



A shift in perspective can change our attitudes and our outcomes

I'm writing this in the early morning while savoring the effects of a shift in attitude before I finished my coffee. My friend Maggie had forwarded me an email: Happy IVGLDSW Day! Today is International Very Good Looking Damn Smart Woman's Day. I don't appreciate most "send-this-to-five-people-you-know" emails, but this one offered perspective and attitude. Example: When life hands you lemons, ask for tequila and salt and call me! This article is about perspective and the results it produces. I began today by looking into the mirror and thinking, "What happened to you?" Now that I've shifted to "Good morning, you very good-looking, damn smart woman!" I'm smiling and I have a new perspective about the day ahead.

— Susan Scott

By Deli Moussavi-Bock

About a decade ago, I came across the following passage from Haim Ginott, child psychologist and psychotherapist and a parent educator.

"I've come to a frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my personal approach that creates the climate. It's my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humanized or dehumanized" (Ginott, 1972).

This quotation speaks strongly to me because I see its application to every individual. As a parent, as a human

being, as a team member, a boss, I create the weather around me, and I either humanize or dehumanize those with whom I come in contact, one interaction at a time. It is a frightening conclusion, as Ginott said, and an indication of the inordinate power we each have to drive our lives and the relationships we foster or destroy.

Years of education research indicate that what teachers believe about students and learning influences their instructional choices. This applies to anyone. Beliefs lead to self-fulfilling prophecies. If I find myself believing my students, my colleagues, or my boss are annoying, how do these beliefs impact how I behave with them? Does my behavior then influence the results I have with them? You bet.

Our beliefs inform our practice. It's human nature to look outside for cause and effect, but our greatest power

for shifting our results lies within. I've repeated this mantra to myself over the years: My greatest work is inner work. I feel 80% of the work in my outcomes is dealing with my own beliefs and behavior, by far the greatest challenge.

Gaining perspective on a situation or a person can change everything about my conversations with that person and our collective outcomes.

The most common outcome of conversation is misunderstanding and misinterpretation. It is human nature to misread a situation or a person completely, and it's stubborn to insist that we didn't.

CONTEXT DRIVES RESULTS

Each of us has a filter through which we interpret everything that's



Moussavi-Bock

In each issue of *JSD*, Susan Scott (susan@fierceinc.com) explores aspects of communication that encourage meaningful collaboration. Scott, author of *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success At Work & In Life, One Conversation at a Time* (Penguin, 2002) and *Fierce Leadership: A Bold Alternative to the Worst "Best" Practices of Business Today* (Broadway Business, 2009), leads Fierce Inc. (www.fierceinc.com), which helps companies around the world transform the conversations that are central to their success. Fierce in the Schools carries this work into schools and higher education.

Columns are available at www.learningforward.org. © Copyright, Fierce Inc., 2012.

said or done. This filter — our context — is made up of our beliefs, attitudes, and opinions, many of them unconscious. Through our context, we constantly interpret what people do and say. Where we often get it wrong is we assume our interpretations are true without checking them out. And then we pay a steep price by locking into our own beliefs or the ongoing conversations we have with ourselves.

My context drives my behavior, my results, and my life. It's up to me to examine my beliefs, understand which ones are in my way, and make some choices.

A school leader once told me he had one of the greatest lessons in his life as a middle school teacher. He believed his students were difficult, lazy troublemakers. The more he reinforced this attitude, the more they acted out. The more they acted out, the crabbier he got. The crabbier he got, the worse their behavior became. He realized he fueled the cycle, and his students were in

large part reacting to his behavior.

I've often found myself struggling to let go of a context that is off base, especially after I have felt betrayed, hurt, let down, or have lost trust. Yet I find that lack of trust itself creates more lack of trust. In my work with Fierce in the Schools, one of the biggest challenges team members bring up is allowing someone to overcome past behavior. It often goes like this: The team has someone who has had problematic behavior in the past. The team has labeled this person to the extent that when he or she genuinely strives to change, the team won't allow it. We narrow our context about a

person and make that person incapable of change in our minds until one day all we can see is what he or she does wrong. Who becomes the problem now? We do.

It's up to us to examine our beliefs, make them conscious, and understand how they affect the relationships and results we want.

DAILY MAINTENANCE

I examine my context on a regular basis by asking:

- What are my current beliefs? What is my overall outlook?
- What is the quality of the conversations I am having with myself? With others?
- What are the stories I'm telling myself about my colleagues, my students, or myself? What are the implications of these ongoing stories?
- How does my context affect the way I lead or interact with others? Is my context shutting me down from understanding them or their perspective?
- Do some of my beliefs need to be examined?

MAKE A CHOICE

In my work with teams, the most common pushback I get regarding choosing a new context is often, "but I genuinely do work with a difficult person — they're nasty, difficult, vengeful" I don't doubt it's true. While I can't control other people's reactions or the events that happen, I do have the power to choose my own context.

The question isn't, "Can I justify my context or beliefs?" The question is, "Are my beliefs working for me? Is my current context helping me to get the results I want?"

I can choose a new context. Am I willing to go into the conversation open, willing to listen, learn, suspend my own preconceptions, and hear the other person's perspective? While I

don't need to agree with that person, I do need to understand what he or she is saying. It takes a conscious choice and a willingness to live in the present and let go of the past in order to see myself and others clearly and not through the cobwebs of old thoughts, feelings, and beliefs.

The fastest way to shift our context is by engaging in new behavior. New behavior helps us get out of our rut and establish new patterns. We see things from a fresh perspective.

New behavior means practicing new approaches, allowing people the grace and freedom to grow and change. Err on the side of the generous, and assume positive intent.

Over a decade ago, I found myself working on a team I didn't like. A friend suggested I shift my perspective: Look at it like a light switch. Flip the switch, go into work tomorrow with the assumption that everyone on that team loves and respects me. I tried it. The shift in my perspective shifted the team's behavior toward me. It was a humbling experience.

By choosing a new context and remaining open, I open the door to genuine curiosity, understanding, and progress. A closed mind shuts off our ability to receive insights and move forward.

The topic of context is universal, human, and one of the common threads running through all the school work I have done. It is also the topic I most need to remind myself about. The bulk of our work in determining whether we humanize or dehumanize each other rests in our beliefs about one another and, most importantly, about ourselves.

REFERENCE

Ginott, H. G. (1972). *Teacher and child: A book for parents and teachers.* New York: Macmillan.

•
Deli Moussavi-Bock (deli@fierceinc.com) is director of training for Fierce in the Schools. ■

It takes a conscious choice and a willingness to live in the present and let go of the past in order to see myself and others clearly and not through the cobwebs of old thoughts, feelings, and beliefs.