Resolving conflict with a 21st century mindset

Results in a prehistoric 'freeze/flight/fight/fright' reaction

Humble beginnings …

Think back to cavemen and dinosaur shows. The caveman stealthily hunts in the woods; the cavewomen gather berries near their caves. Suddenly the caveman finds himself looking straight at a T-Rex! The caveman's reaction is purely emotional and driven by a strong need to survive. He has two choices: he can stand his ground and fight, hoping to kill or maim the dinosaur, or he can run in the opposite direction of his camp and find a cave or somewhere else to hide. In either situation, his fight or flight reaction kicks in. Adrenaline causes his breathing rate to increase, heart to pump faster and pupils to dilate. He needs to have all his critical resources available to him to fight or escape from this predator.

Fast forward to the early 1800's where the settlers traveled across the United States in covered wagons. The travelers are near their new settlement. Suddenly hollering Indians waving bows and arrows surround them. Fear strikes every settler. They have two choices: try to outrun the Indians or stand their ground and fight. In either instance, the breathing rate of each settler increases while adrenaline pumps through their veins and other stress hormones increase. Just like the caveman's reaction.

Fast forward one more time to today's environment. Tom, a business professional, scans an email from one of his colleagues implying that, at the previous day's meeting, Tom was not as knowledgeable on the project as he should have been. Tom immediately hits the 'reply all' button and fires off his retort, defending his words and position while putting in a few 'digs' to the initial recipient. Tom has chosen the 'stand and fight to defend' alternative; adrenaline causes his breathing to increase and his heart to pound while the stress hormones swirling in his brain increase. Just like the caveman's reaction.

Even though these appear to be completely different situations, they all look the same to your emotional brain and they elicit the exact same intense physical reactions. These reactions are the body's natural response to an emergency, an unexpected crisis or a sudden change to the environment. Remember, emotions occur before rational thought. Your emotional brain sees these types of events as a threat; it does not know the difference between

a threat that literally results in death and a stressful situation that is simply a misunderstanding. Even anticipating a stressful event or reaction can itself bring on stress effects. The constant stress-reaction-to-a-threat that many of us experience can lead to longer-lasting physical ailments such as high blood pressure, headaches and physical pain. Small wonder when at the end of the day, our body collapses in exhaustion!

Instinctive Reactions

In a perceived threatening situation, you have three choices:

Option #1: Freeze. This option is initially an unconscious response. "If I don't move the predator won't be able to see me" is the rationale behind this action. Remember African safari documentaries? The hoofed animals know by remaining motionless that the larger cats will not be able to detect their presence. When the animal realizes that they have been identified they will flee, literally, for their lives.

An overwhelming flooding of feelings causes the freeze. When you freeze, time can suspend for you and for a few seconds and your unconscious intent is to blend into your background until the threat has passed. You remain quiet, unmoving yet conscious of your breathing; you may even put your hand over your mouth to stifle any adverse instinctive reactions. Depending on the duration, this can lead you to a feeling of helplessness.

Tim believed his presentation to the company executives was one of his best. He presented the data in a logical manner and laid out the plans for the new project. The team verified his timeline, and current plans were to come in under budget and before the deadline. He was shocked when his boss' boss attacked his methodology and implementation scheduled. Tim could only stand, stunned and unable to process the onslaught of words assaulting him.

Option #2: Flight. Fear is the primary force that prompts this instinctual reaction. Fear also brings with it a sense of loss of control over your environment. Your initial reaction is to surrender and run to escape to a safer location. This can be a conscious move, opting to stop the unproductive and circular discussion. It can also be unconscious; another person is over-reacting and you physically walk away from the tension and stress the person is creating.

The repercussions of the flight reaction are withdrawal from the conversation and withholding data, which can be either information or emotions pertinent to the discussion. You

believe your value has been diminished; your response is to abandon any attempts to regain your worthwhile contributions. If this has occurred before, your actions mimic those of learned helplessness – why try when you know you will not be successful? Previous similar encounters or situations have taught you to be helpless and inactive.

As Terri read her emails, caller id on her phone indicated Jim was calling her. Terri remembered her most recent interaction with Jim; it hadn't ended well. She felt belittled and embarrassed at his outburst. Not wanting to provoke his anger, she took a few steps back away from him, kept a poker face and thought about something else. It was bad enough that he accused her of not knowing about the project (which was incorrect), he intimated in front of the rest of the team that she was a slacker. Seeing his name pop up in the caller id box, these emotions flooded her; she decided to ignore his call and return to her emails.

Option #3: Fight. Anger provokes this intense response when feeling threatened. It is when our wellbeing is in danger that we choose to fight. That feeling unleashes a firestorm of inflamed thoughts and hormones as we viciously attack our predator. As we get emotionally involved defending our position or our beliefs, we are sure to offend others by speaking without thinking. My research has shown that this is the most common reaction of the three and that there are six couplet reasons what we so fiercely defend. These are not mutually exclusive, and often they tie into each other.

'Fight' can occur in instances other than what Tim experienced at the beginning of this article. Lana is sensitive about her communication skills and her position as manager. When someone asks her to elaborate or explain her thinking, she becomes flustered. Her voice rises in both pitch and volume, and her words stumble over each other. Many of her explanations end with "Because I have done this before", "I know what I am talking about" or "I am the boss!" Her staff is stunned (freeze) because their question was to clarify the information, not to question her methods.

Option #4: Fright. This option is a last resort and is generally accompanied by learned helplessness. Fright typically follows the 'flight' reaction; when you realize that there is no escaping the predator, you feign death or mentally erect a barrier between you and the other person. Fright does not occur first, and does not occur in all situations.

Resolution Techniques

1. The key piece to stop your flight or fight reaction is to break the status quo – get up and walk around, move in your chair, do something to physically move the air around you. This causes your cortisol to decrease and your confidence to increase.
2. Change your perspective and reframe the situation. Put aside your assumptions and what you interpreted as a threat was a misunderstanding. Ask for clarification before you react.
3. Develop an awareness of perceived threat and understand its root cause. Could it be that your brain is remembering an incident from your past that no longer applies? Are you injecting your own assumptions and biases into their words or behaviors? Are you fulfilling your negative expectations?

Conclusion

Our brain instinctively and predictably reacts to sudden and unexpected changes in our environment. We react emotionally before we respond rationally. Threats to our safety and survival are different from years past, yet our brain reacts in the exact same manner. Through understanding our primitive reactions and the basis for the perception, we can contain our flight/fight reaction and respond in a more appropriate and fitting manner.

For additional information ….

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About Shari Frisinger ….

A resourceful, informative and entertaining speaker and presenter, Shari has researched leader communication styles in stress and changing environments. Her Doctorate in Executive Leadership links neuro-science with emotional intelligence, and their effect on a leader's ability to successfully manage rapid change. Her expertise lies in leadership communications, conflict resolution and team building, resulting in leaders understanding their own behaviors and the reactions of others. This results in stronger and more cohesive teams, enhanced creativity and innovation, and a positive impact on the company's bottom line.

Clients utilizing Shari's RADAR Leadership programs realize increased morale, productivity, retention and loyalty, which equates to a stronger bottom line. Her coaching, consulting and training clients include Chevron, Pfizer, Amway, Texas Instruments, BNYMellon, FirstEnergy and Cessna. She has also had several articles published in the areas of leadership and emotional intelligence, including "Emotionally Enabled" in Flight Safety Foundation's AeroSafety World magazine.

When you instinctively react, the situation manages you. Consciously respond and you are in control.

