



Dropping Poor Me

Change your mind and your circumstances
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Maximising Your Personal Effectiveness

It starts when we are young and Tommy hits us on the playground. Our sobbing, “Tommy hit me and made me cry!” is met with the first lie, “You poor thing, that Tommy shouldn’t have hurt you and made you so upset!” Tommy may have hit you and physically hurt you, but he has no ability to determine how your brain will respond. That power lies with you.

However, this one small lie teaches us to believe that our responses are at the mercy of outside forces and builds the foundation for learned helplessness. No matter how confident, able and powerful you may be, all of us, at one stage in our lives have felt like a victim of circumstances or other people. When you realise this is never true, you begin to see a range of opportunities for new actions and can achieve a breakthrough in power and effectiveness with your relationships and commitments.

An opportunity for power

What would happen if instead your teacher told you “Tommy can never make you upset. Your emotions and response are yours to choose.” While at first this may sound unsympathetic, it sets in motion a train of thought that is far more empowering as it reminds you who is in control of your emotions.

Each brain is uniquely wired to respond to a particular situation based on conditioning that starts as soon as we’re born. At the same time, neuroscientists have discovered that the brain is plastic and able to change. So, while it may sometimes feel that our habitual responses are set in concrete, we can, in fact, change our behaviours at any time. Sounds simple, but it’s not easy. However, this is where true power begins; when we are the ones choosing how we’ll respond to a situation.

Managing our responses starts with being mindful, which is to be aware of both the situation as it is and your own mental processes in dealing with what is happening. Mindfulness puts you in the drivers seat, controlling which direction you’re heading and how you’ll respond.

When we are mindful and able to take an objective view of the situation, we can choose what response will be appropriate in the moment. Back at the playground you might instead choose to get really angry and hit Tommy back, or laugh at him and pretend it didn't hurt. Whatever your response is, it is yours to choose based on what you think is appropriate and will have the desired effect. This sends a powerful message to the brain that you're in control, not your circumstances.

This is not the same as thinking you can control other people or situations. Things will always happen that are beyond our control. It's a fact of life. But recognising that you are in control of your mind is the first step towards experiencing real power.

Get the whole picture

Less obvious are the underlying dynamics in human relationships that lead to these situations. But when you fully understand what is going on behind the scenes, you'll come to know that you have more of a say in the interaction than you realise.

According to Danish Mathematician Tor Nortranders in his book, *The User Illusion*, the brain takes in and processes 11 million bits of information per second unconsciously, but only about 40 bits consciously. Moreover, the conscious brain lags behind the unconscious by a good 1/2 second.

What this means is that whatever you are aware of in a situation is just a tiny part of all that whole picture. When you are interacting with other people, you are both sending and receiving unconscious signals from them, and they are, in turn, sending and receiving unconscious signals from you. All of this happens continually as you both consciously interact. While you may not be aware of what you're communicating, you are in fact, sending messages to the other person, including how you might respond to their behaviours.

Ever see someone attractive at an event who you want to meet? You might catch their eye with a quick glance before looking away. They may smile, or even hold your gaze for a moment. You've just given them permission to come over and say hello and they've indicated their interest. While nothing has been said, a whole conversation has just taken place. What happens after that is a product of the signals you've just sent to each other.

Now, apply that kind of thinking to someone you have a problem with. Here's where it gets a bit tougher. In many ways, human beings actually prefer to be at the mercy of others rather than acknowledge their responsibility when it comes to conflict. We much prefer to see Tommy as evil, acting without provocation than consider what we might have done to encourage his behaviour. But, we may have unconsciously played a role in that dynamic.

Think about someone you have a conflict with that seems intractable. Now, ask yourself the following questions:

- ▶ How do I feel about this person?
- ▶ What might I be communicating to them that encourages their behaviour?
- ▶ How have I contributed to this dynamic?
- ▶ What can I do differently that I may not have tried before?

Start to challenge your perceptions of the other person and the situation, notice the dynamics and how you contribute to the situation. Do you send unconscious signals to the other person that you'll tolerate their behaviours? Do you unknowingly (or sometimes deliberately) antagonise them? Whether we like or dislike someone, human beings are pretty weak at hiding their feelings. Those unconscious signals are there, manifesting in micro expressions, comments and behaviours that you may not notice, but nevertheless are the human smoke signals conveying our thoughts and emotions.

By challenging your thinking and assumptions, you'll start to notice details you may have previously missed about the other person, the interactions and your own behaviours. While at first this may be an uncomfortable process, it will lead to greater clarity, power and effectiveness in resolving issues and feeling in control of your circumstances.

As the CEO of the Institute For Human Potential, Lisa Rubinstein brings the insight and wisdom of almost two decades of transforming the lives and careers of leading executives in Australia and internationally as an executive coach and trainer. She has invested years of learning and research into the source of leadership excellence, the findings of which are published in her book, *True Leadership: The Source of Success*.

For more thoughts on leadership and performance see Lisa's blog at:
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