

The 'Secret' of Productivity and Effectiveness

A screed from George M. Prince

A few years ago, T.K. Gilliam asked me what I considered to be the most important finding of Synectics research. I said, "The discovery of Discount/Revenge." The reason this is so important only became evident later, as I learned more about the forces underlying Discount/Revenge.

At the time we spotted it and began to watch for it, we considered it significant. We were already aware, from our study of videotapes, of the damage done by negative inputs, and we were all pretty focused on eliminating them. You are aware of the many procedures we have developed to convert negative thoughts into positive contributions. Itemized Response and Building are two familiar examples.

Everyone was aware of the reality of a person 'getting even' for an injury. What was not evident was the extreme sensitivity and the *inevitable* response that became apparent as we began to study Discount/Revenge.

After retirement, when Kathleen and I began to work on the Mind-Free® Program, I again became fascinated with the impact of discounts. I began to dig into the phenomenon by reading about how the brain functions and where the revenge reaction comes from.

Brain research, combined with research on marriage (this is relevant!), on infants and children, plus some experiments we ran, plus some experiments in business, began to point me in a surprising direction. Discounts of any kind have an impact like a *poison* in any system—whether it is a marriage, a family, or a business.

I will need to tie together some disparate findings, so be patient. In any system where people operate together the interactions form *relationships*. Research at the Stone Center at Wellesley College found that a relationship is like a separate entity between people. It *remembers* and the memory influences the relationship positively if the action is affirming, negatively if the action is a discount.

John Gottman, a psychologist, in 30 years of research on couples (using videotapes as the couples spent weekends at his laboratory apartment (great minds!) discovered that when, in the relationship, there was more than one discount to every five affirmations, the marriage would not last. He went on to identify the four major types of discount as: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, withdrawal/stonewalling. I would add: any action that demeans.

This is a rather radical consequence of discounting—for couples to split up unless discounts are eliminated. Consider what we do to kids!

Some work by Robert Kegan, the Harvard psychologist, gives a basic clue to our puzzle. He explores the human need to *be and feel meaningful*. "what an organism does, as William Perry says, 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."

"The attention-recruiting infant is *doing something he will try to do all his life (recognize and be recognized)—and at bottom it is the same thing; the activity of meaning*. Meaning is, in its origins, a physical activity (grasping, seeing), a social activity (it requires another), a survival activity (in doing it we live). Meaning, understood in this way, is the primary human motion, irreducible...well-fed, warm, and free of disease, you may still perish if you cannot "mean"."

Kegan wrote that in 1982 (*The Evolving Self*), long before brain research gave physiological support to the necessity to feel meaningful.

Recent brain research (LeDoux, Goleman, et al), has found that everyone is constantly alert to information coming to him or her from the external field ('field' being the complex of signals surrounding each of us the way a magnetic field surrounds a magnet). We are *genetically* programmed to monitor this field as a matter of survival. An organ in the primitive brain, the amygdala, is dedicated to this surveillance. It monitors all information coming in from the five senses *before* passing it to the appropriate parts of the brain. It is looking for two types of information: That suggesting attraction and that suggesting threat.

If the signals say "attraction", this information is passed to the neocortex, the thinking part of the brain, for further planning. The attraction is then examined for: Will this person nurture me? Can I influence this person? Does he/she respect me? Do I feel meaningful? Does this person care about me? When the answers are "yes", the person is open to connect. His/her whole brain is available.

If the signals say "threat", the information is sent to the whole brain along with an alert to be ready for fight or flight. The threat is then examined for: Is this person controlling me? Is there respect for my need to be autonomous and competent? Is this person excluding me? Do I have little or no influence? When the answers are "yes", the person experiences anxiety and is impelled to take defensive action. In the case of subordinate/dependent people, the actions will be careful, possibly done out of awareness. The psychological mechanism is: the feeling of anxiety is too painful, so defensive actions are substituted to assuage the anxiety—such actions as: inattention, careful rebellion, unawareness, "inadvertent", "unconscious" carelessness, emotional absence, boredom, being: distracted, forgetful, resistant, preoccupied, neglectful, mistake-prone, careless.

Behavior Not a Choice?

We tend to believe that most people control their behavior in a sensible way most of the time. And this is true *unless emotions interfere*. Road rage is a familiar example of an out-of-control reaction to a perceived act of disrespect.

On a much quieter scale are the actions noted above, but just as road rage is not a rational choice, neither are these actions. They are dictated by the fundamental need to be and feel *meaningful*.

Meaningfulness—the Irreducible Constituent of an Identity

This is a complicated way of suggesting how important is the concept of meaningfulness. Unless we understand this, we will not understand how to go about engaging wholeheartedness in the people with whom we interact.

Anxiety

Anxiety is, perhaps, the most critical factor governing behavior. "...the role of anxiety in interpersonal relations is so profoundly important that its differentiation from all other tensions is vital"

"...anxiety arouses *uncanny emotion*"It is akin to awe...dread...horror...loathing. Unlike the pain of hunger or a blow, there seems to be no source. It is manageable only with careful attention to its underlying meaning. (after Sullivan)

Neurophysiology

We have seen that anxiety originates in the amygdala, which is the storehouse of emotional memory and thus of significance itself. Any happening that stirs a memory of a past threat, or resonates with elements of a past episode of trauma, neglect, or emotional injury, will trigger anxiety and set in motion some defensive sequence.

History

An infant first experiences anxiety at about four to six months when she or he senses that s/he has been abandoned by Mother. The emotion remembered by the amygdala is *an unspecific fear of ceasing to exist*—failing to survive—the feeling we call anxiety. Because the amygdala is *approximate* rather than precise, this dread feeling will take over when ever an event even remotely conveys "you are unimportant", or that demeans him/her, discounts; suggests that he/she does not matter, that he/she is meaningless.

The key point here is that there is a physiological, unreasoning conviction that one must be meaningful or cease to exist. Some people with a solid sense of self are able to handle this with less reactivity than others less fortunate, but it impacts *all*.

Significance for us

The fact that we understand this phenomenon might be likened to a pharmaceutical company developing a drug that cures a disease that has been sickening many for years. Discounting is quite visible, but the true nature of its toxicity has not been appreciated... Which puts us in a position to capitalize on our unique knowledge and skills.

There have been some practical clues

The first clues came in the 1920's from an elaborate series of experiments run by psychologists at a Western Electric plant. The Hawthorne Works, near Chicago was the site. The purpose was to study the effect of changing "conditions" for the workers. The first experiment involved improving the lighting. Performance improved. The workers were given more frequent breaks and performance improved again. A number of variations in working conditions were tried, and each improved performance.

Then the experimenters changed all the conditions back to where they were when the experiments started. Performance continued to improve. Many other experiments were tried over the next ten years and the results came to be known as the Hawthorne Effect. It "suggested that any workplace change, such as a research study, makes people feel more important and thereby improves their performance," (*Encyclopedia of Psychology*)

This finding has largely been ignored.

Case histories of situations where people learned to treat each other as meaningful

1. The Harvard Graduate School of Architecture
2. M.I.T. Get out the vote experiment
3. Two teams at Union Carbide
4. The 2nd Hawthorne experiment
5. Hundreds of Synetics problem solving sessions where "savvy about avoiding discounts" produced outstanding results.

Non-Synecotics examples:

1. Southwest Airlines
2. Pygmalion in the Classroom (Dr. Rosenthal's experiment)
3. The New Partnership—Tom Melohn's experiment with meaningfulness
Productivity up 480%, Sales up 28% per year, pre-tax profit up 2400%,
4. Marshall Industries—expenses down, turnover down by 50%, sales grew from \$530, million to \$1 billion