

The Benefit of the Doubt

"I think that whenever soul is present, it's because what you're doing, whom you're with, where you are, evokes love without your thinking about it. You are totally absorbed in the place or person or event, without ego and without judgment." - Jean Shinoda Bolen

Did you ever notice that when you make an error, mess up, miscalculate and the like you tend to blame your environmental, organizational, or life circumstances for your action? That is, "it's not about *me*?" On the other hand, when someone else messes up, do you notice how often you point out some character flaw in them that (you assume) caused them to behave badly or inappropriately?

What's operating here is a psycho-social dynamic called the Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE). In essence, the FAE says we have a tendency to focus on another's personality, character, values, motives or attitudes when we judge their actions while discounting their immediate situation or life circumstances as a reason for their behavior. We assume we "know" the other person and then judge them on the basis of "our knowing," rather than on the social or environmental context which may be influencing them.

HOWEVER, when it comes to *me*, it's never about *me*! It's always about my life circumstances or social context; it's NEVER about my own personality or character.

Consider:

1. On the way out of the building, I pass a coworker and say "hi." S/he acts like s/he doesn't even see me, eyes down, nary a word. I assume s/he's thoughtless, self-absorbed, unfriendly or even an absent-minded jerk.
2. My partner returns home after work and immediately goes to his/her computer. Not an "hello" or a glance – just a bee-line movement past me to rush online. I choose to make a judgment about how disrespectful, unkind, unloving, cruel and uncaring s/he is.

In both circumstances, I have made judgments and assumptions that point to the other's personality or character – on the basis that I "know" them and what's going on in their life.

What I Don't Know:

In the first example, the individual just learned her seventeen-year-old son was in a car accident – is in the hospital in critical condition; and in the second, my partner was told at 4:45 pm there was a chance she would be let go next week and she should check her email tonight for further information (unavailable when she was at the office) about the company's possible next steps.

The important question is: "Why does it seldom occur to us that folks like this may be 'otherwise engaged' – in deep thought or reflection based on some challenging life circumstance or event?"

The point here is to be self-aware, conscious of how much our ego-mind, our judgmental-comparative, reactive mind, our human side, drives our habitual and

patterned behaviors and thoughts during the day, especially when it comes to interacting with and judging others.

The Antidote to the FAE

"When we focus on clarifying what is being observed, felt, and needed rather than on diagnosing and judging, we discover the depth of our own compassion." - Marshall B. Rosenberg

One way to understand the FAE phenomena is to be curious about how we view others, and connect with others – at work, at home, at play and in relationship. What is the "frame" within which we relate to others?

Try this exercise:

Imagine three walls. On one there are ten framed pictures (all ten are the same picture) of the individual in the first situation above. On the second wall there are ten similar pictures of your partner and on the third wall, ten of yourself – remember, all ten are the same. Under each frame is a blank label.

Next, label each individual in the pictures in any way you wish.

When done, consider the labels, including those of yourself. How many of the labels reflect a "task-orientation" and how many reflect a "person-orientation?" How many reflect an objective, functional, role-playing, positional or impersonal orientation? How many reflect a subjective, heart-felt, or human orientation?

Who's judging - and the benefit of the doubt

The labels provide insight into what's operating in us when we judge others. When we come from an impersonal, officious or "business-like" orientation to the world (yes, even at home, at play and in relationship), we're more inclined to be harsh, objective and judgmental. On the other hand, when we come from a heart-felt, subjective and personal orientation, it's often easier to be more conscious of our reactivity, willing to relate to the "person" as opposed to the "function" and be more willing to give another the benefit of the doubt – making no assumptions about another's character, attitudes, values or motives. We allow that we don't know chapter and verse about another (even our closest friends or loved ones) and thus refuse to judge them.

In fact, when we view others from a heart-felt place, we choose to be empathic, compassionate and accepting - understanding that, yes, another's life circumstances and context can affect their behavior. No assumptions; no inferences.

"If you are pained by external things, it is not they that disturb you, but your own judgment of them. And it is in your power to wipe out that judgment now." - Marcus Aurelius

Why the FAE is Our Default Mode

Simple. It's easier (and less scary) to judge others than to honestly, sincerely and self-responsibly get to know ourselves. Judging others lets us off the hook of self-awareness, self-responsibility and self-management. Judging others' motives and

values allows us to forego looking at the Truth of our own values and motives underneath our behaviors and attitudes.

Too, because we, in fact, don't know (and/or don't care) about what's really going on in another's life, we find it easier to focus on the person, rather than their context - assuming, comparing and criticizing based on what we think we know (make up?) about another.

Native Americans approach the FAE in this way: "Don't judge a man until you have walked two moons in his moccasins."

Consider:

Everyone is in Chapter Three of their life. No one knows what transpired in Chapters One and Two. Don't assume you know.

Upon arising in the morning, no one says, "I'm going to be a jerk today." Don't assume you know their motives for acting.

Showing up in life - at work, at home, at play and in relationship - authentically, in integrity, and from a heart-felt place, we are more inclined to forego the FAE trap, or prejudge others. When we relate to others from a heart-felt, compassionate place, we can choose to be more accepting, forgiving, empathic and understanding.

So, some questions for self-reflection are:

- Am I often prone to inferring what I think is motivating another to act negatively?
- When I behave inappropriately, do I usually justify my negative behavior by pointing to outside events and circumstances, and not to *me*?
- Do I own my negative actions?
- Do I ever consider how I'd behave if I were in another's moccasins?
- Do I consciously observe, watch and witness my negative actions?
- Am I willing to consider unseen causes for another's negative behavior?
- Can I be compassionate toward others who behave inappropriately?
- Am I generally judgmental about others? What does being judgmental get me?
- Is there someone on my team or in my family about whom I can be less judgmental, and more understanding?
- Am I a master of the art form of blame?
- How do I feel when another judges me - especially when they have no idea of my life situation or context?
- What would my life be like if I practiced being totally receptive, without judgment, to the circumstances, events and people in my life?

"It's not differences that divide us; it's our judgments about each other that do." - Margaret Wheatley

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