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# **Fight, Flight, Freeze**

Taming Your Reptilian  
Brain and Other  
Practical Approaches  
to Self-Improvement

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## Chapter 3

### The Interpersonal Gap

**T**hink about two or three people that you have difficulty dealing with. We are all products of the cultures that we live in, and a norm of our modern culture is to label a person's personality. What labels (for example: uptight, irresponsible, domineering, slacker, rude, disrespectful, etc.) do you use when you think of these people? Make a mental note of the words that you choose.

Everywhere I go I encounter the same phenomenon...people in all walks of organizational life offering theories about other people's intentions and motives, and operating as if their theories were valid and objective. "Bill can't be trusted." "So and so (or such and such group) isn't committed to this activity." "That plant (department, person, etc.) is resistant to change."

These beliefs, though commonly held, rarely stand up to a rigorous examination. Furthermore, such beliefs greatly complicate conflict and are often a significant contributor to whatever problem the observer is criticizing. In other words, when we generate or give credence to negative interpretations about the motives or personality of others, we have almost certainly become part of the problem (and possibly the source). This almost-universal blind spot fuels all kinds of waste, conflict, and lost productivity.

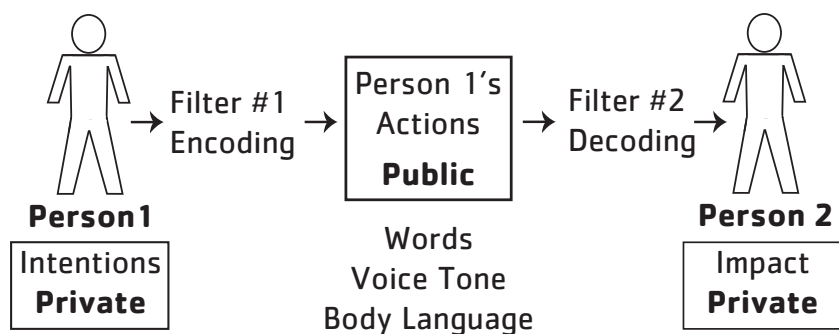
Recognition that we are interpreting and that our interpretations create our reactions to others is the essential skill needed to break out of this culturally accepted phenomenon. Kurt Lewin, one of the founders of Organization Development, once said "There's nothing so practical as a good theory." The Interpersonal Gap (John Wallen, 1964), is one of the most practical theories of behavioral science, and offers a path out of the phenomenon described above.

According to Wallen, "The most basic and recurring problems

in social life stem from what you intend and the actual effect of your actions on others.” I would add (and I’m confident Wallen would agree), that “basic and recurring problems” stem equally from the reverse: your own interpretations, sometimes accurate, sometimes not, of the intentions of others. While both their interpretation of you and your interpretation of them are worth paying attention to, it is the latter source of trouble over which you have the most potential control.

In short, Wallen’s theory is that each of us has intentions in every interaction (we intend a certain impact), we translate (or encode) our intentions into words and actions, the people we are interacting with translate (decode) our words and actions, and the decoding determines the initial emotional impact on them, as illustrated in the following graph:

**Figure 5: The Interpersonal Gap**



*A difference between intent and impact equals a “gap”*

**Filter #1:** Sender’s beliefs & habits regarding how to translate intentions into words and actions.

**Filter #2:** Receiver’s interpretation/judgment (beliefs/theories/stories) about what sender’s behavior really means

This process occurs constantly, and in nanoseconds. It is the micro moment in a macro tapestry of interactions and beliefs. I

react to you, and in that moment you are already reacting to my reactions. To further complicate things, our filters are complex and ever changing. Our history together, our separate life experiences, our culture, the nature of our relationship (i.e., roles such as boss and subordinate, parent and child, salesperson and customer, etc.) all impact our immediate filters about each other. There is ample potential for misunderstanding at any step in the process (beginning with the formidable task of understanding yourself - that is, with having clarity about what impact you really want in any given interaction). Such misunderstandings are what Wallen refers to as a “gap.” As he puts it, “Interpersonal gap refers to the degree of congruence between one person’s intentions and the effect produced in the other. If the effect is what is intended, the gap has been bridged. If the effect is the opposite of what was intended, the gap has become greater.”

Wallen goes on to say, “We see our own actions in the light of our own intentions, but we see the other’s actions not in the light of the other person’s intentions but in the effect on us.” In other words, we usually know what we intended, especially when we believe we’ve been misunderstood (when we believe others have interpreted our words and actions differently than we intended). It is easy to notice Wallen’s gap in those moments. That awareness is the first vital step in potentially clearing up misunderstandings.

It’s more problematic when the shoe is on the other foot, when you interpret another’s words and actions in a manner that has an undesired effect on you. Understanding the power your interpretations have on your own reactions is the starting point for increasing your objectivity and becoming less of a victim to your own interpretations. For example, a person who gives you “close supervision” (an interpretation in itself) may also be decoded/interpreted as a) “not trusting your work,” or b) “being committed to you” (or c, or d, etc.). A worker who speaks with anger may also be decoded/interpreted as a) “a troublemaker” or b) “passionate about their job.” The same behaviors, decoded

differently, evoke different reactions (emotions, beliefs, etc.).

Simple - but hard to remember when the (emotional) heat is on, especially since your circle of associates will likely agree with your negative interpretations, lending what seems like validity to your judgments about the other person or group. And the subtle tension fueled by such negative beliefs makes it likely that future interactions will further reinforce the current outcomes.

Does this mean that you should never have negative judgments of others? Absolutely not. Besides the fact that such a suspension of interpretation would be virtually unachievable, it would be undesirable as well. Honest and timely critical feedback is a vital factor in a high performance workplace. What it does mean is that it is useful for you to be as skillful as possible in describing the behavior that led to your interpretations of others (especially if you are an authority figure giving them performance feedback!), and that you should leave ample room for questioning your own interpretations.

In other words, don't get so attached to your interpretations that you defend them and close your mind to other possibilities. Keep your anterior cingulate cortex switched to "open learner." If you are being objective you will understand that your initial interpretation of someone's words and actions may be very different than what they meant. Close gaps by being specific about what you think they said or did (keeping in mind that they may not describe their words and deeds the same way), and about the emotional impact your interpretation of their words and actions is having on you. The good news is, you have the ability to reconsider your own interpretations, and that is a critical step for breaking any patterns of misunderstanding that are needlessly complicating your relationships at home and at work.

Wallen states: "I know myself by my intentions; I know others by their \_\_\_\_\_."

How would you finish the sentence? Think of your response, and then continue reading.

If you said, “I know others by their behavior,” your answer reflects the dominant cultural perspective of our times. In other words, most people would give that answer. It is part of the subtle victim mentality we spoke about earlier. The solution is seen as being located outside of the self. “I know them by their behavior; for things to be different, their behavior has to be different.” It follows that your efforts will be on analyzing them and trying to change them (or getting rid of them). And since the people around you are operating in the same cultural mode (answering the question the same way), that seems to validate your perspective. “Don’t talk crazy. Everyone knows the world is flat!” But is it?

Wallen’s completion of that sentence is a radical shift. “I know myself by my intentions. I know others by my interpretations.” I know you by the stories I *make up* about what I believe your words and actions *really* mean. This leads to an empowering possibility. If I change my stories, I change my reaction. In other words, I create my own reactions. A subtle shift, but radically different than popular belief. “You made me angry!” Nope. “I interpreted your words and actions as an attack, as an attempt to thwart what I want, and my thoughts aroused anger within me.” And if one is really objective they might add, “And frankly, there’s a good chance I misunderstood what you meant to convey.”

“I know you by my interpretations” is both a sobering and calming perspective. Rather than believing, defending, and reacting to your own interpretations, if you maintain awareness of the possibility of misunderstanding (an awareness that will have a grounding effect), you open the door to more rational relationships – you will calm the limbic and put the prefrontal cortex back in charge.

### Activity:

Write down the interpretive words you used at the beginning of this chapter.

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Be a detective of your own interpretations. What were the words or actions that led to your choice of those words?

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Think of the person you hold in the highest regard in all the world. If they did or said the same things that you have listed above, would you interpret them in a different light? Strictly for the purpose of increasing your awareness of how you give meaning to other people's actions, interpret the words and actions you have listed in a manner that would make you feel appreciative of the other person. (Please note: I am not trying to trick you into appreciating this other's words and actions. I am simply trying to give you insight into to how your own process of interpretation works).

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Now let's look at the Interpersonal Gap from yet another angle. To understand your own reactions and to convey useful feedback to another, it's important to be as clear as you can about what "action" you are interpreting. When you are conversing with someone, what sort of behavior are you taking in?

For our purposes, there are three primary sources of behavioral information: words, body language, and tone of voice. Words are what the person is saying and what you are hearing them say (which may be two different things!). Body language is constant, and includes the powerful information conveyed by facial expression. Are they smiling? Frowning? Looking at you? Leaning towards you? Leaning back? Tensing their muscles? Slumped in their posture? Folding their arms? All body language provides information about the sender of the message, and is open to interpretation by the receiver. Last but not necessarily least, does the tone of voice match the words being conveyed? Think of the various tones that could be used with the words "Thanks a lot." As you can probably surmise, very different messages can be conveyed, depending on the tone.

A famous study by Dr. Albert Mehrabian assessed where the receiver tuned in for understanding, when the messages from these three aspects of behavior (body, tone, words) were inconsistent. Mehrabian's research breaks them down into percentages. What percentage do you think you get the message from, when there are mixed messages from the sender? Take your best guess, and then turn the page:

Body Language: \_\_\_\_\_%

Words: \_\_\_\_\_%

Tone: \_\_\_\_\_%



In Dr. Mehrabian's research, these were the percentages:

Body Language: 55%

Tone: 38%

Words: 7%

If you answered differently, that doesn't invalidate your answer. You may be getting more of your information from one or two of these sources than did the people in the study, or you may be closer to the study's numbers than you realize. Either way, your ability to be specific about what you are reacting to will increase your own clarity about your reactions and improve the clarity of the feedback you give to others. For example, when you believe you are receiving a mixed message, you could think or say something like this: "when you said you were happy, you were frowning, so I didn't believe it." Compare that to somebody being effected by the same behavior, and thinking or saying, "liar." Feedback which primarily conveys specific behavior is generally less inflammatory than feedback which primarily or solely conveys judgments (interpretations). It's also more likely that the receiver and the sender can learn from and act on behaviorally specific feedback. The ability to give behaviorally specific feedback, free of interpretations, is essential if you are in a position of supervision, and important at home if you want less fighting and more understanding. Frankly, if you can't be behaviorally specific, you are better off not saying anything at all. How you put things and what you focus on does matter. Activities to sharpen your skills are soon to follow.

You can also pay attention to the alignment of these three variables in your own communication. How aware are you of your own facial expressions? Do you smile when you are anxious or delivering a serious message? Many people smile because they are afraid of how the message will be received. Others cover

their inner state by never varying their expression. Unfortunately, either behavior is likely to be confusing to the person on the receiving end. And neither behavior protects you from conveying *something*, and sometimes conveying messages very different than what you intend. Ironically, people who have a more or less consistently blank facial expression, especially if they are in positions of authority, are often miss-interpreted more, because people have less to go on and are filling in the blanks with their own imaginations (and with authority figures, they often imagine the worst).

If you want people to get a clear message, try smiling when you like what's happening, and looking serious when you feel serious. Family Therapist Virginia Satir calls this match between your inner experience and your outer expression "congruency." You started life that way. When you were happy you looked happy, when you were sad you looked sad, and so on. If you have ever been around an infant, you know this to be true. From that point on, we all learned habits of what to show and what not to show. Through persistent intentional effort, you can unlearn those habits which are no longer serving you well, and relearn how to be congruent when you want to be.

The same is true of tone, and of words. As the Toltec Mayans have known for thousands of years, your words are powerful. Endeavor to say what you mean, and mean what you say. Be kind with your words, to yourself (in your head) and about others. Keep your word.

Wallen identified four ways to close interpersonal gaps. Read on and experiment. Remember, not every experiment will go the way you want it to. Learning new behaviors can be awkward, and the people you are with may not know what to make of your efforts. But just because you fall down doesn't mean learning to walk is a mistake. If the voice in your head starts being negative the first time you try new behavior and the interaction doesn't go the way you want, challenge that filter! Thank goodness that

filter wasn't in place when you were learning to walk and talk! You can stumble and still move forward! It doesn't mean you, or the method, are a failure! Be clear about what you want, and go after it! The more you try on the behaviors in this book, the more you'll forge your own path, your own style, and create more of what you want in your life!