



The New Sciences and the Learning Organization Part 3B: Old Brain Tricks

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“In an uncertain world, those who survived always had their emotional radar — call it instinct, if you will — turned on. And Stone Age people, at the mercy of wild predators or impending disasters, came to trust their instincts above all else. ... evolutionary psychology suggests that emotions can never be fully suppressed. That is why, for instance, even the most sensible employees cannot seem to receive feedback in the constructive vein in which it is often given.”
— Nigel Nicholson, *How Hardwired Is Human Behaviour?*, *Harvard Business Review*, (July-August 1998)

Imagine that a team is having a meeting. Joe, a team member, is telling the other team members

about a great idea. He’s very excited about this idea, emphasizing how good it is, and telling everyone how it will fix the problems the team is facing. As he steps up to the white board to illustrate his point, he flashes his charismatic smile and continues to talk. When he’s done writing on the white board, he turns, makes a final convincing point, and asks the team members what they think. He’s convinced that the team will see it his way. Therefore, he’s not prepared to hear the feedback. When it comes, it hits hard and deep.

One person tells him what’s wrong with the idea. A second person tells him she doesn’t understand what’s so great about the idea. A third person tells him that the team has tried a similar idea in the past and it failed. Joe doesn’t know what to say. He’s dumbfounded. He can’t believe what he’s just heard. His inner thoughts start rushing by: “Can’t they see how great this idea is? What’s wrong with this group?

Are they out to get me? I think this is personal! *I know this is personal!*” He stands up, and says, “You just don’t understand it, do you? You just don’t get it! This always happens to my ideas. *I don’t need this.*” Then, he pushes his chair from the table and storms out of the room.

Why is feedback so hard to take? According to evolutionary psychology, we’re not genetically designed to take criticism well. We evolved in small groups that kept us safe. Being part of the group was essential to survival, and this required people to follow the norms of the group. Any dissent from the norm could be seen as a threat to the group’s survival. Criticism is a form of dissent; in some cases, dissent from the majority. Therefore, the wrong kind of criticism could result in being punished by the group — and one of the more severe punishments was banishment to the hostile environment, resulting in certain death. This genetic heritage is still with us. When we receive criticism,

we treat it as a threat that could result in being shunned or banished. No matter how advanced we are, our brains still operate in primitive modes, especially when we feel threatened.

In the last newsletter, we talked about the human fear of loss. In this newsletter, we're suggesting that the human fear of criticism is a form of loss, often called a *loss of face*. Loss of face happens when you believe you have lost your standing and credibility in a group. If we analyze what happened to Joe above, we can now see that his internal conversation was his attempt to deal with his perceived loss of face. He believed that the team didn't like his idea, which his brain quickly translated into the belief that *the team didn't like him*. To minimize this feeling, he reacted defensively in a manner that made him believe that he was in control, when, in fact, he was acting out of desperation. When this happens to Joe or to anyone, including you, it's the genes that are in control, not the person.

According to Warren Farrell, author of **Women Can't Hear What Men Don't Say**, learning how to take criticism is key to overcoming this fear and taking back the control. Farrell makes an interesting point: most communication courses stress that giving feedback well is crucial. Farrell disagrees. He claims that giving feedback well doesn't work as well as we think. In fact, any form of feedback, irrespective of how it's given, sets up a defensive reaction in most people. Farrell maintains that learning to receive poorly given feedback is a more useful and effective skill. "Learning

to handle criticism is a prerequisite for success."

We agree. In fact, this is precisely what we teach people to do in our long-term team development programs. Team members learn how to tell each other their perspectives, and how to receive an other's perspective in a non-defensive way. The first step is to create awareness of what evolutionary psychology tells us about our defensive stance. The second step is to practice and learn from each situation in which the defensive stance surfaces. Once people understand how their brains trick them into feeling certain ways, they can start to practice dealing with those feelings. The breakthrough comes when people recognize the moment when their brains are tricking them.

Creating Awareness

Here's how you can develop awareness of your defensive stance and how it happens. Consider a recent situation in which you felt defensive. Analyze your perspective in this situation by answering the following questions:

- What made me feel defensive?
- Which of my buttons was being pushed?
- What was my reaction to the situation? What did I do? What did I say?
- What reaction did I get from the other person? How did I interpret this reaction?
- What made me believe that I needed to take this situation personally?
- What does this tell me about myself?

Once you can recognize that you're about to enter your defensive stance, ask yourself these questions:

- Why am I feeling threatened?
- Am I taking this the wrong way?
- Am I open, or am I closed?

Practice, Practice, Practice

Practice these techniques in any situation. Find a partner in a friend or colleague, or even a whole team that is willing to learn with you. We've found the best results occur when the whole team helps each of its members to learn how to take any form of criticism well. The key lies in your willingness to view criticism as an opportunity for growth and learning.

"If we are to prepare our children to be pioneers of political, social, or scientific change, we have to do more than protect them from criticism, verbal abuse, and neglect. We have to prepare them to experience it as a growth opportunity."

— Warren Farrell, **Women Can't Hear What Men Don't Say**, (1999)

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