

THE EFFECT OF AFFECT



What the boss believes about us actually influences our ability to be productive. In turn, our perspective affects our subordinates. Consider long-term strategies for staying steady even in the face of criticism.

"What we observe is not nature itself,
but nature exposed to our method of questioning."
– Werner Heisenberg, physicist

"You should have seen Karen; smoke was coming out of her ears," Jerry told his rapt audience. "She was presenting right after Judith, who'd dazzled the group for more than an hour. The room was so small that Judith sat down right under Karen's nose. And just as Karen was building some momentum, Judith let out a loud descant of a yawn, tilted her chair and stretched like a large cat. Almost hit Karen in the face. Well, Karen was fit to be tied! Could have wrung Judith's neck. Daggers were shooting out of her eyes. 'How could she do this to me?' Karen thought.

We're not doing this story justice. Jerry is a gifted entertainer; as he told this tale, folks were laughing so hard that they literally couldn't catch a breath. Just one problem: Jerry got it wrong. Yes, Judith did yawn hugely. And, yes, Karen did glance at her. Even so, Karen wasn't angry. Startled, yes. Concerned about audience reaction, yes. But the internal dialogue Jerry described existed entirely in *his* head.

As Jerry performed, Karen wanted to laugh along with everyone else, except for one thing. Jerry's beliefs about her are so strong that they actually influence her behavior. Normally witty and insightful, Karen becomes somber, dull, unimaginative with Jerry.

"When Jerry talks about me, I'm dumbfounded," Karen groans. "He's so wrapped up in his picture that I don't feel that he can actually hear or see me. But the real kicker is that when I'm around Jerry, I find myself fumbling and mumbling. I don't even recognize myself!"

This phenomenon reflects a central concept of quantum physics: that the presence of an observer changes the nature of the observed. If the physicists have got it right, if it's indeed impossible to observe a thing without changing it, imagine how much impact one person's perspective can have on another person's performance! Translated to work, that means that what the boss believes about us influences our ability to be productive; and our perspective changes our subordinates, as well. Our affect has an effect.

Imagine yourself in a discussion trying to surface solutions to a marketing problem. George brings up off-the-wall questions and ideas, on a track different from that followed by everyone else. The senior person in the group rolls his eyes, shrugs his shoulders, doesn't even acknowledge that he's heard George, and turns to someone

else. As the meeting goes on, George's voice skies higher; he feels awkward and eventually clams up.

But what if George has been invited to the meeting because he has a special expertise? The leader looks upon him with respect. When George says something "different," the leader reflects on it; asks George questions with a desire to be taught; carefully records George's suggestions.

George's knowledge base is the same in both situations. But because the first leader doesn't believe that George can make a worthwhile contribution, George is thrown off balance. The manager's concern is proved: George doesn't perform well in that situation. But he's a hero in the second meeting. It's not that the second leader is fooled by a title or a resume; rather, that manager's regard makes it easy for George to keep his bearings. He's able to sustain calm confidence, the platform from which he can access resources of innate intelligence.

"The 'anointed' in organizations, those high flyers who move quickly through the ranks, are given at least some of their wings through our desire to observe them as winners," notes Margaret J. Wheatley in *Leadership and the New Science*. "We endow their ideas and words with more credibility. We entrust them with more resources and better assignments. We have already decided that they will succeed, so we continually observe them with the expectation that they will confirm our beliefs."

But this is more than an "emperor's new clothes" scenario, a form of self-hypnosis in which the group sees only what they've been told to expect. More important than third-party delusion is what happens inside us. Specifically, we need to be aware, and wary, when our feelings of insecurity have been triggered. In such situations, the conventional response is to put on our mental/emotional armor and forge ahead. We may make progress in the short term, but armoring is ultimately an unsatisfactory strategy. In order to feel invulnerable, we cut ourselves off from being touched by others, which simultaneously clamps down our connection to the wellspring of insight, intuition, ingenuity.

So the key question is: how can we remain steadfast in the face of criticism or contempt; how can we stay grounded while remaining open to the feelings of others? First, we need to remember that any interaction actually embraces no less than three conversations: (1) what each of us says to the other; (2) what is being "said" in the other person's thinking; 3) what we are "saying" to ourselves through our thoughts.

Approach relationship-building by acknowledging that you can never assume the content of the other person's thinking, and by constantly checking in with your internal dialogue. In addition to your specific thoughts, "She must think I'm crazy;" "Now I'm cookin'!" "What should I say?" notice your mental tone. Nervous? Confident? Excited? Fearful?

That may be hard to do when you're caught up in a heated debate. But your body gives you clues. Is your voice changing, perhaps higher in pitch, louder, faster or swallowed back in your throat? Is your breathing fast or shallow, or are you actually holding your breath? Are you tapping your finger or shaking your leg?

In short, learn to recognize the physical clues that you are being pulled emotionally off-balance. Countering habitual actions can help short-circuit thought reflexes. In other words, consciously changing behaviors can remind us to avoid "autopilot" reactions. Then, we can access our wisdom and common sense. For example, Betsy reflected on meetings that left bruised feelings; even if she'd gotten what she wanted,

she'd blown her cool and was left with a bad taste. She noticed that in some meetings she'd lean forward in her chair. That happened when someone hit on a sensitive area; Betsy realized that her mind would speed up, running defensive arguments round and round as the other people were talking. So now when things begin to escalate, Betsy consciously sits back in her chair. That simple action helps her stay at a level of consciousness in which she is better able to sustain the right tone and make appropriate responses.

The practice of body-awareness can also turn outward. Take note of your subordinates' physical clues. Are their shoulders and arms hunched tight or hanging loose? Are their eyebrows drawn together and jaw clenched? Is their voice high and thin? Are they giggling in quick jerks? Or do their words resonate, punctuated by laughter that comes from deep in the belly? Such signs telegraph whether they are off-balance and, therefore, tentative. Or grounded and confident.

Once you are conscious of subordinates' behaviors, turn your attention to the effect of your affect. That is: what does your attitude toward others bring out in them? If your tone is sharp, brusque, dismissive, you're unlikely to get good quality thinking from subordinates. But if you maintain a stance of curiosity, consideration, warmth, you may be amazed how suddenly wise and creative other people have become!

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