

GROWING THROUGH CONFLICT. PERCEPTIONS, ASSUMPTIONS & BELIEFS.

An article written by John Sautelle - Principal of performgroup.

To understand what is often happening with conflict in relationships in the workplace, and to deal with them more effectively, we need to understand the process of how we make meaning of the world around us, the role that beliefs play in that process, and what happens when we make false assumptions based on those beliefs. Central to this process is our Reticular Activating System (RAS). What on earth, you might ask, is our RAS?

Have you had the experience where you were at a social gathering, straining to hear the person you are talking to because of the loud background noise, when suddenly you hear someone on the other side of the room mention your name? Or have you planned to buy a particular type of car and discovered that every second person seems to be driving one?

In both of these situations your "Reticular Activating System" has been at work.

The RAS is a group of cells at the base of the brain stem (about the size of a little finger) that receive input from our sensory systems. It is like a filtering system, interpreting and reacting to information from within the body as well as external signals like sight, sound, smell and taste.

We receive enormous amounts of information through our senses. Even though it appears that all of the information is recorded at an unconscious level, we are only consciously aware of a fraction of what comes in. Our reticular activating system filters out the unimportant information so that we are consciously aware of the things that are important to us. In some ways it works like a film director. Imagine a large crowd scene in a movie, a multitude of action, colour, movement and sounds. The cameras have recorded everything, but we see and hear the things the director wants us to focus our attention on.

This filtering effect has enormous impact in our relationships. When I form a strong belief about you, my RAS kicks into action, merrily filtering what happens from then on. I become aware of the things you do that support my belief, and filter out things that don't support it.

The process goes something like this:¹ (The process described is very similar to the "Ladder of Inference" described by Peter Senge in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing*)

Sensory Input - This is the information we take in through our senses what we see, hear, physically feel, taste and smell.

Awareness Filter - This determines where we place our attention, what we become consciously aware of.

Meaning - This is the meaning we give to what we become aware of. We do this by making assumptions and drawing conclusions based on existing beliefs which come from our past experience.

New Belief - This is the belief that the meaning we have given to what we became aware of is accurate and "real". This belief itself can become a new "awareness filter" through which we will interpret future experience.

Action - This is what we do based on our new belief.

To bring this theoretical model to life, let me give a simple illustration of how it works in practice.

Some time ago I was running a Negotiation Skills training session. A couple of hours into the program I was in the middle of explaining an agreement focused model that is dear to my heart. One of the participants, Bill, challenged the model by stating that it wouldn't work in the cold hard world of business negotiations.

Naturally enough, my awareness filter drew my attention to this! Without being consciously aware of it, I assumed that Bill's intention was to undermine my position as a trainer and concluded that he would be a pain in the neck for the rest of the day. I formed the belief that he was a troublemaker who was out to make life difficult for me. That belief itself became a strong filter through which I interpreted what happened in the training room for the remainder of the day.

My failure to check my assumptions about Bill's intent in challenging the negotiation model, coupled with need to defend my beliefs about the model, resulted in a lost

If I hadn't been mindful of my role as a trainer, and to the needs of the group, it most likely would have resulted in overt rather than covert conflict between us.

The impact of this unconscious filtering process, and the associated tendency to make false assumptions about intent, has been evident in pretty well all of the mediations I have conducted over the past 13 years. Let me share one of those mediations with you to further illustrate how this happens.

The mediation I am thinking of involved two very successful, but different senior executives. Gillian was in charge of the institutional lending section of a large finance company. She was dynamic, creative, outgoing, a big-picture thinker, had an intense dislike for routine procedures, thrived on change and liked to think outside the square. She wasn't good at implementing new initiatives, but had the sense and awareness to ensure there were people around her who were.

In terms of length of service, Aravinda was one of the most senior executives in the company. He had traditionally worked in the area of acquisitions and mergers, regularly won new deals and brought in more fees than just about anyone else. With some misgivings he had agreed to join Gillian's section and take on the challenge of helping to build up the institutional lending side of the business. Introverted by nature, he was careful and methodical in his approach.

The relationship between Gillian and Aravinda was awkward from the outset. Part of this was because of their very different personality preferences, something which neither of them seemed to be consciously aware of. As time went by, they each established strong filters through which they interpreted, often inaccurately, what the other person said and did. False assumptions were continually being made about the intent they had towards each other, and their fundamental need to be treated with respect and understanding was often ignored.

Their relationship deteriorated to the extent that the conflict between them began to impact on their productivity. It was also creating a very unpleasant environment for those who worked around them.

Eventually, with some pressure from the CEO, they decided to bring me in as a mediator to help them work through the conflict they were experiencing. I discovered that apart from

not recognising and managing their personality differences, they were doing what we all do much of the time - unconsciously climbing up the "Ladder of Inference" without checking their perceptions and assumptions. Much of their communication was through e mail, rather than face to face or by phone. Here is one example of what was going on:

Aravinda & Gillian were both scheduled to attend a two day symposium on corporate governance. It was an important opportunity to network with potential new clients and fly the company's flag.

In the week leading up to the symposium Aravinda was overseas at an international conference. When he left he was a little concerned about a major infrastructure lending deal which had been set in motion. Technically it was Gillian's client, however he had been working on the file in the background from the outset.

Although nothing was expected to happen while he was away, he had little trust in one of parties involved. Before leaving he took the precaution of giving Gillian a quick update on where the deal was up to and asked her to look after it for him while he was away. Within a day or two of Aravinda's departure the deal leapt into life with a vengeance and Gillian had to drop everything else to deal with it.

Aravinda arrived back from his overseas trip the day before he and Gillian were due to fly to Melbourne for the corporate governance symposium. He systematically began working through the back-log of e mails that had accumulated in his in-box. Amongst these was one from Gillian which he got to late in the day. It went something like this: "Welcome back. The Jones deal has blown up.

There were problems with the way it was being structured. Have been working on it constantly for the last three days. Still not under control. I think I'll have to stay and miss the symposium." Aravinda replied: "Sorry to hear that. I will let you know how it goes."

The day after Aravinda returned from the symposium he met with Gillian. She seemed very uptight, a bit like a pressure-cooker that has been left on the stove for too long. "What's wrong?" Aravinda queried. "The Jones deal. It's a mess and I've been left with egg all over my face with our client!" Gillian exploded. She didn't say anything about the symposium.

At the management meeting at the end of the week Aravinda gave a short summary of what had happened at the symposium. He concluded with "It's a pity Gillian couldn't make it." At that point Gillian stormed out of the meeting.

Through the process of mediation we were able to unpack what was going on beneath the words in this situation. This paved the way for a fresh start in the relationship. Here is what surfaced:

GILLIAN:

Assumptions - Aravinda would offer to work on the file so that she could attend the symposium

Conclusions - Aravinda doesn't care about me or the client. He is only interested in promoting himself. That is why he has gone to the symposium when he knows he should be working on this deal.

Beliefs - Aravinda is selfish and ambitious. He probably wants my position as head of the section. I'd better protect myself.

Actions - Expressions of anger and frustration. Subtle undermining of Aravinda with the CEO and other executives. Avoidance of contact with Aravinda. Assuming that Aravinda has an ongoing intention to make life difficult for her.

ARAVINDA:

Assumptions - Gillian has decided to hold on to the deal to make sure we keep her client happy. It is really important that someone represents the company at the symposium, she must want me to go.

Conclusions - After the meeting with Gillian it is clear that she doesn't trust me with the responsibility for a deal as complex as the Jones case. She has lost confidence in me and is probably going to try and somehow get rid of me.

Beliefs - I am being treated unfairly. Gillian is totally unreasonable and difficult to work for. I have to protect my position here from now on.

Actions - Time and energy spent consolidating position with the CEO and other senior executives, subtle undermining of Gillian's position. Assuming that Gillian has an ongoing intention of making life difficult for him.

The catch 22 is that when beliefs like those described above are firmly in place, they become filters through which both Aravinda and Gillian interpret future behaviours. Their Reticular Activating Systems swing into action. Where future actions and behaviours are capable of being construed as being harmful, then that is how they will be interpreted.

Malicious intent is automatically attributed when in fact it may not be there. Any actions or behaviours that challenge these negative beliefs will simply be filtered out, they will never reach conscious awareness. This phenomenon is at the heart of much inter-personal conflict and more often than not the people involved are blissfully unaware of what is really going on.

WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

Becoming aware of the process is the starting point. Each time you find yourself in conflict with someone else, here are some constructive things you can do that will make a difference.

With your perceptions:

Consciously identify any assumptions you have made about the other person's motivation which may or may not be true; Check the validity of those assumptions; and Identify the extent to which your own beliefs could be distorting your interpretation of what is going on, and if so, put them to one side.

With the other person's perceptions:

Put yourself in the other person's shoes to see if you can identify any false assumptions they might be making about your actions; If you suspect that the other person has made false assumptions, check this with them and, if appropriate, set them straight; Identify any strong beliefs they might have which are distorting their interpretation of what is going on; and explore those beliefs with them

To help with the above, and to get a different perspective on what is happening with the conflict, try imagining you are an impartial person looking on who does not know you or the other person involved. What would this neutral bystander observe? How would they describe what is happening between you and the other person?

Taking the above steps can help resolve much of the conflict that takes place in relationships. It is a powerful way of treating conflict with another as an opportunity for growth and development, rather than something that is bad and either to be avoided, or to be "won" at all costs.