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Perspective Analysis

Tools for Shifting Perspective to Increase Effectiveness

By Donny Ebenstein

This article presents an approach that promotes more effective communication and collaboration. Called Perspective Analysis, it addresses a widespread and well-known problem—much of the blockage and breakdown in communication occurs when people are unable to see beyond their own perspectives. Perspective Analysis enables people to utilize a set of simple and powerful cognitive steps. It does not require that one’s counterpart participate; rather, it can be employed unilaterally. In addition, the method can be used by people of almost any level of skill; while the concepts are simple, with practice they can be applied with ever greater degrees of sophistication and nuance.

This approach comprises three modes of analysis that help people step beyond their limited perspectives.

1. Systemic Awareness

The first mode is called Systemic Awareness. This refers to becoming aware of the role each party in an interchange is playing in response to external pressures. The following story will help illustrate.

Hans was a manager who worked for the Information Technology (IT) department at a large bank. He frequently fought with a colleague named Linda over project deadlines. Hans described Linda as being very pushy and demanding. No matter what timeline he offered her, she would push him to finish her projects faster. Their constant conflict had seriously strained their relationship.

Although Hans focused on Linda’s pushy personality, I decided to explore the systemic dimension of the situation. My dialogue with Hans went as follows:

CONSULTANT: Aside from her own desire to get her work done, why would Linda press you so hard for quicker turnarounds?

HANS: What do you mean?

CONSULTANT: I am assuming that Linda has external clients that she must satisfy, right?

HANS: Definitely.

CONSULTANT: What do her clients say to her?

HANS: The external clients are very pushy. They make extreme demands, things that are totally unrealistic. But the culture of our firm is that we will move mountains to please the client, so there is not much hope of getting Linda to push back on her clients. Her clients are not going to change.

CONSULTANT: So Linda is passing onto you the pressure that her clients are putting on her?

HANS: Yeah, I guess so.

CONSULTANT: And how do you tend to respond to her pressure? Do you get her work done faster as a result?

HANS: Sometimes I work faster just to get her to leave me alone. I may even get things done ahead of schedule, which, of course, is good.

CONSULTANT: How can you get things done ahead of schedule?

HANS: Well, every good IT manager builds a “cushion” into the deadline, just in case

there are unexpected delays or testing the code takes longer than expected.

CONSULTANT: So the time estimate you give her might be a bit longer than the job will actually take, because of the cushion?

HANS: Yes, but I need the cushion so that I have something to negotiate with.

CONSULTANT: Are you the only IT manager who has these issues with internal clients like Linda?

HANS: No way. Most of the IT managers complain about the deadline negotiations that take place in one form or another.

This discussion revealed the systemic nature of the conflict. Linda's behavior was not aimed at Hans personally. Rather, it was shaped by the pressure she received from her own clients, which she then passed on to Hans. The culture of the firm encouraged people like Linda to respond to clients by pushing harder on the internal staff. Conversely, when confronted with demanding colleagues, Hans and other IT managers learned to build a cushion into deadlines, which could be dipped into when they were pressed. And when pressuring IT managers such as Hans yielded results, Linda's pushy behavior was reinforced and continued.

What is significant is that much of this problem goes beyond Hans and Linda as individuals. Indeed, this dynamic was played out by many IT managers and their internal clients. It is largely created by the intersection of their roles, rather than the intersection of their personalities. Linda's priority is to push for the earliest possible completion date. Hans' priority is to build in a cushion to reduce the risk that he will not meet his target deadline. Thus, the problem is *systemic*; it is built into how the organization functions. Nevertheless, the tension is played out by individuals, who can easily overlook the systemic aspect of the dynamic.

There are numerous instances of these types of systemic tensions in corporations, in which roles and priorities are in conflict. For example, when confronting a regulatory issue affecting the business, a corporate Compliance Department may

be inclined towards maximum caution in order to avoid potential regulatory difficulties, even at the expense of business opportunities. Conversely, the company's Business Development Department may be inclined towards an aggressive stance to maximize the business opportunity, even at the risk of potential regulatory difficulties. In such a situation, the two departments (and the individuals representing them) are likely to experience systemic conflict, which can lead to interpersonal friction as it did for Hans and Linda. Such systemic

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tensions may be unavoidable in the corporate world. They may even be useful, if through the interplay of conflicting priorities, the policy that emerges offers the best balance of conflicting corporate needs. But this will only happen if the individuals involved can work through the conflict, rather than become mired in it.

The advice for individuals experiencing a systemic conflict is to raise their awareness of the systemic nature of the dynamic. Why? Because recognition that it is the *roles* that are in conflict, rather than the individuals, can unlock more constructive behaviors, such as more open communications and engagement in joint problem solving.

In Hans' case, once he perceived the systemic nature of his conflict with Linda, he became much less defensive and suspicious of her and her motives for pressuring him. He was able to discuss the problem with Linda as follows:

HANS: Linda, I know you are under pressure from your client to get the ABC project done right away.

LINDA: You bet I am. You know how clients are—they want it yesterday.

HANS: Definitely. And I know that you feel the timeline I gave you before was exaggerated and included too much "cushion."

LINDA: That's right. You guys always pad your timelines, and in this case we can't afford that. I need to get back to the client with a quick turnaround date—

that's what "customer focused" means.

HANS: So here's how I see the issue. We need to find the right balance between meeting the client's expectations on the one hand, and being realistic with the client on the other. I know you are pressuring me because the client is pressuring you. I realize that it's not personal. I want you to understand that when I push back on you, it's not because I don't want to help—it's because it's my job to make sure things get done right and to be realistic with my clients about what we can do, and by when.

LINDA: Well, what about my client's expectations?

HANS: I think the goal should be for you and me to find a balance between accommodating the client and setting realistic expectations with them. Because if you are able to get me to say 'yes,' but it's not done on time or

correctly, the client will still be unhappy. And if I get you to back off, but the client is angry and withdraws his business, I have also failed. We are on the same side here, although sometimes it feels like we are pulling in opposite directions.

Application

How can one practice and improve at identifying systemic tensions at work in their interaction with others? The following tips can help.

- » **Look for the roles you and the other person are playing in the organizational context:** In this case, framing the issue as “the IT person” and “the business person” (rather than “Hans” and “Linda”) helped highlight that the conflict was based on the roles they each played, rather than on their personalities.
- » **Look for other parties that may be pressuring you (or the other side) and thereby influencing this dynamic:** Linda was getting pressure from her clients, which she in turn passed on to Hans. Recognizing that the conflict goes beyond the individuals directly involved is another clue that there is a systemic tension.
- » **Look for a repetition of this dynamic with other players:** Hans may have a similar problem with other clients, or Linda may have a similar interaction with other IT staff members. Again, the problem is not limited to Hans or Linda.

2. Describing Their Narrative

The second mode of Perspective Analysis is learning to see the other person’s point of view, telling their narrative *as they would tell it themselves*. This skill combats the tendency of people in conflict to describe their counterpart’s viewpoint in negative and simplistic terms. In cases where it is difficult to pinpoint the systemic tension, or in cases where the tensions are not systemic, but instead are caused by personality clashes or differences, this mode is often useful. Here is an example:

Sam asked for help in dealing with his colleague, Chris, with whom he frequently collaborated on various projects. Sam explained that Chris always waited until the last minute before finishing anything, not realizing or caring that this creates stress for other people, particularly for Sam. I asked Sam if he had tried to discuss this with Chris, and he said that he had, but it had gone poorly. I suggested that we role play his conversation with Chris, me playing Chris, and Sam playing himself. The conversation went as follows:

SAM: Chris, I need to talk to you about how we work together. You always wait until the last minute to get things done, and that’s not acceptable.

CHRIS: I always get things done on time. I prefer to wait until I know exactly what the client wants before I invest too much effort. Over-planning is a waste of time. Besides, I have other things that I could be doing instead.

SAM: But it’s inefficient, and it’s not fair to everyone else.

CHRIS: It is efficient for me. I don’t like working so far in advance of a deadline—I don’t focus as well. It’s not fair to ask me to work on your schedule.

SAM: It’s not my schedule—it’s just acting professionally. You’re being completely self-centered!

At this point I stopped the conversation. Sam confirmed that this was a realistic portrayal of his interactions with Chris. I asked if he felt like he understood Chris’ point of view, and he said that he did. When asked to summarize Chris’ point of view, Sam said, “Chris doesn’t like to plan things, and so he refuses to. And that is insensitive and self-centered.”

The gap between Chris’ own narrative, on the one hand, and Sam’s *perception* of Chris’ narrative, on the other, was clear. In Chris’ own story, he articulates reasons for not wanting to plan. He feels that planning too far in advance is inefficient; it makes it harder for him to focus. Chris enjoys the flexibility of not over-planning. He feels his time can be better spent on other things. Yet Sam’s *description* of Chris’ story glosses

over these explanations. It’s as if he doesn’t hear Chris at all.

What is even more striking about this interaction is that Sam is *unaware* of the fact that he is missing the nuances in Chris’ story. I refer to this as *nested unawareness*—being unaware of the nuances of the other person’s story, and also *being unaware of being unaware*. Sam truly believes that he *gets* Chris’ story, but to the observer, it is apparent that Sam is missing much of the nuance, not to mention the legitimacy and emotion, in Chris’ narrative. Instead, he simply labels Chris as “not liking to plan,” “insensitive” and “self-centered.”

I confronted Sam with his oversimplification of Chris’ narrative, and I invited him to see things as Chris might. I explained that while he believes his method of scheduling work is objectively professional, Chris sees it as Sam trying to impose his work style on Chris. And for Chris, Sam’s planning is just as frustrating as Chris’ laid-back attitude is to Sam. For Chris, Sam seems like a rigid, inflexible over-planner.

Sam begrudgingly listened, and then protested, “But Chris is wrong.” I replied, “Yes, he may be wrong, but that is not the point. To make this situation go better, you need to first understand what Chris thinks and how he feels, so that you can discuss the situation constructively.”

Following this discussion of Chris’ point of view, I asked Sam to summarize his colleague’s point of view. He said, “I guess Chris feels like I am trying to force him to do things my way, which means planning. And he doesn’t like to plan. So he probably feels that not only am I asking him to do something he doesn’t like to do, but am forcing it on him by saying ‘It’s the only legitimate way to do things’ rather than asking him to do it for the benefit of the company.” At this point I felt that we were making headway. I then said to Sam, “So if you were a reasonable person with Chris’ viewpoint, what would you want?” And Sam, after thinking a minute, said, “I guess I would want that person to listen to me and respect my point of view. And I would want to feel that I’m choosing to compromise by doing more planning than

I'd like, as opposed to being forced into changing my natural work style."

I then invited Sam to try role playing a conversation with Chris. I urged him to incorporate some of what he had learned about Chris' perspective into the conversation. The new conversation went like this:

SAM: Chris, I want to talk to you about how we work together. I know we have different work styles, and I want to find a way to collaborate so that we will both be happy.

CHRIS: Sam, I know you like to plan everything in advance, but I always get things done on time. I prefer to wait until I know exactly what the client wants before I invest too much effort. Over-planning is a waste of time. Besides, I have other things that I could be doing instead.

SAM: I understand where you are coming from. You like to be flexible, and I like to plan. I'm not saying you are wrong, although I like my way better, I'm just saying we need to find a way that works for both of us. I'm not trying to force you to do it my way; but at the same time, I don't want to be forced to do it your way. How can we compromise?

CHRIS: I'd be willing to compromise on this. What do you suggest?

Thus, overcoming nested unawareness happens in two stages. First, one must become *aware* that the oversimplification of the other's narrative is occurring. Once that realization is made, one can then seek a fuller appreciation of the other's narrative. When the other's narrative is fully appreciated, it can be summarized and respected in the dialogue, which in turn promotes more constructive behaviors and a willingness to compromise.

Application

How can one improve at describing their narrative? Begin by assuming that you have failed to tell the story completely accurately. While this may not always be true, it is a useful assumption. Then, try re-telling the story, with the following guidelines:

- » **Put the other person at the center of the narrative.** When telling the other person's story, all the other players and other issues (including you) should revolve around the other person. It is likely that that person experiences the world in just that way—with him or herself at the center.
- » **Attribute virtuous motivations to the other side.** People tend to see themselves as good and as doing the right thing. So if there is any way to rationalize or explain even questionable

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behavior, try to incorporate it into the other side's narrative.

- » **When imagining how the other party interprets the motivations of others (including yours), consider attributing nefarious motivations.** This is difficult, because we know our own story and why our behavior is legitimate - which means we are likely to overlook the elements of their story that assign us a negative role. Therefore, it's helpful to lean against this tendency by telling the reverse narrative. For example, in the other side's eyes, you are the villain.
- » **Interpret any vague information in the light most favorable to the other person.**

3. Objective Self-Perception

The third mode of Perspective Analysis is learning to see oneself more objectively. This can help you identify your own (often invisible) contribution to the dynamic, affording you a more accurate perception of your own tendencies. This mode is most helpful when one is plagued by the

same issue in multiple and often diverse situations. Here is an example:

I led a workshop in which a participant named Joy was struggling with her new role as a team leader for software development. Joy described her difficulties with a team member named Hank. Hank was both very talented and very busy. He loved developing new applications and tended to take on too much work. The problem was that Hank was not getting his work done on schedule. While missing deadlines by a few days was common in

the group, Hank went far beyond this; he was sometimes as much as two weeks late, which affected other team members' progress. Frequently Joy would simply do Hank's work herself, just to keep the project moving forward. She was frustrated with his behavior, but unsure of what to do.

I asked Joy what happened when she raised the topic with Hank. She said that he minimized the problem and promised to be more punctual in the future. She said that Hank had made this commitment several times, but that nothing had really changed.

I asked Joy if we could role play her conversation with Hank. It went like this:

JOY: Hank, I need to talk to you.

HANK: Okay, what's up?

JOY: Do you know when you will have your project assignment completed?

HANK: Yeah, it's almost done. I'll try to get it to you next week.

JOY: Okay. That would be great.

HANK: Sure, no problem.

I invited Joy to be more direct with Hank about her frustration and the affect his tardiness was having on her and the team. We role played again:

JOY: Hank, it would be great if you could finish the project assignment as soon as possible.

HANK: No problem—but you know how overloaded I am.

JOY: Yes, I understand that. Well, it's very important, so please try to get to it when you are able.

HANK: You got it.

I asked Joy if she felt she was being direct, and she said, "yes." I then asked the group that had been observing the role play if they thought she was being direct, and they all said, "no." I shared with Joy that Hank, as played by me, definitely was not "getting" how frustrated she was.

I asked Joy to have the conversation once more, only this time she should try an *overshoot*. The goal of an *overshoot* is to stretch one's communication muscles, not to practice communicating in a realistic way. Therefore, in the *overshoot*, I asked Joy to be as assertive and direct as possible. She should feel free to yell, get angry, use profanity—anything that would communicate her frustration with Hank. Indeed, Joy should exaggerate her behavior in this role play and strive to go beyond what would be permissible in real life.

Following these instructions, Joy's *overshoot* conversation went like this:

JOY: Hank, I need to talk to you.

HANK: Okay, what's up?

JOY: Do you know when you will have the project assignment ready?

HANK: Yeah, it's almost done. I'll try to get it to you next week.

JOY: Hank, I really need your work. It's holding everyone else back, and it wastes a lot of time when you are late.

HANK: I'm sorry, but I'm really overloaded.

JOY: Well, this needs to get done, because it's urgent. I know you have other things on your plate, but you made a commitment to me and to the team. Maybe we should have someone else

assigned to the team to take your place if you are too busy.

HANK: No, I want to be on the team. I'll get right on it.

JOY: Can we agree to a specific date? Can you have it done by this Friday?

HANK: Yeah, it's almost done. I will make sure to have it by Friday.

JOY: Thank you.

When asked if she felt that she had been overly assertive, she said "yes," and that she could never do that in real life—it would be rude.

I then turned to the group and asked for their input. Everyone said that Joy's conversation was entirely appropriate and professional, and not at all extreme. I shared with Joy that I, playing Hank, did not experience the conversation as rude or overly aggressive. In fact, it was quite possible that until a direct conversation like it took place, Hank was not even aware of Joy's frustration or the effect his lateness was having on the team.

What is most striking about Joy's situation was the gap between how *she perceived herself* and how *everyone else perceived her*. Joy thought that she was being direct with Hank and telling him her frustrations, when in reality she was quite timid and indirect. And when urged to exaggerate and behave as assertively as possible, Joy produced a dialogue that was firm but polite and certainly not inappropriate. And yet Joy saw herself in that conversation as being over the line. This discrepancy is her learning challenge.

Application

How can one utilize this mode of Perspective Analysis? The first part is learning to question one's own self-perception. Simply put, I ask myself if I am seeing myself as others see me. Am I as sympathetic (or friendly, direct, open, patient, sensitive, etc.) as I think I am? Do I come across to others as I think I do? Consistently questioning one's behavior and its effect on others is a habit that can be learned and applied constructively.

The second part—correcting a

Donny Ebenstein, JD, is a Managing Director at Consensus, a negotiation, conflict resolution, and international peace building consultancy, where he oversees the firm's Professional Development practice. An advisor to the New York University Law School Mediation Organization, he previously taught negotiation at Hebrew University Law School, Bar Ilan Law School, and the Israel Center for Negotiation at Technion. Donny holds a JD from Harvard Law School. He can be reached at donny@consensusgroup.com.

misperception of oneself—is more difficult to achieve alone. Joy may wonder if she is direct enough, but it would be difficult for her to find out on her own. She could turn to a trusted source, such as a friend, colleague, family member or mentor, and ask for honest feedback. Those who know her best are in a good position to offer her insights. Joy can also experiment with a more direct style and look at the results. If, over time, she receives positive feedback (such as Hank getting his work done on time) from behaving in a way that to her feels "too pushy," that new behavior will be reinforced and her internal barometer of appropriate behavior can be recalibrated.

Conclusion

The Perspective Analysis method is designed to heighten one's awareness of interpersonal dynamics. Applying this method requires practice, a training of one's mental and emotional "muscles," so that the technique can be applied. Learning and practicing how to see the system, to tell the other person's narrative, and to see oneself accurately encourages the mental and emotional flexibility that can lead to strong communication skills.