

Is the 'Little You' Watching?

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How aggressive are you at seeking feedback? Does your organizational culture value seeking and volunteering feedback? Do you welcome feedback? Or do you cringe when someone offers it?

Would you like a confidential third party observer available at your request to watch you interact with others and provide you with information about your effectiveness? How about an ally who understands your thoughts and motives perfectly and has your interests in mind?

I am sometimes requested by clients to serve as a third party observer. My role in the interaction is to monitor what happens and report my insights when requested. As an observer, I am to avoid any participation in the dialogue, to be as inconspicuous as possible, and to comment as objectively as possible on the process I observed.

Among the remarks I might share are who said what, what tone of voice was used, what facial expressions I noticed, how the other person reacted, how warm the interchange seemed to be, etc. Third party observers are sometimes used by individuals who want to improve their relationships with others. They are sometimes used in legal situations to serve as an independent witness.

A disadvantage of using a human observer is an application of what was originally known as the "Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle." Werner Heisenberg, founder of quantum physics, sought to measure the location and momentum of subatomic particles. He was frustrated in his attempts, because every effort to measure these characteristics changes either the position or speed of the particle. That is, the act of measuring actually changes what is being measured.

Applied to human beings, behavioral psychologists call that concept "the observer effect." Think of times when you've had someone observe your behavior. Maybe it was a boss watching you interact with a customer. Maybe it was a teacher observing you take an examination. How did you feel or act? Perhaps you were nervous, or less aggressive, or you exaggerated something to make sure the observer saw it. Maybe knowing you were being watched distracted your thoughts.

You have available to you, however, a third party observer with none of those disadvantages. It's an imaginary observer, a "little you," that you can engage at any time.

I like to think of the "little you" as about three inches in height and stationed in a position to see well the facial expression and body language of both you and the person you are addressing. The "little you" has powerful observation skills and can be totally truthful with you.

The "little you" is a tool for your self-awareness. In addition to observing your behaviors, the "little you" has access to your thoughts, values, and motives. The "little you" can tell when you are stretching the truth, when you are being selfish, and when you are genuinely motivated to serve the other person.

You are trapped in your own body. You can see the rest of the world, but you can't see your facial expressions and much of your body language. Therefore, these contributors to your communication are normally outside your awareness. Ah, but the "little you" can see everything the other person sees!

The other person is very aware of your body language. He or she is continuously looking for consistency between the words you are saying and your facial expressions and tone of voice.

The "little you" also recognizes the impact of your appearance. Not literally, of course. The "little you" is merely an application of your imagination. So, imagine that the "little you" has great insight, sensitive to your underlying intent and feelings, but also aware of your facial expression and body language.

With a little practice, the "little you" can be a superb ally in helping you increase awareness of your effect on others. The "little you" can become one of your most trusted feedback providers!

Additional thought:

In a conversation with a client about this article, we explored the meaning of the word “detached.”

Yes, the “little you” is detached from the “big you,” and that characteristic is what gives the concept power. The “little you” is far less interested in the outcome than the “big you” is. You’ve got an agenda you’re working. The “little you” is far more objective about what’s happening between you and that other person. The “little you” is more focused on the process of what’s happening (the mechanics of the interaction—body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice) rather than on the content. When the “little you” communicates his or her observations to you, you are able to accept them because you realize the “little you” isn’t working any particular agenda. That is, the “little you” isn’t trying to tear you down or build you up--the “little you” is simply reporting what he or she is observing.

Said another way, the “little you” is neither “attached” to your agenda, desired outcome, and methods, nor is the “little you” non-attached (totally unconcerned) with you and the other person. The “little you” is somewhere between “attached” and “non-attached.” The “little you” is perfectly situated to be as unbiased an observer--a teller of truth--as is possible. The “little you” is detached, yet able to be an excellent ally!

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