The Choice & Impact Model by Diane Wilkinson

'How can I have the impact that I want on others? What do I do with feedback that takes me by surprise?'

It is all too easy to pass an instant, critical judgement on people who give us unexpected and (perhaps) unwelcome feedback. It is harder to consider how to respond differently.

If, for example, I am running a coaching session or facilitating a group and someone says 'What do you mean?' or 'What do you want us to do?' then it is clear that my intention has not been properly heard or fully understood by that person. I can blame them, and simply assume they have not been listening. Or I can choose to stop for a moment, understand that I have not achieved the impact I wanted, and look at what I could do differently.

Harriet Lerner (2004) says, *"We may be putting our energy into trying to change the other person, rather than putting that same energy into getting clear about our own position and choices."*

So what choices do we have? How can we achieve the impact we want? And what can we do if our intentions are good and solid, but others simply do not respond as we expect?

Introducing the Choice/Impact Model – what impact do I have on others?
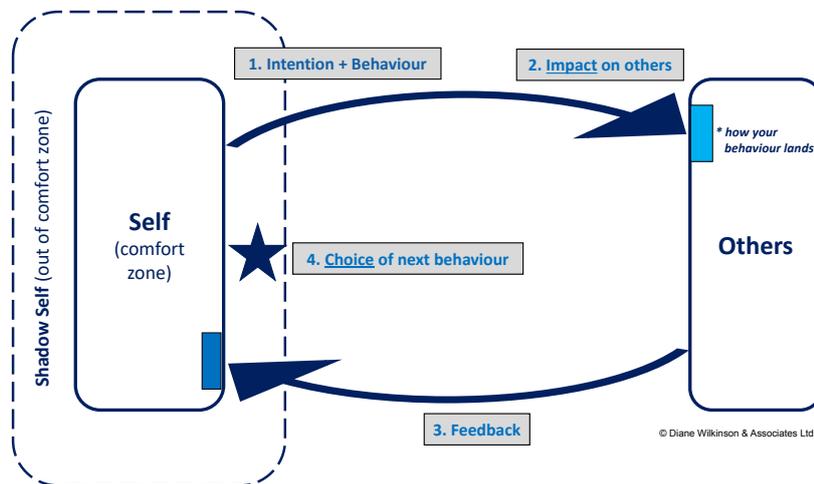
Coaches often tell me they want to be more confident and comfortable at senior leadership team meetings. I have found that being clear on the desired outcome makes it far easier to create a plan for getting there – a technique I have also found useful when working with clients.

Recently, for example, a coachee told me he was not being heard in meetings. People said they valued his contribution, yet he never got a word in edgeways. But he also said that he never liked to interrupt, as that would be impolite. We looked at the outcome he wanted – to have some input into the way the project was run – and explored the options he had for getting heard in the meeting. These were in his stretch zone, but were also a long way outside his comfort zone.

How do we apply the model when working with clients?
If people are to achieve confidence then I believe they will often need to step out of their comfort zone. In MBTI terms this is our 'shadow self', where we need more energy to operate successfully. I find it helpful to compare this with Karl Rohnke's model of comfort, stretch and panic zones. It is valuable to explore what 'stretch' means for us, and to use the feedback about our impact that we get from others to choose what that stretch should be.

What if I feel 'uncomfortable' with the new approach?
When trying new behaviours I believe we sometimes need to make a choice between impact and comfort. For example, if someone with a quiet voice is not getting 'heard' at meetings, they may need to speak more loudly.

In a group I will suggest they try to shout, after checking that the group gives them permission to do so and that they give themselves permission to try. We will then rate it out of 10 on volume. Invariably that person will rate themselves at 8 or 9, while the group will rate it only at 4 or 5 – a good example of unexpected feedback.

The person then has a choice about how to respond to that feedback. Speaking more loudly may be very uncomfortable for them, and they may well feel it is beyond their capability. So I offer them a choice. Do they want to achieve the impact they wish for, and perhaps feel uncomfortable at first? Or do they want to stay in their comfort zone?

Panic zone — Where disbelief lives and fear stops all action

Stretch zone — Where excitement lives, action is taken and fear disappears

Comfort zone — Where fear lives, action is limited or sporadic, and excitement wanes

How can I find the boundary between the 'stretch zone' and the 'panic zone'?

When learning to practice new behaviours it is useful to identify the boundary between the 'out of comfort' or 'stretch' zone and the 'panic zone'. For both practitioners and clients it is better to get a benchmark from other people rather than using our own parameters, so we understand how much we may need to stretch, and what support we might need to do so.

Someone trying a louder voice could begin in a safe environment in front of a mirror at home, or even practice in the park with their children. I often encourage clients to try new techniques with their children at home: it is safe, and children can be quick to give honest feedback about what is and is not acceptable. Another approach might be to experiment at work, and ask a trusted colleague to observe and give feedback – for example, by once again rating their volume out of 10.

What is the effect of cognitive dissonance?

In this choice between impact and comfort, I have recognised that clients often face a 'dissonance' – which the Oxford Dictionary defines as '*the state of having inconsistent thoughts, beliefs, or attitudes, especially as relating to behavioural decisions and attitude change'.*

It is helpful to recognise that choosing the impact we want may create uncomfortable cognitive dissonance as we process the feedback we have received and compare it to the usual way we operate. This is the critical point in the model, where we have a clear choice: to achieve the impact we want, or not to achieve it but to stay within our comfort zone.

Good intentions are not enough. If your voice is perceived as too quiet, you will not achieve your objective of being heard.

Where has this model come from?

The choice/impact model is derived from my own experience of difficult relationships in which I was misunderstood, no matter what my intention was – and in which the way my behaviour 'landed' was the exact opposite of what I had intended.

At that time a senior consultant reminded me that 'we are responsible for the impact we have on others'. This led me to explore the same issue in my supervision, and in my growth and development as a coach/consultant – and out of this came the design of the model and the belief that we are responsible for the choice and the intention of our behaviour. However, acknowledging good boundaries is important- although we can try to change the impact we have, we are not responsible for the reaction of the other person.

How can we apply the model to ourselves as coaches and consultants?

We need to define precisely what we are responsible for, and what responsibility falls to the other person and should be left with them. This leads to the clear definition, in the model, of the choice we have as individuals.

We may or may not get the impact we want, but it is our responsibility to try something different rather than blaming the other person. And so, just like our clients, we may need to move out of our comfort zone and use our 'shadow' self to get the impact that we want. For example, we may need to ask an incisive question, with few words and at a fast pace, if we are trying to achieve an impact we believe may be helpful for a client.

As Cheung-Judge (2015) says: *"Within this self, the total personality, there is known and unknown, (persona and shadow) – they are a collective phenomenon. But for anyone who wants to use self to engage clients and to effect change, they need to pay deliberate attention to assessing and assimilating the shadow into a healthy persona. The more the practitioner learns about this self, whether it is persona or shadow, the more effective the self as an instrument of change can be."*

To sum up: whether we are coaches, consultants or coachees we need to develop the self and the out-of-comfort-zone selves in order to be whole and rounded people.

References

Lerner, Harriet G: *The Dance of Anger: A Woman's Guide to Changing the Patterns of Intimate Relationships,* Element, 2004

Cheung-Judge, Dr Mee-Yan and Holbeche, Linda: *Organization Development: A Practitioner's Guide for OD and HR*, Kogan Page, 2015

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