# 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 and interpersonal learning. Personal learning occurs through reflection and introspection when I am alone. Personal learning focuses on developing a better understanding of the motivations, needs, and past events that shape 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 or colleague, and why do I want it?". I can enhance my personal learning by reading a book or talking to someone else. However, this kind of learning does not require the presence of another person to be maximally effective.

Interpersonal learning, on the other hand, focuses on "how" questions – e.g., "How can I influence others?"; "How can I handle conflict?"; "How can I get my needs met?" (all the interpersonal competencies listed in the preceding chapter). Interpersonal learning must involve others to be effective. Learning how to learn with others, build rich interpersonal relationships, and form effective teams cannot occur in isolation. The very process of learning involves others. It is virtually impossible to develop interpersonal competencies by oneself. This is because we need others in order to know ourselves.

## We Need Others in Order to Know Ourselves

Paradoxically, 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 and known to both of us: behavior. Behavior can be verbal or non-verbal, and silence and inaction are also forms of behavior.

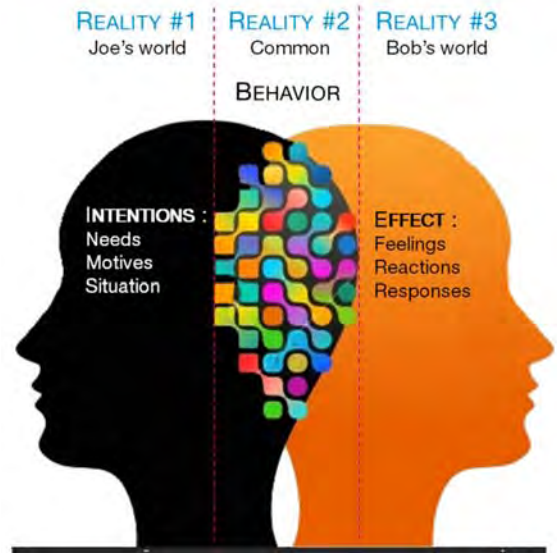
There is part of me that you are the expert in: the effects of my behavior on you.

Figure 1 illustrates the idea that there are at least two realities: "What I know about myself" and "What you know about me." I am the one most aware of the former; my needs and motives. These, along with

situational influences, lead me to intend to behave in a certain way. I am the expert in my needs, motives and intentions. For example, I am 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 am the only one who really knows what my motive is.

Behavior is the only reality that is known to both of us because it can be seen. Remember, if I describe my feelings or intentions, that would be (verbal) behavior.

***Figure 1. The Interpersonal Cycle***




What I do not know about myself is the way my behavior affects you. That is, does my behavior have the outcome that I intend? In the example above, I gave you a compliment because I wanted you to know that I admired what you did because I could never have done it myself. Did you sense my genuine admiration for you? In addition, does it have any costs that I did not intend? I never intended, nor will I know, unless you tell me, that you questioned 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 of my behavior can be many-fold. One effect, like that 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 feelings about what I said or did (more about that as the course goes on). Third, as we interact over time, you will build up impressions of me and make judgments about me. The sum of these effects will influence the nature of our relationship.

## Interpersonal learning is very inexact and error-prone

Interpersonal learning happens all the time. In our everyday interactions with people, we use their responses, verbal and nonverbal (facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, etc.), to gauge and modify how we behave with them. Unfortunately, interpersonal learning is prey to ambiguity and error.

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

People often disguise or distort their reactions to us for fear of hurting us, looking silly, or because of injunctions such as "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all"; "Don't say anything you might later regret"; "Be diplomatic", etc. It is difficult to uncover the real meaning behind another person's reaction when we are not given all the information.

**We may not understand what causes other people's negative reactions to our behavior.**

It is difficult to determine whether another person's negative response to our behavior is a reflection of that person ("He is having a really bad day today and that is why he got mad at me"), or a reflection of us ("He is right —I was inconsiderate"). This ambiguity about where to draw the line between ourselves and others in negative interpersonal interactions may cause us to mistakenly take responsibility for negative outcomes, or conversely, we may become defensive and reject the valuable information others give us about ourselves in these situations.

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

For example, when we raise difficult issues in meetings or with colleagues and things do not turn out well, we are often inclined to say, "Well, I'll never do that again!" This approach causes us to overlook situations where the same approach may have been more appropriate and effective.

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

On the rare occasion we receive concrete, specific feedback, it may make such a strong impression on us that we continue to believe it is true when it no longer is. For example, if our first boss made a disparaging comment about our work style years ago, we may still worry about this today, even though we no longer have the same work style. Or, if a parent made a searing remark fifteen years ago about how selfish we are, we may believe ourselves to be selfish even though none of our other close friends and family have ever made the same remark.

Each of these factors causes us to paint clouded pictures of ourselves. Further, because interpersonal learning is so inexact and error-prone, we tend to make safer and more sanitized disclosures to others in an effort to minimize confusion and mistakes. That is, we probably conceal more of ourselves than we have to. This is apparent in that most people do not reveal much of themselves in the course of normal conversations, and certainly nothing that has drawn negative feedback from others in the past.

## Why is interpersonal learning so often distorted?

**There is ambivalence on the part of the learner.**

As mentioned above, we frequently conceal parts of ourselves and present an image to others that may differ from the people we really are (e.g., pretending to know what to do when we don't, feeling we have to appear cool when we feel anxious, etc.). When we conceal ourselves and create discrepancies between our real selves and the image we portray to others, the feedback we receive from others will help us learn whether we have succeeded or not in presenting an image of ourselves. This may be troubling. We may wonder, "What if the image I present is not successful or convincing?"; "What if I have been fooling myself into thinking that I am seen a certain way, when in fact, I am seen completely differently?" We may not want to know the answers to these questions.

When we accept feedback, we may worry that we will be put in a subordinate position to the person giving the feedback, be seen as less competent, and be less respected as a result. Furthermore, we may fear that accepting feedback may mean that we will be forced to change. What if we are not ready, or, even worse, unable to change in the ways others want?

**There is ambivalence on the part of the other.**



People who share feedback with us are often concerned about how the feedback reflects on them (e.g., "Jack will think I am too sensitive if I tell him about his impact on me"). They may also worry that they will hurt us, damage our relationship, or make us defensive and angry.

They may also be concerned that, by giving feedback, they are giving us license to give them feedback as well. They may not want to receive negative feedback from us.

**The way we give feedback is problematic.**

When we move away from our area of expertise (sharing how others impact us) and shift to the others' expertise (their motives, intentions, etc.) when we are giving feedback, interpersonal learning gets distorted. This is the focus of the next section.

# The Implications of This Model

**Part 1: Misusing the model hinders learning**

The model helps explain why *most feedback has low impact.* The problem is that most people do not speak from their area of expertise but, instead, speak from their area of ignorance! How does this happen? Most of us act like amateur psychologists: we try to figure out why others act the way 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. I decide to attribute your behavior to your motives and intentions (you are inconsiderate). This is a normal process because it allows me to make sense of the world. Now with that label that I have hung around your neck, I can "understand" your other behaviors.

This attribution process is common, but it can be dysfunctional. My sense-making is a guess or a hunch. I am "crossing over the net" from my area of expertise (that I am annoyed at your behavior) to your area of expertise (your motives and intentions). My guess about your motives can always be debated, *("You don't listen" "Yes, I do" "No you don't")* whereas my own feelings and reactions are 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, *most feedback causes or increases defensiveness.* 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). Most defensiveness in reaction to attribution-based feedback occurs because this type of feedback is invasive and because we may be wrong about others' intentions. Attribution-based feedback also causes defensiveness because it is usually an over-simplification of 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 *encourages us to hold back and collect data on the other person* 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, we also begin to "build a case" and our conclusions harden as we begin to selectively hear things that confirm our assumptions and conclusions.

Despite the dysfunctional nature of this type of feedback, most of the feedback that occurs in organizations "crosses over the net." Think about the feedback you usually encounter in an organization (e.g., in performance appraisals and 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. Each of these statements is a guess about another person's intentions and motives.

**Part 2: Using the model facilitates interpersonal learning**

The interpersonal model provides clues about how to learn effectively when it is used appropriately. There are several important aspects of the model:

a. If Person *B* stays on his/her side of the net, his/her *feedback is always an accurate statement* about the effect of *A's* behavior on *B*. Note that we are *not* saying that the feedback reflects on *Person A's* motives or intentions for the behavior. Staying on our side of the net helps us learn how we truly react to one another.

b. If, because *Person B* stays on his/her side of the net, his/her feedback is always accurate, then *Person B can give feedback very early in his/her relationship* with *Person A* because *Person B* is likely to have reactions from the very beginning of the relationship. Conversely, if *Person B* has feedback *about how Person A is*, then he/she needs to hold back and collect a lot of data over time. If *Person A* interrupts *Person B* and this annoys *B* and makes him/her *feel discounted*, *Person B's* feelings are real irrespective of what *Person A* intended. *B* can share those feelings as long as he/she sticks to describing his/her reactions and does not cross over the net.

c. How can *Person A* and *B* be open about their needs and reactions? This works best when there is a *climate that supports risk-taking and openness.* People need to feel that if they disclose things about themselves, they will not be rejected, and that if they listen to feedback, they will not be forced to change.

d. The model of interpersonal learning works best *when it provides choices*, not when it coerces change. If people do not know the impact of their behavior on others, they have no way to change. It is only when they understand their impact that meaningful change can occur.

It is likely that our behavior affects different people in different ways. Thus, there is no single perfect way to behave that will satisfy everybody. But if we can build a safe learning climate (in our relationships, in the groups that we belong to), we can collect the information we need about how our behavior is affecting others. That allows us to engage in some joint problem-solving about how we can interact with others to be most productive.

Becoming productive may require only a slight change in our behavior. Or it might be that when others know our intentions the negative effect of our behaviors decrease. (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 learned in Chapter 1 are crucial for today's organizations.

e. *The more Person A can express, the more that there is for B to respond to.* 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 opportunity there is for others to create their own (mis)interpretations of our motives and intentions.

Conversely, the more we play a role, give socially desirable responses, and hold back our true feelings and concerns, the more that others' feedback will be focused on our presented self-images, rather than our true selves.

## But can't I learn from observation?

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A corollary to this point is that the more our behavior is "really us", the more valuable others' feedback will be.

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We clearly learn from observing others. But learning from observing others is also part of the Interpersonal Cycle. While we do not know others' motives or intentions, we can observe their behavior and note our reactions and/or the reactions of others. On the bases of either of those reactions, we can decide whether or not to engage in those behaviors.

Observing others can be valuable because it can *increase the range of behaviors* that we consider enacting. The way others behave provides us with new possibilities. But there are limitations to this form of learning when it is not coupled with direct feedback from others. The key question is, *when we behave in new ways, will our actions have the same effects as they did when*

*we observed them in others?* It is not just *what* we do, but also *how* we do it. We may observe Charley confront Mary and see that this behavior has a positive outcome. However, it is possible that when we confront another person, we will not appear as genuine and therefore the confrontation will end badly.

This is not to say that we should not observe and learn from others. But it is also important to adapt new behaviors to our style, try them out, and directly collect the data about how others react to these new behaviors.

## What OB374 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 appropriate interpersonal and group climates.

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

Third, this course is about *learning how to be our true selves*. Each of us is unique and our uniqueness gives us strength. "Playing a role" is usually less effective than being ourselves. In this course, each of us will take the risk of showing our true selves 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 choices we have (including what use we make of feedback) and how to wisely make those choices