

Closing the Influence Gap with Interaction Styles

When we communicate with others, we usually have a positive intention, but sometimes the impact of our behaviour can be negative. This reduces our influence and may mean we don't achieve the outcomes we intended.

To close the influence gap we need at least three things:

- Self-awareness to realise how our behaviour might be experienced by others
- Ability to recognise and manage the emotions driving our behaviour
- Ability to pick up accurate cues from others about their thoughts and feelings

There is recent research evidence that all three of these are difficult to achieve.

1. Self-awareness

Sun and Vazire of the University of California recently researched self-knowledge. They used the Five Factor Model of personality (OCEAN) to explore the question [“Do people know what they are like in the moment?”](#) They compared ratings of behaviour given by the subjects with ratings given by observers. They found the highest levels of self-knowledge and subject-observer agreement on Extraversion, followed by Conscientiousness. Neuroticism, not surprisingly, was not visible to observers.

The findings on Agreeableness were interesting – subjects had less self-insight in this area and the researchers suggested that “this apparent self-ignorance may be partly responsible for interpersonal problems and for blind spots in trait self-knowledge”. They concluded that: “we can probably trust what people say about their momentary levels of Extraversion, Conscientiousness and Neuroticism”, but “our findings call into question people’s awareness of when they are being considerate vs rude”.

2. Recognising and managing our emotions

Lisa Feldman-Barrett (professor of psychology at North-eastern university in the USA) is the author of *How Emotions are Made – the Secret Life of the Brain*, and she has a great [TED Talk](#) about her theory of constructed emotion. She believes that “emotions are your brain’s best guesses for what your body’s sensations mean, based on your situation”. For example, if your face goes red, your brain races to work out the likely cause, based partly on the situation – am I angry, excited, embarrassed, hot? “Your brain makes meaning from the identical sensation in different ways, depending on the context”. There is not always a direct semantic link from the body to the emotion: we smile when we are happy, but we also smile when we are sad; we cry when we are sad, but we also cry when we are happy. Recognising our emotions involves guess work.

Sometimes we aren't even aware of the emotions or don't know what they are and can't name them. Neuroscientists such as [David Eagleman](#) believe that “a lot goes on under the hood”, outside our conscious awareness. And if you have ever seen the [moon-walking bear](#), you will know that sometimes our brains don't notice what *is* there!

We also know that our emotional, flight or fight response to a situation, can kick in via the more primitive part of the brain, the amygdala, before the more rational part has had time to work out a more reasoned response. Our [inner chimp](#) hijacks us and it can be difficult to manage our emotions.

3. Picking up accurate cues from others

Picking up accurate cues from other people's behaviour is also difficult. We automatically infer mental states from face, voice tone, body language – much of this is unconscious and our assumptions may be wrong. Neville Chamberlain's words about Hitler in a letter to his sister in 1938 are a good example: *"I got the impression that here was a man who could be relied upon when he had given his word"*.

We can be influenced by superficial appearance or what is going on in our own minds. Problems between people often occur because we attribute thoughts or feelings to them which are not accurate, and this affects how we behave towards them. According to Mlodinow, in *Subliminal: the new unconscious and what it teaches us*, our brains are not recording experiences, they are creating them.

Can we overcome these challenges? How might Interaction Styles help?

Join me at the AusAPT conference where we will explore these issues and share some practical actions to close the influence gap. And for more tips, tools and practical activities, come along to my post conference workshop on Sunday 24th November.

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