

## Atlantic Article: The Hidden Mind

Meetings between two or more people are the primary tool for getting things done in life, including life in the business world. The authors were both in the business of studying meetings from different points of view. Tom Snyder, a psychiatrist, worked with couples and individuals who were having difficulties with their meetings. George Prince, doing research into the creative process in business, studied individuals and small groups attempting to solve problems and invent new products.

In the study of 'business' meetings we used audio and video tape to record the action and then studied the results to identify those actions that seemed to aid the purpose of the meeting and those that seemed to hinder. An early observation that has proven extremely significant was that any action that was perceived as disrespectful, produced a later revenge reaction. At first, we thought this was simply a sign of immaturity, but after hundreds of examples, with no mature reactions, we recognized it as a universal response. We called this the **Discount/Revenge Law**. The reason this is significant is that every one of the actions we identified as hindering the purpose of the meeting is, to some degree, disrespectful, and therefore a discount with a consequent revenge reaction.

In psychotherapy, we focused on behaviors that were creating problems for the individual or couple. It is evident that the law of discount/revenge is operating at full force in these relationships. Dr. John Gottman ([www.gottman.com](http://www.gottman.com)) conducted research with couples over a thirty-year period. The couples spent weekends and other times in a special apartment equipped with video cameras. In addition, the participants were wired to measure their heart rates and blood pressure. He learned that if the ratio of discounts to appreciations exceeded one discount to every five appreciations, the relationship would fail and the couple would divorce. He identified five discounts that caused trouble: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, stonewalling, and aggression.

My experience with couples supports Gottman's conclusions. Maybe you need to explain what you have also experienced with couples through your wife's work.

Recent brain research suggests that there is a nether mind—a mind that is governed by emotion and makes important behavioral decisions for us out of our awareness... and many of these decisions are destructive to our best interests. (I think it would be nice to elaborate on this a bit more. How is this critical to understanding the negative auto-pilot that takes over whether a real threat exists or not. Paragraph moved up from below: Defensive maneuvers develop largely out of conscious awareness and we are often unmindful of what triggers a defensive reaction. Most of us have experienced the surprising rush of anger when, as we attempt pay for a purchase, the salesperson ignores us. Road rage and wife battering are extreme examples of inappropriate responses to a perceived threat to meaningfulness.

We begin by describing two children's classes: a second grade and a kindergarten. They are significant because a change in teaching method resulted in unexpected changes in behavior. In

the light of the new brain research this change in behavior was brought about by a relaxation of unconscious defenses. The precise mechanism will be explored later. The significance of the children's changes is that no one guessed that many of the childish, uncontrolled actions that we are accustomed to and accept as "that's children", are in fact defensive maneuvers dictated by unconscious reactions to stimuli. The implications for home and workplace are impressive.

### Needham Second Grade

Marilyn Yas, a teacher at Needham schools spent her sabbatical working with us at Synectics® Inc., a company doing research on the creative process. Afterwards we designed an experiment for her new second grade. Our purpose was to empower the children by modifying the controlling aspect of teaching, and see what might happen. Ms. Yas made clear to her 7 year olds that *they* were going to run the class-----with her help. She began with a meeting beneath an easel pad. With marker poised she said, "Learning is a risky business because you naturally make lots of mistakes, and that feels dangerous. It is not really dangerous, but it feels that way. Now, what do you want to risk learning this year?"

Every one of the 24 kids had a say. It was an impressive list and included everything they would be covering and much more.

Next, she said, "We want to have lots of fun this year, but we do not want to disturb the classes on either side. How shall we keep from getting too noisy? Lots of ideas and they selected two by vote: The first kid who hears the noise getting too loud, raises hands with two fingers in the victory sign. When others see that, they raise their hand too. If that does not quiet things down, turn the lights on and off. They used the system successfully all year.

You get the idea. She turned over the power, wherever possible, to them. The results were remarkable. (Tie this to validation and respect. Validated/respected human beings have no need to destroy) As one approached their room, the sign on the door, made by the kids, said, 'RISK ROOM'. Step in and you were greeted by a quiet, busy sound. The field (do we know what a 'field' is?) of comfort and openness and good cheer enveloped you like a blanket.

Only now do we understand what really happened in that class. The teacher made it clear that the kids were safe from any threat to their power over themselves. (I like this phrase "power over myself" but I would like to make sure people really understand what you are thinking about. A small bit of elaboration, please.) This freed them from the need to defend themselves from being "bossed around". Their natural learning talents could come out full blast. The kids worked together to solve every problem that came up: bullying on the playground, jostling to get on the bus, noisiness in the corridors, battles at lunchtime. They solved them. Perhaps the most spectacular out-come was with the four special needs kids who were members of the class. All needed outside help and two had extreme self-control behavior problems. After a couple of weeks, it was decided (in consultation with parents) that the outside help would be eliminated. The special needs kids were on their own, with help from schoolmates.

At the end of the year, there were *no* special needs kids. The behavior problem kids had solved their behavior problems. (I think people will have a hard time taking just your word for this. What really happened. I know the answer. I just want a statement here.)

### Needham Kindergarten

A few years later, Ms. Yas was teaching a kindergarten class and used the same modified teaching method with the five year olds in her class. We are examining them because they're behaving so differently from their peers in the other kindergarten classes. It is a day in March and they have been together since the previous September. School is about to begin. The children are, by rule, lined up at the door of their rooms ready to "pass in quickly, quietly and cooperatively." There is the usual squealing, shoving, laughing and horseplay except in the case of Ms. Yas' class. Here, the twenty students stand, quietly talking and waiting for the door to open. This group, that we will call K1, stands out because they do not seem to be infected by giggles and horseplay.

As we follow them into their room, there is a cheerful, relaxed undertone of conversation and on most days, "Hello, Ms. Yas", as they quietly go to their lockers, hang up their raincoats and deliver notes from home into a large box labeled "N", (what does the 'n' stand for. If you mention it, I am thinking it is significant to something?) (the box with label is an invention of the children) and go to a seat of their choosing. One little girl has a story to tell Ms. Yas and as these two quietly converse, the rest of the class moves into small groups and several quiet conversations begin. These continue for a few minutes until Ms. Yas and Vera have finished their meeting.

Ms. Yas then says Good Morning to all and suggests that they plan their day. She has written on the board a list of all the things they want to accomplish in that session. "What shall we do before our snack, and what after?" She asks.

There follows a discussion in which the children decide. If one has trouble reading an item on the list, another helps. They negotiate most differences, but if they hit an impasse, they settle it by vote. Then they implement their plan. This daily exercise develops a sense of time and planning ability, and more important, an awareness of being in charge of themselves.

K1 is an unusual class, eighteen of the twenty children have taught themselves to read. In the traditional kindergartens, about two of twenty learn to read. At "sharing time" when children take turns telling of experiences, it is not unusual for two or three to collaborate and present a dance, complete with music or some other creative presentation—a high risk adventure for a five-year old. Some write "books" which they read to the class.

K1 is visited once a week by a music teacher, and a librarian, who give special training. Each of them has taken Ms. Yas aside and remarked on three ways their experience with K1q is different from other kindergartens: 1.) they are impressed with the unusually long attention span of the children, 2.) their high level of enthusiasm and responsiveness, and finally, 3. their own level of

enjoyment in working with these children. There is no need to spend any energy on control or discipline or settling arguments.

There is a marked difference in the way K1 children behave while walking in the hall and waiting to board their busses at the end of their day. With most children, there is the usual hubbub, pushing, giggling and competition for first place in line. In contrast, the K1 children are calm and in quiet conversations with each other. Early in the year they problem-solved about taking turns being first, so that is not an issue, and because they are used to being in charge of their own behavior there is no need to act out.

### Suggestive Experiment in the Workplace

In a book, *The New Partnership*, published in 1984, (**ASIN:** B01FKTWH2Y)

Tom Melohn describes an experiment he conducted with a small manufacturing plant he purchased. It was organized in the traditional hierarchical way. He gave himself the title of Head Sweeper, and revised the interrelations to give maximum self-government to every employee. They learned to manage every activity in the company from the purchase of new equipment, to ordering supplies, to organizing shipping. Melohn acted as a consultant when asked. The results are impressive: sales up 28% each year, productivity up 480%, pre-tax profit up 2400%

In the case of the children, these experiments were initiated based on observations of people in invention sessions. In Mr. Melohn's case it must have been his intuition that guided him.

### Enter Brain Research

In the 1990's Joseph LeDoux, scientist at NYU, Michael Gazzanica, Daniel Siegel and colleagues began to unravel the specific ways the brain deals with fear and anxiety. Incoming information from the senses is routed through an organ called the amygdala and its system. The information is scanned for two things: threat and possibilities for nurture—danger and love.

When the signal says danger, the system goes into emergency. It virtually by-passes the thinking part of the brain and goes into emotional fight or flight mode. Anxiety is triggered and an electrical/chemical neural cascade in the brain produces a defensive action.

This defense system begins to develop in infancy. When the infant is left alone too long, it senses that it has been abandoned and goes into an emergency display of screams and wriggling to get attention. Nature, knowing that abandonment will lead to death and meaninglessness, has sensitized the infant to defend itself.

This alarm and defense system does not discriminate. Any *slightest* threat and it goes into action. Any abuse or neglect triggers the cascade to defensive action. As instances of abuse or neglect are repeated, the neural cascade becomes hard-wired. The threat occurs, the behavior happens without thought. As the infant matures, the brain continues to react to threat with anxiety, but this is a painful feeling and the brain develops 'foresight function'. It perceives threat and to

avoid the dread feeling of anxiety it substitutes a defensive action. In the case of an infant, the initial defensive action is screaming and wriggling. This gradually evolves to going numb. When the 'more experienced' infant perceives threat of abandonment, its brain by-passes the screaming and goes directly to numb.

Defensive maneuvers develop largely out of conscious awareness and we are often unmindful of what triggers a defensive reaction. Most of us have experienced the surprising rush of anger when, as we attempt pay for a purchase, the salesperson ignores us. Road rage and wife battering are extreme examples of inappropriate responses to a perceived threat to meaningfulness. (This is an important paragraph; I was wondering if it would have covered my earlier question.)

### Meaningfulness

To understand the fundamental nature of defensiveness, we need to be aware of its significance.

“...what an organism does is organize; and what a human organism organizes is meaning. Thus, it is not that a person makes meaning, as much as that the activity of being a person is the activity of meaning-making.”<sup>1</sup>

meaning, understood in this way, is the primary human motion, irreducible.... not meaning, by definition, is utterly lonely. Well-fed, warm, and free of disease, you may still perish if you cannot “mean”. (Ibid)

The original motion is to survive abandonment—which means death and becoming meaningless. It now appears that we are far more sensitive to threat than we have realized. Everyday actions that we have not thought of as threatening, apparently produce powerful defensive reactions

To give you a sense of how sensitive are the antennae to detect any threat to meaningfulness, it is instructive to consider those experiments with children.

We now theorize that the teaching design of careful self-governing removed many of the usual threats to meaningfulness that come from teacher/parent control/discipline. Do you have examples of people/places where this type of mindful teaching is taking place? I would really like to investigate further.

Knowledge of the unconscious defenses of the brain suggests that much of the disorderly, uncooperative behavior of kids is triggered by their feeling disrespected, and resorting to rebellious actions to defend their need to feel meaningful.

The development of a person’s defensive armament against meaninglessness proceeds out of awareness. Initially, the defensive action tends to be extreme: violent anger, striking out, screams, convulsions. As the child, teen, and adult experiences the consequences of the hard-wired reactions of aggressive defensive actions, the hard-wired reaction continues to occur, but it is modified to avoid retaliation, which suggests that most defensive reactions can be modified if the original abuse or neglect has not been too severe.

Brain studies make it clear that a child’s brain develops through experience modifying genetic proclivities. Scientists repeatedly describe the way a child learns interacting through his own interactions with a caregiver and others. If these are nurturing, empathic and respectful, the child’s brain develops to produce that kind of behavior. Her ways of relating are respectful and caring about the other. They grow up recruiting others to them. With less ideal parenting, the child matures to be recruitable—available to respond in kind. With neglectful or abusive parenting, the child becomes a non-recruitable adult, largely unable to relate to others in mutually rewarding ways. These are the people whose defensive maneuvers are extreme. Our prisons are full of them.

Below is an attempt to chart the outcomes of the three types of parenting.

### Spectrum of Attitudes Parenting

Reflects more neglect and abuse				More nurturing		
Anxiety Driven				Consciousness Driven		
Aggressive	Antagonistic	Passive Aggressive	Neutral	Positive/Courageous		
Disobedient	Adversarial	Distracted	Undermines	Attentive	Receptive	Supports confusions/ uncertainty
Quarrelsome	Opposes	Listless	Neglectful	Supportive	Responsive	Temporarily suspends disbelief
Combative	Controlling	Bored	Mistake-prone	Listens	Hospitable	Builds
Dominating	Contrary	Unresponsive	Misunderstands	Approves	Non-restrictive	Deals as equal
Hostile	Squabbly	Ignores	Careless	Credits	Open-minded	
Angry	Competitive	Oblivious	Disinterested	Connects	Optimistic	
Litigious	Cynical	Unconscious	Pessimistic	Jumps to favorable conclusions	Shares risks	
Contemptuous		Doesn’t get it			Listens approximately	

Critical					Protects vulnerable beginnings	
<b>Non-Recruitable</b>		<b>Recruitable</b>		<b>Recruiter</b>		

It is significant that the 'decision' to employ a defensive maneuver is purely emotional and automatic. The positive relating actions on the right are the result of conscious decisions.

### What Can We Do

Since the anxiety driven defensive maneuvers are, nearly without exception, destructive to relationships and to the purpose of most businesses, it is important to design steps to reduce defensiveness. The problem is that the mechanisms that produce defensiveness are 'built in', and go into action without conscious thought. In helping people operate at maximum effectiveness in invention groups, we use videotape review to make participants very conscious of the destructive behaviors. We have found it necessary to include a facilitator who curbs the impulses to slip into defensive actions.

This is effective in the group sessions, but we have been disappointed in the carry-over to everyday work. It is the rare person who continues the carefully respectful behaviors of the session. Now brain research informs us that these defensive maneuvers are emotionally controlled and intelligence plays only a small part.

One of the difficult parts of the puzzle is that some, perhaps many, of these actions have a purpose that is constructive. For example, pointing out flaws in a new idea is a way of avoiding possible future problems. Yet, to do so is perceived by the originator of the idea as a discount and usually results in some sort of revenge reaction at a later time.

Given this new information about the unconscious aspect of defensiveness, there seem to be two ways to reduce the impulsive actions that are destructive: 1. Create an interpersonal field that is totally respectful so that no defensiveness is triggered, and 2. Educate people about their own defensive proclivities. The fundamental idea would be, invent methods to create "foresight function" to bring destructive actions into awareness *before* acting, and to substitute constructive actions that accomplish the intended purpose.

An example, to make this concrete, is a procedure used in invention sessions. It seems that any suggestion of an idea triggers defensiveness in most of us and we immediately think of reasons the idea will not work. It seems important to point out these flaws. Even when it has been made clear that in the early stages an idea needs protection, the impulse is strong. We train participants that there will always be an evaluation period. At that time, we will look at all the positives and all the negatives, *in that order*. We learned that by appreciating the positive aspects of an idea first, it avoids the possibility of discounting the originator.

It is interesting to speculate why a new idea elicits such anxiety. Is it that, as a member of the group, I will be held responsible for this idea? Or perhaps I unconsciously feel the idea proposer is getting too much attention and I will declare my own meaningfulness by pointing out a flaw.

Whatever the reason for the impulse, it is widely felt and is a good example of the way a defensive maneuver can get in the way of accomplishment.

### Emotions are the Key

This new brain research upsets our long held belief in the primacy of rational thinking. It is now clear that in interpersonal actions, emotions play a critical role. The problem now becomes: how can we measure the emotional impact of any given action. If we could do this, we could design an organization to create an interpersonal field that is totally respectful. There would remain the problem of educating people about their defensive proclivities.

In response to this need we have developed a method for measuring emotions.

Over to you, Tom