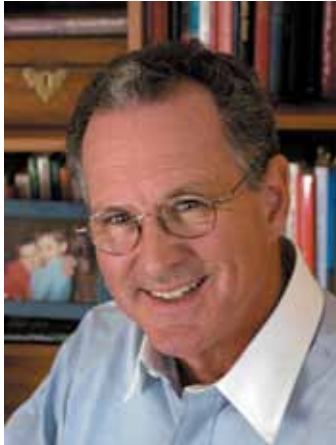


Self Reflection: by invitation only

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Self reflection that seeks out how one is contributing to the problem is very difficult to do when the focus is primarily on how others are behaving badly. This article explores what makes self reflection hard to do given the way we experience others' actions. When helping their clients, consultants encounter several pitfalls trying to get their clients to be self reflective. They can improve their chances by using certain techniques that do not demand, but invite self reflection on the part of their clients.

KEYWORDS: Self Reflection, Chris Argyris, Blaming, Action Learning, Defensiveness, Consulting

When a problem occurs, it is so much easier to look outside of ourselves for the cause, rather than looking within. After all, some person, team or department has done something to make your life difficult. Most of your mental activity is spent figuring out why they did what they did. It remains a problem “out there.”

Seeing the problem as external to one's own self is a hard perception to shake loose. When I intervene in a team conflict or crisis, I usually find everyone finding fault with another person's words or actions. The problem is defined as the “other guy.”

Any self reflection as to how one might be contributing to the difficulty at hand is as rare as an UFO sighting.

The greatest challenge I face, as a consultant, is helping someone stop pointing the finger of blame at someone else and instead examine his or her own thinking and behaviour. A willingness to be self-reflective is critical to the successful negotiation of working relationships. Thinking and acting differently depends on our ability to stand outside our own perspective in order to understand different points of view and gain insight into how others may be experiencing our actions.

Self reflection helps us to see how our interactions create results that no one desires or intends. Even in the situation where there is a bona fide example of a poor performer or an autocratic boss, what is often missed is what we do to either trigger or enable the identified problem behaviour. Self reflection that seeks out how one is contributing to the problem is very difficult to do when the focus is primarily on how others are behaving badly. In this article, I will explore two main reasons why *self reflection* is hard to do and what consultants do that either promotes or inhibits their client's chances of engaging in a self reflection process.

The Impact of Another's Actions

The ease to which we see others as the problem is due to how we experience the impact of their words and actions. When someone does or says something that creates difficulty, we feel the force of his or her action immediately. From this impact, we draw inferences or conclusions about what happened and why they did it.

For example, I was facilitating a meeting of a group of managers. At the end of the meeting, I conducted my usual check-out question designed to evaluate my performance. I asked:

Bill: Was there anything I said or did that either inhibited or promoted your learning during our session?

Manager: (raising his hand) Yeah, you attacked me the whole meeting.

I was taken back a bit, largely because I barely noticed his presence during the meeting. I asked him:

Bill: I am not aware that I was attacking you, so help me out here. What did I say or do during the meeting that led you to believe I was attacking you?

Manager: You kept poking your finger at me during the meeting.

Not aware of my gesture, I asked the group, "Did others notice that as well?" A number of participants confirmed the manager's perception that indeed, I was pointing my finger a lot, but that it didn't bother them. Clearly it had bothered the manager.

I acknowledged the impact of my actions by saying, "Yes, I understand now. If you kept seeing my finger pointing in your direction, I can reasonably understand how you would interpret it as singling you out."

That evening at home, I asked my wife, "Do I point with my finger a lot when I talk?" "Yes, you do," she said. "It is the teacher in you." Since then, to avoid that potential, unintended impact upon others, I keep my hands in my pockets or at my side when I speak in a group setting.

For this manager, my finger pointing led him to think he was being singled out. From this, he made several quick assumptions – what I was saying was being directed toward him and that I was critical of him. Based on these assumptions, he drew the conclusion that I was attacking him. While understandable, his final conclusion was inaccurate. Once we tested his inferences against others' interpretation of my

gesturing, he backed off his accusation. He admitted that it helped hearing my acknowledgement of how I contributed to his perception of being attacked.

The impact of an action says as much about the person on the receiving end of the action as it does about the person who initiated it. Understanding the impact of our actions upon each other requires attention to both parties' contribution: what is said or done and how it is received.

Quick Thinking

This example illustrates the second reason why one maintains the perception of the problem being "out there." Our reaction to the impact of another's actions is to draw a quick conclusion – one which may or may not be accurate. In particular, when the impact activates our internal sense of being threatened or potentially embarrassed, our conclusions not only occur instantaneously, they tend to be black or white. We go on to develop a host of explanations and theories that account for why the other person is so difficult. This thinking is not shared publicly with the other person, but kept private or confined to sympathetic listeners. When this happens, the chance of mistaken thinking increases. Without the benefit of any external verification or public testing, we can fool ourselves very easily.

A friend of mine came back from an Alcoholic Anonymous (AA) meeting once and related to me a popular AA slogan: *"Remember that your mind is like a dangerous neighbourhood. You are not to go in there alone or unarmed."* The slogan

remains a reminder that one can be mugged by false assumptions and erroneous perceptions.

The AA slogan does not communicate a message of "Don't think." The slogan does not say "Do not go into the neighbourhood." The analogy instructs us that we need help from others to see what we are unaware of and critical thinking skills capable of challenging our own thinking. We usually need the most help separating intent from the impact of someone's action upon us.

When we experience the impact of another person's actions as problematic, we quickly attribute negative intent on their part. Two of the most common negative intentions we assign others is malicious intent ("The person is out to get me") and pure self-interest ("She is only looking out for herself.") This seems to be the only reasonable explanation that can account for the behaviour.

The mental shift from assigning negative intent to registering the impact of the offending action is very difficult to do. Removing negative intent does not mean brushing off what the other said or did and excusing the person from his actions. The behaviour had an impact. The impact is what you want to raise in conversation. When registering the impact, start with the observable behaviour that had an impact on you. Paraphrase what the other person said or did and keep your paraphrase free of inference. Then describe the impact it had. "I am unsure as to what your intentions were, but when you said, I had X reaction.... Did I mishear you or did you intend something different than what I heard?"

A student of mine presented the following situation to me as a case study. Members of her team sat down with their director to raise the issue of inappropriate conduct on the part of another team member. After each person had shared their experiences, the director expressed his appreciation and stated his intent to look into the matter. He also requested that the information shared stay in the room.

In debriefing the meeting, I asked her:

Bill: "What did you say to him in response to his stated intention to look into the matter?"

Sheila: I asked him directly, "When will action be taken?"

He responded by saying that he wasn't sure and would need to gather more information. He thanks us again for bringing it to his attention.

Bill: What was your reaction to what he said?

Sheila: I was disappointed with his vague answers. He is new and doesn't want to rock the boat. He gave us no indication as to what steps he would take to follow up on our concerns.

Bill: Did you saying anything back?

Shelia: No, I left the meeting frustrated and with no confidence that he would do anything.

Bill: So, while he listened to your concerns, the concrete action steps you were expecting to hear didn't materialize. It makes sense then that you would interpret his words as vague.

Sheila: Correct.

In Shelia's mind, her need for immediate action sets up an expectation. When the

expectation is not met, the impact is disappointment. Not hearing any concrete action plan, she draws the conclusion that his answers are vague and assigns a negative intention of "not rocking the boat." Unable to separate the intent from impact, she walks away from the interaction frustrated and experiences her director's response as problematic.

Depending on our frame of mind, we select some things that people say and ignore others. Because of Sheila's expectations, she skips over her director's statement that he wasn't sure what he was going to do. By focusing on what has been missed, I can begin to help her separate intent from impact.

Bill: You recall him saying that he wasn't sure what to do. Given that he is new to the position, I could imagine that on face value what he said is true. If so, how would that alter your thinking about him?

Sheila: Well, he might be more cautious and want to gather more information like he said he needed to. I don't know, maybe I came off too demanding, but still I wanted to hear concrete steps.

Bill: Yes, so if you think of him as truly being uncertain as to what to do, you can think of yourself as helping him be more concrete. You might say something like, "Bob, your statements about being unsure as to what to do and the need more information creates a concern in my mind that action may not be taken quickly enough. What would alleviate my concern is if you could tell me when I can check back with you to hear your thoughts on how you can help us address this issue?"

Sheila: What if he said, "Don't worry. I will get back to you."

Bill: I'd say, "I don't doubt that you will, but we are reaching the outer limits of our tolerance for Roy's behaviour and an open-ended time frame only adds to our fear that nothing will be done."

Sheila and Bob have a different sense of urgency. Being the recipient of the inappropriate behaviour, Sheila has a greater sense of urgency than Bob who hears about the complaint for the first time. Rather than leaving the meeting frustrated, she can register the impact of Bob's words and keep the conversation going by stating how he can help alleviate her concern.

Because registering the impact of another's words is a new skill for Sheila, I make it a point of practice to model how it could be said, rather than offering abstract advice. This gives her a chance to try on the words. I usually follow up my effort of modelling the skill with a question: "Can you see yourself saying something like that or would it prove to be difficult to say?"

Getting Others to be Self Reflective: The Pitfalls

One can not programme insight, write a policy for reflection or develop a procedure for self discovery. Each of us makes our own journey of self discovery.

I learned this the hard way. Early in my career as a counsellor, I mistakenly believed that I could get another person to be self reflective. My first practice was in the field of death and dying. I was charged with the

vision of helping people come to a peaceful acceptance of their death. I got fired by my first patient. I was told that she was dying of cancer, but was in denial about her death. Ready to bust down denial with the latest psychological judo manoeuvre, I continued to bring up in our conversations the reality that she was going to die soon.

When I called to make our second appointment, she told me not to come. "Why not?" I asked. "You are too depressing," she said. "All you want to talk about is death."

She was right. I was running my agenda for when and how she was going to come to grips with her death. In that moment, I learned that whether I am helping someone to reflect on her words, actions or the course of her life, I cannot engineer her reflection by my desire for her to do so. The invitation for self reflection is accepted by one's own will to do so. It is an invitation and not a demand.

The challenge to the consultant is how to extend an invitation when he or she thinks the client is in desperate need of self reflection. There a number of common pitfalls he or she can fall into when trying to help others be self reflective.

Convincing the Client

The consultant can help clients to organise their experience in ways that make it understandable and manageable. From an outside perspective, the consultant has a better vantage point for making observations and seeing patterns of

dysfunctional interactions – usually long before the client can see them. Free from any emotional attachment or historical and cultural baggage, a consultant can be more objective.

Unfortunately, a consultant can project an attitude of “I see what is going on and if you can see it, you will agree and we will make a breakthrough together.” It is an “I know better” attitude that trips me up every time. This is not arrogance in the sense of being smarter than others, but a flash of insight based on experience and a good use of theory. There is nothing wrong with this attitude, and it is very likely that I have a good insight. It is my attempt to impose my view of what is happening unilaterally that gets me in trouble.

A mental tip-off that I have fallen into this pitfall is when I hear the voice in my head say, “I’ve got to get him to see what he is doing.” I have a theory as to what he is doing that is contributing to the difficulty. I want him to take the focus off of how bad the other person is and help him see how his own response is triggering the very behaviour he deems objectionable. This is tricky because I am trying to get the person to see something that he is unaware of or doesn’t want to admit to. If I point out his own problematic behaviour, and he resists, then I label him as being defensive. I am now in a position of either having to back off or push harder to make my point. If I back off, I leave the session thinking my client is resistant and defensive. I am pessimistic about any positive change. If I push harder to get him to buy my position, I may only increase his defensiveness.

As a consultant, I have now employed what Chris Argyris (1974) calls “defensive reasoning” or “Model I” thinking and behaviour. I believe my view is sensible and right. My client is thick headed and I have to crack his skull to get him to see what the problem is. Even if I back off, I am still operating with the same mindset: I am right, he is wrong. Not surprisingly, there is a good chance that I have replicated the same dynamic that got the client in trouble in the first place.

I have adopted two techniques to avoid this pitfall. First, when I meet defensiveness on my client’s part, I go with it and explore its sources – which could very well be what I have said or done. Second, I explore with my client the observable, behavioural data each of us would need to see to either confirm or disconfirm my theory of what is happening.

Avoiding the Socrates Effect

The Socratic Method is simply asking a series of questions in order to help another person with self discovery. While the Socratic Method is a noble, time-tested method for self reflection, it can cause the Socrates Effect. The line of inquiry becomes so persistent that the other person begins to feel interrogated. It doesn’t take long before the other person wants to slip you a hemlock cocktail to get you to stop.

A consultant needs to become vigilant around the unintended impact of asking too many questions. I have found it helpful to cue the other person by saying, “I am

going to ask you a series of questions in order to better understand your thinking. If at any point, you get a sense that I am interrogating you, please stop me.” It is always important to remember that the philosopher Socrates started from ignorance. He sincerely did not know. His intention was not to draw the other person toward his version of reality, but to help others explore their own thinking.

Fostering Self Reflection: Modelling the Behaviour

Even after multiple gentle nudges to encourage self reflection, I hear from my client, “Yes, I know I have a part in this as well, but if you knew this guy like I do, you would react the same way.” Given how our buttons are pushed by different people and contexts, I might have or not have reacted the same. Yet, what I am aware of is my client’s complete reluctance to focus more than a nanosecond on his part. I begin to form an opinion in my mind that my client is being thick headed. Early in my career, I would write off the client as being constitutionally incapable of being honest with him or herself. When I did so, I was punishing my client for not being self reflective.

I have been capable of punishing others for not being reflective when I, myself, have shown very little self reflection. Once, I received feedback from someone who had overheard a comment in the hallway during a break that the workshop was “going to slow.” When I resumed the class, I asked them, “What prevented you from raising

the issue of pacing?” This had an impact of essentially saying, “You have pointed out a possible error on my part, but I am not going to address it. Instead, I am going to focus on yours.” I could have taken the opportunity to model how to receive feedback and modify errors by dealing with what was going on with the pacing.

After I had investigated the issue of pacing, then I could have helped the group discuss what made it difficult to raise the issue publicly. There is a difference between saying, “What prevented you from raising it?” and “What makes it difficult to discuss the issue of pacing?” The former has an accusatory meaning of “what stopped you from doing what you were told to do?” The latter phrase sets the context of how difficult it is for anyone to do this given cultural norms and behaviours. I could have also explored whether their perception of me or my actions had made it more difficult to discuss.

Punishing people for not being self reflective has never been helpful nor generated a productive result. Instead, the best way to foster self reflection is to provide a good example by modelling it myself.

Examining Results and Getting Curious

A good stimulus for reflection is the simple question, “How’s it working for you?” The question focuses the person immediately on the results. If the person is not getting the results they desire or intend, then it is time

to get curious and figure out how his or her actions are contributing to the results. After the person lists the disastrous results generated from a recent interaction or failed project, I ask, "What actions did you take that contributed to those results?" Once a few problematic behaviours are identified, then the deeper work begins. I ask, "And in what ways were you thinking that led you to your actions?" An examination of the assumptions, frames of mind and values presents ample opportunity for reframing and redesigning action.

Imaging the Other Side

When I experience my client possessing a high degree of confidence in his version of reality - particularly in his view that the other person is the problem - I ask for examples of how he responds to the person. When I hear what he says, I can get a good idea of the likely impact the words had on the other person. I will either register the impact of my client's words upon me by putting myself in the shoes of the other person or I will ask my client to imagine what it must be like to be on the other side of the conversation hearing his words. The following is a brief interaction with a person who was the lead on a company project and described a member of his team as doing everything he could do to "bully me into his ideas."

Bill: When he tries to bully you into his ideas, give me an example of how he does it.

Manager: He told me that without his suggestion, this project would fail miserably and wanted to go on record that he did not agree with my

course of action. He accused me of not listening to his ideas. He said something like, "So far everything that I've said has been dismissed by you."

Bill: And how did you find yourself responding?

Manager: I said, "That's not true. I take every idea into consideration. The problem is that we don't have enough time to implement all of these ideas. Besides, this project is my responsibility and you will not be held accountable for any problems."

Bill: If you were on the other side of the conversation, how might you have interpreted those words?

Manager: (smiles) That my ideas aren't going to fly with this manager. It is going to be his way or the highway.

Bill: Yes, I can well imagine that reaction on his part. Do you recall what he actually said?

Manager: Yes, he said, "Of course I won't be held responsible. You're not taking my suggestions." So I was bullying him right back, but because I am the manager, I can bully back harder.

Bill: So, you were doing to him what you yourself don't like being done to you.

This technique achieves a simple goal of self reflection – the ability to stand outside of one's perspective. Once outside, the person has the chance to see how others may be experiencing his words and actions. The result is often ironic. He sees that the very behaviour he is objecting to in the other person, he is doing as well.

The common complaint is that people do not feel they are being listened to, and yet, upon examination, they are making no

effort to listen to the other person. Instead, they are advocating their point of view just as hard as the other person. This insight helps break the lock on the other person as the problem and turns the attention to the quality of the interaction.

Conclusion

Helping others to reflect on their actions has been a hit and miss adventure. No technique or tool in the hands of a consultant is foolproof. I have walked out of many meetings where I conducted an intervention around a contentious issue and been discouraged by the results.

People appeared only further entrenched in their views and none of my appeals to seek greater understanding were heeded. Just then, I get a phone call from the client saying what a great meeting it was. I hear comments like, "We have never been able to talk about these issues publicly before." The client goes on to report his post-reflections on the meeting demonstrating a better understanding of views that differ from his own and claiming insight into how his own behaviour proves to be problematic for others.

For awhile, I was simply dumbfounded by the response and could not take any credit for the final results. Over time, I have learned patience and once again, the lesson that self reflection cannot be demanded, engineered or tailored to my expectations. Self reflection does occur when a gentle invitation to enter into a different perspective is offered.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Bill Noonan is an educator and consultant with an international practice including many of leading learning organisations. His practice includes facilitation, executive coaching, conducting workshops and designing web-based learning programmes: *Forging Breakthroughs with Peter Senge* (Ninthhouse) and *Productive Business Dialogues and Managing Difficult Conversations* (Harvard Business Review Publishing Company).

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