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Maximizing Situational Intelligence

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Maximizing Situational Intelligence

"The worst student we had, the worst I have ever encountered, was in his life outside the classroom as mature, intelligent, and interesting a person as anyone at the school. What went wrong? . . . Somewhere along the line, his intelligence became disconnected from his schooling."[1]

Contrary to prevalent 20th-century beliefs, educator John Holt found that intelligence is not a fixed attribute; rather, it varies in person to person, from moment to moment, mainly based on our internal perceptions of external situations. Following this premise, perhaps it is possible to help those we interact with to increase their intelligence in key situations. By doing so, we can help them to permanently increase their intelligence, benefitting both their own lives and all they take part in. The task of changing starts with us. We can begin to influence others by internalizing three key principles: seeing people as people, learning to trust others, and showing humility.

> *Live the following three principles:*
> *See people as people*
> *Learn to trust*
> *Show humility*

The idea that people's intelligence is constantly fluctuating based on their situation is a concept I'll refer to as *situational intelligence.* Those who can increase others' intelligence in key situations have great power for good. Think of the impact of teachers who work with students at their full capacity to learn, or leaders who enable the teams they work with to unlock previously unknown potential. Think of the innovation and growth that can stem from such purpose-driven leaders!

Oftentimes in daunting situations, it is easier for people to put up a wall, to disconnect themselves from the task at hand. Our goal as teachers, leaders, and participants in others' lives should be to have a permanent, positive impact through teaching effective thinking and reasoning; however, as we begin, doing so may seem to them like entering a foreign country. We first need to take them there for a few hours, days, or weeks. Over time, they may eventually become citizens of that intellectual country. But first, we need to show them how.[2]

Teachers and leaders—which I will refer to here as *influencers*—play a key role in either building or destroying the intelligence of those they work with (learners, team members, and associates). We can begin to influence others' intelligence for good by internalizing three key principles: seeing people as people, learning to trust others, and showing humility.

Seeing People as People

Left on their own, people are inherently intelligent and innovative. One sixth-grade girl who was considering current educational systems observed, "You know, kids really like to learn; we just don't like being pushed around."[3]

> *"Kids really like to learn; we just don't like being pushed around."*

Instead of attempting to fit others to our own mold, we should work to recognize their innate potential and seek to help them realize their dreams.

In the widely acclaimed book *Leadership and Self-Deception*, the Arbinger Institute outlines a plan for influencing people in a real and powerful way. This book introduces the concept of "getting out of the box," explaining that when we are in the box, we tend to view others more as objects than as people, with needs and wants less important than our own. When influencers come from this mindset, they tend to stifle new ideas and destroy positive change. Everything needs to cater to them and build them up.[4]

Inside the box, we see people as objects. Outside the box, we see people as people.

People coming from within the box struggle to cope with others, communicate well, implement new ideas, and change themselves and others.[5] Thus, the key to effective leadership is to break free of our mental box and see others as real people with legitimate and important needs.

In our daily interactions, we often feel inclined to treat others better. Sometimes we feel a desire to show empathy for someone else—to divert attention when they make a mistake, to try an idea they have before trying our own, or to listen when they aren't feeling understood. As we recognize these feelings for what they are, we are presented with a choice: we can honor them by following through with our actions, or we can decide against taking action.

When we choose to betray our feelings to help, we place ourselves inside the box. Perhaps we sometimes permit this betrayal because choosing to help feels inconvenient, and may appear weak or unprofessional. By doing this, we miss opportunities to serve, and our view of self and others becomes warped. We begin to justify our actions, and therefore have a harder time leaving the box. As a result, both our intelligence and the intelligence of others are minimized.

On the other hand, when we choose to honor our feelings to treat others as real people, more opportunities to serve arise, our perception of self and others becomes more accurate, and intelligence is permitted to increase [Figure 1].[6]
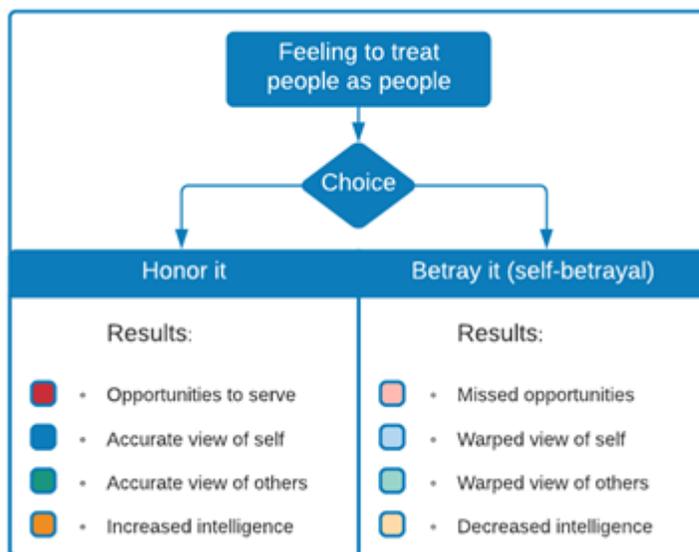

Figure 1: Choice to enter or remain out of the box

By honoring our feelings to see the value and importance of others' needs, we keep ourselves out of the box. As we continue to honor our feelings, we remain in a position to unlock the intelligence of others and open the door to learning.

Enabling Trust

One challenge many influencers face is coming to trust learners. In turn, learners lose trust in themselves, and their capacity for intelligence is minimized.

Parents face this challenge on a daily basis with their children. How much should children do on their own? When should parents intervene? What is the balance between empowering children and protecting them? Sometimes parents choose the seemingly safer route, opting to shield their child from everything, instead of permitting their child to learn.

> *"What is the balance between empowering and protecting?"*

Parents must certainly maintain a balance—many dangers *do* exist that children are unaware of—but most children are very cognizant of their surroundings and careful in what they do. In allowing children to explore and discover, parents are opening the door to real learning.

As a young boy, I loved to climb trees. I would climb with my friends and siblings, and we would work to go higher than ever before. But with every step I took—and every branch I grabbed—I was meticulously careful to ensure I didn't fall. I would test branches to make sure they were safe, look around for other branches to grab in an emergency, and follow the "rule of three" that my parents taught me—to always keep three of my limbs on a sturdy anchor.

One day at a park, my mother was deep in a conversation when the other lady suddenly gasped and exclaimed, "Did you know your boys are up in that tree?!" The lady had a horrified look on her face, but my mother smiled and remarked, "Wow, I didn't know they could do that!" Thanks to my parents' trust, I learned much more quickly; knowing the advice they gave me was for a reason, I felt more inclined to follow it.

This holds true in both the classroom and the workplace. When people feel trusted by others, they push themselves more, learn better, and develop self-confidence. Real trust leads to increased skill and judgment, while a lack of trust leads to decreased skill and judgment, which can be crippling.[7]

> *"A lack of trust leads to lower skill and judgment, which can be crippling."*

In addition, a lack of trust often leads us to over-administer tests and overstate success. In the book *Mindset*, psychologist Carol S. Dweck discusses the danger of basing people's value on external measures of success (things such as grades, praises, or accomplishments). When people do so, they lose their ability to experiment and grow because of an inherent fear of failure, leading to the assumption that their immediate results permanently define their intelligence.[8]

Learners have incredible innate capacity. When we work to both feel and show confidence in learners, our trust becomes enabling.

A recent 2020 study found that collegiate instructors' beliefs about intelligence consistently affected their students' predicted and actual performance, as well as their future interest in the subject. When students thought their professors believed intelligence was malleable, as John Holt had discovered, students showed more confidence, better performance, and higher future interest in the subject.

The same study found that when students thought their professors believed intelligence was a fixed attribute, those students showed less confidence, delivered worse performance, and had lower future interest in the subject.[9]

Valuing Humility

Social scientist Anita W. Woolley observed that another key element in building intelligence in groups is for all members to feel safe in contributing. As leaders and participants in groups, we should try to enhance this.

Woolley found that when team members, students, or associates avoided speaking up—which may have stemmed from a fear of ridicule, embarrassment, or punishment—the ability of the whole group became more limited.[10]

Science journalist David Robson builds on Woolley's research to discuss how "natural leaders" and talented people can cause a group to fail, describing how "If they [natural leaders] give the impression that they know everything already, other team members will feel they have nothing to contribute, which deprives the group of valuable information and alternative points of view" [Figure 2].[11]

Figure 2: Dysfunctional team with domineering leader

We often try to be the focus and appear talented and indispensable, but we can maximize others' intelligence only when we help *them* feel like that. This means we must choose humility over constantly showcasing our own talents. In impactful teams, all members contribute an equal amount, and ideas are refined and improved. In such cases, our humility becomes more valuable than personal talent, because it enables further talent to develop and grow [Figure 3].

Figure 3: Powerful team with impactful leader

Dweck showed that influencers hold power over the lives of others, which grants them the ability to administer both punishments and rewards. When a task revolves around pleasing an influencer instead of growing or creating, intelligence and innovation are stifled. Instead of using a leadership situation as an opportunity for personal validation, we should, in Dweck's words, "use it as an engine of growth." Influencers should work to help those they lead to become more visibly impactful than themselves.

When influencers feel the need to reaffirm their own intelligence and power, learners and followers can become primarily worried about catering to their leader. Pleasing influencers becomes the main focus, causing intelligence to decrease.[12]

Research has found that in most cases, higher levels of anxiety and stress correlate with decreased intelligence and capacity in participants. Therefore, by providing a safe environment where all can share and participate, team productivity is maximized.[13]

Individuals who are worried about proving their own intelligence can effectively silence others and make a group less productive than an individual—the opposite of what groups are intended to be. Influencers can show real intelligence by working to include every individual, value every contribution, and help every person feel intelligent in what they share and do.[14]

Applying Intelligence

In reality, all three of these principles are interrelated and interdependent. If we don't learn to see others as real people, we can never truly trust them, and we won't have any motivation to show real humility.

By seeing others as real people with hopes, dreams, and needs, we naturally trust them to do well, and we give them opportunities to succeed.

Every one of us is placed in situations where we can be influencers, whether through teaching a class, participating in a team, or taking part in a group activity. We can each impact the intelligence of others, for better or for worse.

The impact you have can be monumental. If you choose to be socially perceptive by applying these three principles, you will be able to help increase the situational intelligence of those around you, and over time you will help them realize a permanent change. So, try it! In your next interaction, ask yourself these questions:

- Am I seeing others as real people?
- Am I trusting others to do well?

- Am I helping others feel valued and needed?

By applying these three principles, you can begin to maximize situational intelligence in others, as well as in yourself.

Research:

[1]John Holt, *How Children Fail* (Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1995), 13–85.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Arbinger Institute, *Leadership and Self-deception: Getting out of the Box* (California: Berrett-Koehler, 2002), 88.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Ibid.

[7]John Holt, *How Children Fail* (Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1995), 13–85.

[8]Carol Dweck, *Mindset—The New Psychology of Success* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2016), 16–125.

[9]Katherine Muenks, Elizabeth A. Canning, Jennifer LaCosse, Dorainne J. Green, Sabrina Zirkel, Julie A. Garcia, and Mary C. Murphy, "Does my professor think my ability can change? Students' perceptions of their STEM professors' mindset beliefs predict their psychological vulnerability, engagement, and performance in class," *Journal of Experimental Psychology,* 149, no. 11 (2020): 2119–2144. DOI: https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32378957/.

[10]Anna T. Mayo, and Anita Williams Woolley, "Teamwork in Health Care: Maximizing Collective Intelligence via Inclusive Collaboration and Open Communication," *AMA Journal of Ethics,* 18, no. 9 (2016): 933–940. DOI: https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/sites/journalofethics.ama-assn.org/files/2018-05/stas2-1609.pdf.

[11]David Robson, *The Intelligence Trap: Why Smart People Make Stupid Mistakes—and How to Make Wiser Decisions* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2019), 220.

[12] Carol Dweck, *Mindset—The New Psychology of Success* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2016), 16–125.

[13]Maryam Moghadasin and Bita Khodaverdizadeh, "Comparison Of Verbal And Practical Intelligence In Normal Individuals And Individuals With Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) By Focusing On Worry, Rumination, And Post-Event Processing," *Journal of Clinical & Experimental Pathology*, 9, no. 1 (2019): 363. DOI: https://www.omicsonline.org/open-access/comparison-of-verbal-and-practical-intelligence-in-normal-individuals-and-individuals-with-generalized-anxiety-disorder-gad-by-foc-2161-0681-1000363-108276.html

[14] Anna T. Mayo, and Anita Williams Woolley, "Teamwork in Health Care: Maximizing Collective Intelligence via Inclusive Collaboration and Open Communication," *AMA Journal of Ethics,* 18, no. 9 (2016): 933–940. DOI: https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/sites/journalofethics.ama-assn.org/files/2018-05/stas2-1609.pdf.