

LIMglobal.net

Dear Reader,

Here comes a Stop-Reflect. Take a moment and go through your day, let's say yesterday. How much time of your waking time did you spend interacting with others? (This refers to face-to face interactions, phone conversations, email exchanges. It also includes driving, as you have to interact with others on the road.)

Ready? Now, after deducting your "interaction" time, how much of the time remaining did you spend thinking of your interactions with others, be it reviewing your conversations, planning, analyzing, debating with yourself about how to handle a future interaction, anticipating other people's reactions? You may be surprised to realize what a big portion of your life is involved in interactions with others. How well are we prepared for it? In school we learn geography, math, language, science. In college we can learn about technology, business, law, accounting, economy, politics. But unless we enroll in behavioral, social sciences, or theological studies, we hear little about how human interactions work, how we humans work. Maybe it's time to review our school syllabus...

This month we address the important topic of human interactions. We hope you find it interesting! Enjoy the reading!

Isabel Rimanoczy
Editor

Quote of the Month

Los Recuerdos

*Los recuerdos suelen
Contarte mentiras
Se amoldan al viento
Amañan la historia
Por aquí se encogen
Por allá se estiran
Se tiñen de Gloria
Se bañan en lodo
Se endulzan, se amargan
A nuestro acomodo
Según nos convenga
Porque antes que nada
Y a pesar de todo
Hay que sobrevivir*

Memories

*Memories tend
to tell lies
they adapt to the wind
they amend history
Here they shrink
There they expand
they color themselves in glory
They bathe in dirt
They become sweet, they become bitter
to fit our needs
more appropriately
Because first and foremost
and despite everything
we must survive.*

*Fragment from "Los Recuerdos"
- Lyrics and music by Spanish artist Joan Manuel Serrat -*

LIM NEWS



20 YEARS developing your leaders while they develop your business

Issue 74

The LIM Newsletter

October 2006

Interactions

By Isabel Rimanoczy

If we compare the time spent responding to problems caused by human behaviors with time spent addressing technical problems, we might be surprised by how much more effort the human interactions demand of our energy and time.

For many years I have been reflecting on this issue. How are we humans prepared to deal with others? How much do we know, what have we learned about our mechanisms for perceiving, organizing information, making meaning, reacting? Early philosophers realized the enigma of behavior, giving it special attention, and even recommending "Know Thyself"^[1]. Contemporary adult development programs increasingly offer "self awareness" as one of their components. Leadership and teamwork training, diversity programs, negotiation courses, conflict management sessions, change management workshops - all these introduce elements of psychology to help participants understand behaviors, their own and those of others, in order to have better personal interactions.

Interactions and the role of perception

Perception lies at the heart of all human interaction and there are many theories about it in the field of psychology. Perception, in one definition, is the process of paying attention to, interpreting, and organizing sensory information. There are different methods of studying perception, ranging from biological or physiological to psychological. Perception is our way of "making meaning": people interpret stimuli from their environment so that they can respond appropriately ^[2].

Initially understood as the way to construe an external reality, this interpretation was based on the positivist paradigm that there is a reality out there that we can, more or less accurately, know. More recent psychological studies refer to perception as a process whereby individuals actively construct meaning. This post-modern understanding is based on the belief that there is not one objective, 'true'

reality, but rather that individuals construct narratives, based on social, cultural, personal, ethnical, biological, economic, and gender related factors. Shared narratives become a shared version of "reality".

From this perspective, we don't simply react to some clear stimuli that we perceive. We are constantly surrounded by an immense number of stimuli, and we can not possibly pay attention to all of them. These include cars driving by, people talking, birds or dogs, machines, body sensations like our pulse, breathing, stomach juices, the touch of the computer keys under our fingertips, the smell of a cleaning spray, the taste of our last coffee, the toolbars surrounding our computer screen, the objects on the desk, not to mention memories that jump out of nowhere. So to begin with, in a fast and unconscious way we select from among all these stimuli which ones we will pay attention to.

Now this selection is made following some automatic criteria: without us being aware of it, a **habit** will make us skip a stimulus (for example, we are used to see certain objects on our desk, so we no longer "see" them until we need one of them). Our **knowledge** also impacts our selection: as it has been said in a classical example, the Eskimos are able to recognize dozens of different types of snow, while someone without that knowledge would just perceive one thing - snow. Our **personal preferences**, related to our personality, history and experiences, also impact our unconscious selection: we may rapidly detect someone smoking whether we like or dislike it; we may notice weight loss in others if this is something meaningful for us, or frowning gestures from the audience when we are anxious about a presentation we are making.

But then, in addition to those selection filters, we also implement unconscious criteria that are meant to **protect** us - to protect our self concept, our image, and our identity. I should say, "unconscious criteria are at work", as "we" don't really have control over them when they happen. Like the functioning of our liver, "we" don't really have an active role in leading the process, although it can be helpful to understand how the liver operates.

Our defense mechanisms

Our 'self' wishes to be protected from eventual threats, especially situations that question our competency (our ability to do things right) or to be worthy of love (appreciation, recognition) ^[3]. We experience this in our need to show consistency in what we say or do, to stay in control of situations, to maintain a respectable image, to "save face", to abide by what we consider are expectations others have of us. These are very powerful motivations, and to honor them, our automatic, unconscious mechanisms protect us through some other perceptive tricks.

One category of those defense mechanisms corresponds to **denial**. Denial helps a person to reject something that could be unpleasant, painful, embarrassing, unacceptable, something that threatens harmony, wellbeing or self concept.

One way to implement denial is through **omission**. It is easy to "forget" something that puts us into an unpleasant situation. Forgetting an appointment for example can be a momentary solution to avoid a meeting that we anticipate will be difficult.

Another way through which denial acts is through **minimization**. When a situation can create anxiety, we react by minimizing it. This allows us to keep our balance, to protect ourselves for a little longer. We have different ways of minimizing the importance of something that could be

unpleasant: we make jokes, ridicule it, give it an optimistic interpretation.

Rejection is the most explicit form of denial: We push an idea or a situation away from us, we declare it inexistent, false, wrong; we dismiss it as unrealistic, a misperception. If a merger threat is on the office grapevine, we may avoid the anxiety of losing our job by rejecting the rumors as false.

Projecting onto others is another very common form of denial, albeit one that is very difficult to acknowledge. In an unconscious process, we put on others our own unacceptable or unwanted thoughts or/and emotions. "I think you don't like the proposal our boss made", "she wants to compete with me", "they don't want me to speak up in meetings", "I'm doing it for you".

Another category of defense mechanisms is **generalization**. Through generalization we take a singular quality and assign it to a larger scope. Small amounts of information are used to draw conclusions about individuals. For example, if a person arrives late for two meetings, the generalized perception is that s/he is always late.

Stereotyping is a particular version of generalization. It occurs when we assign attributes to a person based solely on the other's membership in a particular demographic or social group, and talk about "the Muslims", or "the Americans", or "New Yorkers", or "the homeless"... One particularly dangerous form of stereotyping is *polarization*, when we unconsciously free ourselves from the discomfort of ambiguity, and divide the world into "good and evil", "young and old", "loyalty versus disloyalty". This apparent simplification provides us a momentary relief from anxiety in unclear situations. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr recently expressed in an interview on American Public Radio, ignorance is not as dangerous as applied ignorance. It is when we make decisions based on our ignorance that it becomes a problem^[4], and polarized interpretations are an example of it.

Another form of generalization is "**the halo effect**". Based on one attribute of an individual, we assign a variety of other attributes to the person. For example, to a person who dresses neatly we might also ascribe trustworthiness in meeting deadlines; a silent or serious individual might be seen as a good professional, or as someone who lives a boring life. The halo effect can apply to either creating a favorable or an unfavorable impression. The problem with halo effects is that we don't recognize them as such. As a consequence we are biased in our interactions, and, tangled in our interpretations we may be missing important information. In the best cases, a positive halo effect can work as a self-fulfilling prophecy; our positive perception can have the effect of instilling increased sense of self-worth in that person. If we trust a person because he lives in our building, we may set an implicit expectation towards his behavior that may lead him to act in a trustworthy way. But it can work the other way too. If we distrust a person because he is from, say, a different ethnic group or social class, the person may equally react to our lack of trust with a distant or unfriendly attitude.

Why is it important to know this?

Our habits, knowledge and personal preferences act as filters that determine what we hear, what we see and what meaning we make out of it. When we are facing challenging situations, it can be helpful to pause and examine the habits, knowledge and personal preferences that are influencing our perspectives and the alternatives we see. Secondly, to consider what may be the other person's filters helps us expand our understanding of the situation.

In a similar way, our omissions, minimizations, rejections or projections are important signposts that alert us when something significant is happening, and point to an area where our attention

should be directed. Rather than quickly moving on, if we would reflect on what may be behind an omission, we could get important information about how we are feeling about some specific challenges. Jokes also are a valuable signpost. We make jokes to dispense tension, because we are not comfortable in a tense atmosphere. We also use jokes to ridicule or minimize situations that we feel uneasy about, that we don't know how to cope with. Jokes are never casual. With that in mind, to ask ourselves why we made a joke can open a door to interesting data about our deeper assumptions of feelings. Sometimes it is said that to analyze is 'risky and destabilizing'. Much to the contrary, to glimpse into what is pushing us to act in a certain way will give us a wider understanding of ourselves, and therefore expanding our possibilities to control our lives.

Projections and rejections are more difficult to acknowledge, but paradoxically they are a even better mirror into ourselves. Just think for a moment of something that you deeply dislike about someone, and consider if that precise aspect is not something that you hate to see in yourself.

The more we are aware of our filters, the better we know ourselves. The more we are able to know ourselves, the more enlightened we will be in understanding our reactions, emotions and dilemmas. And as we become more tolerant and understanding we automatically change the way we interact with others. The dual benefits are that we are perceived in a different way by others, and we realize the complexity of those perceptive filters in other individuals. These psychological defense mechanisms are something that we all have, independent of our ethnical, cultural, social or other particular characteristics. These filters are things we share with all human nature. Isn't it about time we learned about them?



[1] The Ancient Greek aphorism "*Know thyself*" was inscribed in golden letters at the lintel of the entrance to the [Temple of Apollo](#) at [Delphi](#). The phrase has been attributed to at least five ancient Greek sages: [Chilon of Sparta](#), [Thales of Miletus](#), [Socrates](#), [Pythagoras](#), [Solon](#) of Athens. *Source: Wikipedia.com*

[2] For perception and its influence on negotiation, see Lewicki, Saunders, Barry and Minton (2004). *Essentials of Negotiation*. New York: McGraw Hill.

[3] For identity threats in connection to conflicts with others, see Stone, Patton, & Heen (1999) *Difficult conversations: How to discuss what matters most*. New York: Penguin Books.

[4] Nasr is University Professor of Religious Studies at George Washington University and the author of many books, including *Islam: Religion, History, and Civilization*.



LEADERSHIP IN INTERNATIONAL MANAGEMENT

© 2006 LIM. All Rights Reserved.

LIM News is published by LIM, Leadership in International Management
LLC

Editor: Isabel Rimanoczy - Editing Support: Tony Pearson

21205 Yacht Club Drive, Suite 708, Aventura, FL 33180 - USA - Ph/Fax:
(305) 692-4586
E-mail: newsletter@LIMglobal.net - www.LIMglobal.net