always accurate</u> as a statement of the effect of **A's** behavior on **B**. Note that we are **not** saying that feedback is how **Person A** is (that's one reality). What we are speaking to is Robert Burn's observation of understanding how others react to us.

(b) If staying on our own side of the net means that feedback is always accurate, then <u>one can give feedback very early in the relationship</u> because **Person B** is likely to have

reactions from the very beginning. Conversely, if feedback is on **how you are**, then I need to hold back and collect a lot of data. Going back to the example above, if **Person A** interrupts and this annoys **B** and **B** *feel discounted*, those are real feelings irrespective of what **Person A** intends. **B** can share those feelings as long as s/he sticks with describing the reactions and not as indictments of the other person.

(c) How can **Person A** and **B** to be open about their needs and reactions, this works best when there is a <u>climate supportive of risk-taking and openness</u>. Thus, learning does not occur in a vacuum. People need to know that if they disclose more, they will not be rejected and that if they listen to feedback, they will not be forced to change.

(d) This model of interpersonal learning works best <u>when it provides choices</u>, not when it coerces change. If people do not know the impact of their behavior, then they have no systematic way to change. It is only when they understand the impact that meaningful change can occur.

This is important because it is likely that our behavior affects different people in different ways. Thus, there is no one perfect way to be that will satisfy everybody. But if one can build a learning climate (in our relationships, in the groups that we belong to), then I can collect the information that I need about how my behavior is affecting you, and you, and you. That allows us to engage in some joint problem-solving about how we can interact to be most productive.

It may be that it will require only a slight change in my behavior. Or it might be that your knowing my intentions, decreases the negative effect of my behavior. (So if you know that my interruptions are due to my eagerness, not to disrespect, maybe you won't be so bothered.)

It is this learning and joint problem-solving that can allow people to more quickly build the sort of relationships that we said in Chapter 1 are crucial for today's organizations.   It allows learning to be specific to that relationship.

(e) <u>The more Person A can express, the more that there is for **B** to respond to</u>. Even though silence is a behavior, it reveals much less about A than overt actions.   We said that feedback based on interpretations tends to create defensiveness.   Few of us like to be "psyched out" by others.   Unfortunately, the more we hold back, the greater the vacuum there is for others to read in and (mis)interpret out motives and intentions.

A corollary to this point is that the more my behavior is "really me", the more valuable the feedback will be.   Conversely, the more that I play a role, give the socially desirable response, hold back my true feelings and concerns, the more that the feedback will be on my presented image, rather than on me.

But can't I learn from observation?

We clearly do learn from observing others. But note that also follows the Interpersonal Cycle. While we don't know the other's motives or intentions, we do observe the behavior and we note either our reactions and/or see the reactions of others. On the bases of either of those reactions, we may make the decision to show, or never show that set of behaviors.

This can be valuable as a way to increase the range of behaviors that we would consider enacting. How others act provide us with new possibilities. But there are limitations to this form of learning unless it is also coupled with direct feedback from others. The key question is will our acting that new way have the same impact? It is not just *what* we do, but also *how* we do it. We observe Charley confronting Mary and it having a positive outcome, but maybe the way we do it won't appear as genuine and therefore have negative results.

This is not to say that we shouldn't observe and learn from others. But then it is important to adapt that to our style, try it out and directly collect the data as to how others react.

What R374 is about?

Interpersonal Dynamics is basically about "learning how to learn from others." It is about how to express more of ourselves, how to give and receive feedback in a constructive way, and how to build the appropriate interpersonal and group climate.

The course is less about *giving up behavior* and more about *increasing our repertoire* of how we act. Most of us get into trouble because we **overuse our strengths** (more about that later.) Most of us have the potential to act with a wider range of skills than we presently show.

Third, this course is about *learning how to be more ourselves*. Each of us is unique and it is that uniqueness that is a strength. "Playing a role" is usually less effective than being ourselves. In this course, each of us will take the risk of being more ourselves and learning how that impacts others.

Finally, this course is about *having choices*. We often think that others "do things to us" and that we have no option but to go along (or leave). We will discover all the choice points we have (including what use we make of feedback) and how to wisely make those choices