

Bob Gunn, Editor

# The Effect of Affect

BY ROBERT GUNN & BETSY RASKIN GULLICKSON

“You should have seen Karen; smoke was coming out of her ears,” Jerry told his rapt audience. “She was presenting right after Judith, who’d dazzled the group for more than an hour. The room was so small that Judith sat down right under Karen’s nose. And

just as Karen was building some momentum, Judith let out a loud descendant of a yawn, tilted her chair, and stretched like a large cat. Almost hit Karen in the face. Well, Karen was fit to be tied! She could have wrung Judith’s neck. Daggers were shooting out of her eyes. ‘How could she do this to me?’ Karen thought. ‘And what do I do now!!!’”

We’re not doing this story justice. Jerry is a gifted entertainer and, as he told his tale, folks were laughing so hard they couldn’t catch a breath. There was just one problem: Jerry was wrong.

Yes, Judith did yawn loudly. And, yes, Karen did glance at her. Even so, Karen wasn’t angry. Startled? Yes. Concerned about audience reaction? Yes. But the internal dialogue Jerry described existed entirely in *his* head.

As Jerry performed, Karen wanted to laugh along with everyone else—except for one thing. Jerry’s beliefs

about her are so strong that they actually influence her behavior. Normally witty and insightful, Karen becomes somber, dull, and unimaginative around Jerry.

“When Jerry talks about me, I’m dumbfounded,” Karen groans. “He’s so wrapped up in his picture that I don’t feel that he can actually hear or see *me*. But the real kicker is that when I’m around Jerry, I start fumbling and mumbling. I don’t even recognize myself!”

This phenomenon reflects a central concept of quantum physics: The presence of an observer changes the nature of the observed. If the physicists have it right, if it’s indeed impossible to observe a thing without changing it, imagine how much impact one person’s perspective can have on another’s performance! Translated to the work environment, that means that what the boss believes about us influences our ability

to be productive, and our perspective changes our subordinates as well.

Our *affect* has an effect.

Imagine yourself in a discussion trying to surface solutions to a marketing problem. George brings up off-the-wall questions and ideas on a track different from that followed

by everyone else. The senior person in the group rolls his eyes, shrugs his shoulders, doesn’t even acknowledge that he’s heard George, and turns to someone else. As the meeting goes on, George’s voice gets higher, he feels awkward, and eventually he stops talking entirely.

But what if George has been invited to the meeting because he has a special expertise? The leader looks upon him with respect. When George says something “different,” the leader reflects on it, asks George questions while showing a desire to be taught, or carefully records George’s suggestions.

George’s knowledge base is the



same in both situations. But because the first leader doesn't believe that George can make a worthwhile contribution, George is thrown off balance. The manager's concern is proved: George *doesn't* perform well in that situation. But he's a hero in the second meeting. It's not that the second leader is fooled by a title or a résumé. Instead, that manager's regard makes it easy for George to keep his bearings. He's able to sustain a calm confidence, the platform from which he can access resources of innate intelligence.

"The 'anointed' in organizations, those high flyers who move quickly through the ranks, are given at least some of their wings through our desire to observe them as winners," notes Margaret J. Wheatley in *Leadership and the New Science*. "We endow their ideas and words with more credibility. We entrust them with more resources and better assignments. We have already decided that they will succeed, so we continually observe them with the expectation that they will confirm our beliefs."

But this is more than an "emperor's new clothes scenario," a form of self-hypnosis in which the group sees only what they've been told to expect. More important than third-party delusion is what happens *inside us*. Specifically, we need to be aware, and wary, of when our feelings of insecurity have been triggered.

In such situations, the conventional response is to put on our mental/emotional armor and forge ahead. We may make progress in the short term, but armoring is ultimately an unsatisfactory strategy. In order to feel invulnerable, we cut ourselves off from being touched by others—simultaneously clamping down our connection to the well-spring of insight, intuition, and

ingenuity.

So how can we remain steadfast in the face of criticism or contempt? How can we stay grounded while remaining open to the feelings of others? First, we need to remember that any interaction actually embraces no less than three conversations: (1) what each of us says to the other; (2) what is being "said" in the other person's thinking; (3) what we are "saying" to ourselves through our own thoughts.

Approach relationship building by acknowledging that you can never assume the content of the other person's thinking and by constantly checking in with your internal dialogue. In addition to your specific thoughts—"She must think I'm crazy," "Now I'm cooking!" "What should I say?"—notice your mental tone. Is it nervous? Confident? Excited? Fearful?

That may be hard to do when you're caught up in a heated debate, but your body gives you clues. Is your voice changing—perhaps higher in pitch, louder, faster, or swallowed back in your throat? Is your breathing fast or shallow, or are you actually holding your breath? Are you tapping your finger or shaking your leg?

In short, learn to recognize the physical clues that you are being pulled emotionally off balance. Countering habitual actions can help short-circuit thought reflexes. In other words, consciously changing behaviors can remind us to avoid "autopilot" reactions. Then we can access our wisdom and common sense.

For example, Betsy reflected on meetings that left bruised feelings: Even if she'd gotten what she wanted, she'd blown her cool and was left with a bad taste. She noticed that in some meetings she'd lean forward in

her chair. That happened when someone hit on a sensitive area; Betsy realized that her mind would speed up, running defensive arguments round and round as the other people were talking. When things begin to escalate now, Betsy consciously sits back in her chair. That simple action helps her stay at a level of consciousness at which she is better able to sustain the right tone and make appropriate responses.

Body awareness can also turn outward. Take note of your subordinates' physical clues. Are their shoulders and arms hunched tight or hanging loose? Are their eyebrows drawn together and jaw clenched? Is their voice high and thin? Are they giggling in quick jerks? Or do their words resonate, punctuated by laughter that comes from deep in the belly? Such signs telegraph whether they are off balance and, therefore, tentative or grounded and confident.

Once you are conscious of subordinates' behaviors, turn your attention to the *effect* of your *affect*. What does your attitude toward others bring out in them? If your tone is sharp, brusque, or dismissive, you're unlikely to get good-quality thinking from subordinates. But if you maintain a stance of curiosity, consideration, and warmth, you may be amazed by how wise and creative other people have suddenly become! ■

*Bob Gunn is the co-founder of Prescient Leaders, a consulting firm focused on executive effectiveness. You can e-mail Bob at [rgunn@prescientleaders.com](mailto:rgunn@prescientleaders.com).*

*Betsy Raskin Gullickson was an EVP for Ketchum Communications and is now a leadership coach and author.*