

# Thriving Workplace

## Our Interpersonal Inheritance

*"Language is something you inherit, it's never just you doing the talking . . ."*

[Cees Nooteboom, *The Foxes Come Out at Night.*]

And it's never just you doing the listening, reacting, arguing or negotiating.

Waiting in line for a coffee at my local airport, I became aware of a minor commotion. Gradually I tuned-in to a young boy's complaining. No older than nine, he was with his mother aside of the line. The boy's father was ahead of me. I picked up the conversation at this point:

Boy (wailing, but firmly): *I don't **want** anything.*

Mother: Yes you do. *Of course you do.*

Boy: *But I'm not hungry.* (He cries.)

Mother: *Don't be silly.*

Boy (wails): *I don't want anything!*

Mother: You're being silly.

Boy: *No I'm not. I'm not hungry.*

Mother: *That's really silly! You won't get anything on the plane. Nothing. You're just being silly.*

Boy cries.

Mother (loudly, to boy's father): *Brad, get him a muffin or something. He's being really **stupid!***

Father (to boy): *Wierdo!*

Boy sobs uncontrollably.

### What does a diet like this teach?

No, not muffins; a diet of the parents' behaviour.

This is the child who will be criticised sooner or later (and probably already), for not speaking up about his needs. At home he may be chastised with, *Speak up! Don't mumble! Say what you want: I'm not a mind-reader!* In the workplace he may attract the comments, *Lacks confidence. Needs to assert himself* and asked, *Why didn't you speak up and say something . . . ?*

Why . . . ? The short answer is, of course, because he learned that saying what he wants gets him nowhere except into trouble; that his needs don't count.

### Two sides of a coin?

The boy is also learning another vitally significant reference-point for interpersonal exchanges that will last him many years: *It is entirely legitimate for a person holding authority to treat those who hold less, with non-negotiable commands, intimidation, ridicule, negative labelling, disrespect and contempt.*

The consequence of these two apparently conflicting ideas is that as the child grows older he may be told, *How dare you speak to me like that!* or advised to *Snap out of it!* when he becomes mute and despondent. Both are probabilities.

In the workplace he may become known as a moody, grizzling or belligerent person, someone unable to take criticism or negative feedback but able to dish it out damagingly.

If he is fortunate later in life to be helped to establish why he finds some aspects of interpersonal communication difficult, especially when there are interpersonal differences and serious conflict, he's likely to find that he harbours deeply-embedded beliefs such as these:

- The first reference-point for deciding if, when and how to speak up is the answer to the question, *Who has the most power in these circumstances?*
- When I hold the power I may treat others however I want; it's OK to intimidate, manipulate, berate and label them, and to do so in the presence of others if I choose to. If they object to these behaviours, it's OK to dismiss or ignore their concerns.
- When I hold less power in the relationship, I should yield to others' needs and demands without contest, whatever the cost.
- Interpersonal conflict is dangerous and destructive.
- Conflict is best avoided if at all possible, even when I suffer or relationships suffer by doing this.
- People's feelings are irrelevant to interpersonal exchanges; it's only the rational/logical content that has real significance.
- It's unsafe to express my feelings: I'll be ridiculed for doing so.
- My feelings cannot be trusted; they are unreliable indicators of my needs.
- It is unwise and often pointless or unsafe to express my needs directly.
- I should rely on others to determine my needs and make decisions that affect me.
- I am not worthy. I am guilty of being not good enough. I am not an OK person.

### **Or the same side of a coin?**

These are the usual attitudinal bases of both the passive (self-disrespectful) and aggressive (other-disrespecting) behaviours which so disrupt workplace relationships. They are the foundations of the self-protective urges and fight-or-flight behaviours which cause people to find conflict difficult.

But passivity and aggression are not opposites. They are from the same source, and are both forms of **reacting** in a knee-jerk way to the everyday stimuli of inevitable difference in interpersonal relationships, and thus very similar; worth placing, in fact, on one side of a coin.

On the other side of that coin are **responsive** behaviours - practices carefully chosen and habituated on the basis of imperturbability, mature confidence, fairness, and equal respect for our own and others' humanity.

### **What's your own part in this?**

How able are you to *stay in role* when criticised, blamed, judged or labelled? If you rush to react, (defend yourself, withdraw, become a *frightened child* or retaliate), what are you defending? What will you need to change in order to *still your mind*, return to maturity and your workplace role, and respond constructively instead?

How easily “hear-able” are your forms of expressing vulnerability or annoyance, and of messages for guiding and correcting performance, giving negative feedback, limit-setting or boundary-holding?

How confident are you around interpersonal conflict?

### **Why you should know**

Answers to these questions often lie outside of our understanding because examining our own interpersonal communication practices is like to asking a fish to describe water. For most people they're an ever-present unnoticed environment in which our lives happen.

But *conversations are the barometers of a healthy organisation* and improvements to our workplace practices around dialogue depend on those answers; we **should** be able to answer them.

How appropriate are your interpersonal practices? How do you know?

How well do the beliefs you learned around conflict as you grew up, serve you as an adult?

For support and information about where and how to start modifying and enhancing your practices, visit our [interpersonal communication pages](#).

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