

SHIFTING THE BASIC HUMAN EQUATION

A proposition for our clients and ourselves to improve communication with others and make life's disappointments more manageable

BY WILLIAM KLAASSEN, RCC

You are on your way to a conference, and although you left home later than you should have, the timing is working out perfectly. Well, it was working out, until that red car swerved into the lane ahead of you and clipped the bumper of the UPS delivery van merging from the opposite lane. A feeling of frustration wells up inside you. As you step out of your car, you have an urge to yell something at this driver. After dealing with the legalities of the incident, you quickly get on your way again and start to feel more elated as the traffic seems to be moving faster than usual. The closer you get to your destination, the more optimistic you feel; you might make it after all.

Surely, you can imagine dozens of similar situations that occur daily. Theoretically, there are many skills we could try to learn to deal with these situations. However, I believe we all have the skills already and that the solution is much simpler.

We will come back to this scenario, but first, let's take a step back and consider what I call the Basic Human Equation.

THE BASIC HUMAN EQUATION

Everything that occurs in our lives is always, and only, made up of two parts: the expectation of an event or situation and the experience of that event or situation. Let's elaborate.

First, we have the expectation of what

we anticipated or expected would happen.

Our expectation is not always explicit. In fact, sometimes it could be cultural, something we rarely give thought to, or even something in nature. We expected it to be sunny this morning. We expected our alarm clock to go off at 7 a.m. We expected our client to show up at 9 a.m.

Second, we have the actual experience of the event. We experienced the sound of rain as we woke up. We experienced waking up at 8:30 a.m. We experienced our client not showing up.

Notice that when the expectation and the experience of each situation are juxtaposed, there is a dissonance. In each case, the expectation was greater (more desirable) than the experience. We

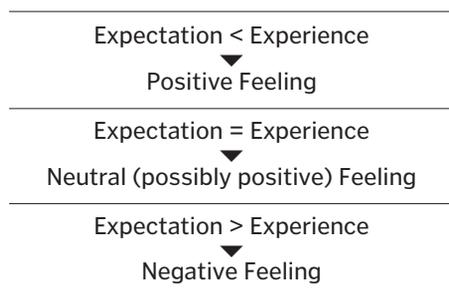
experience, we will definitely experience strong positive feelings. When this happens, we pass accolades all around and consider ourselves quite “good.” We achieved an experience that exceeded our expectation.

As mentioned earlier, typically, it is only when our expectation is greater than our experience that we run into conflict.

At this point, you may be thinking, “Well, okay, that’s pretty obvious, and this all makes sense, but how do I put this into practice and what difference will it actually make?”

The first step is to categorically understand that every event in our respective lives is always a melding of our expectation and experience. Our bodies have a very effective mechanism to communicate the overt result of this equation to us: feelings.

So in terms of the equation, the following is typically true:



Looking at this from pure mathematics, to change this equation, we would have to switch the sign, which ultimately means we must either change the experience or the expectation. Naturally, we cannot change anything after the event has happened, so this is simply unfeasible.

Thankfully, the solution is not found in mathematics, but rather in our perspective and focus. And no, it is not about simply being more positive or focusing on believing the best or even learning a new model or method. Instead,

we need to shift our focus from where it habitually goes. For example, when we have a negative feeling (expectation > experience), our focus usually goes to the experience we are having and possibly the effects of that experience. Notice where our focus and thoughts go for these little scenarios:

“What does that weather forecaster know anyway? She said it would be



When our language changes and our focus is off the other person’s behaviour, we are more open to discussing our expectation and the possibility that it plays a more important role than the experience.

sunny! How is our company picnic going to turn out now?”

“That stupid alarm clock didn’t ring again! Why do they make alarm clocks like that anyway? Now, I have to walk into my meeting late and feel embarrassed!”

“Why didn’t she just call to say she wasn’t coming? How disrespectful of her to just not show up. I could be doing so many other things right now.”

As you will notice, each of these thoughts or expressions are an explicit focus on the experience of the event and, possibly, the effects that follow. In a sense, we focus only on the second part of the equation, then express the result in those terms. To affect change, we need to focus on the first part of the equation instead, and when we do this, a multitude of things shift to completely change the outcome of the situation.

SHIFTING FOCUS AND PERSPECTIVE

OUR ULTIMATE GOAL IS TO FOCUS ON OUR (UNMET) EXPECTATION RATHER THAN THE MANIFESTED EXPERIENCE.



Too often, by focusing on the experience, we try to change our experience by demanding that the other person change ... we all know how well conversations go when we try to change someone.



	OUTCOMES IF THE FOCUS IS ON EXPERIENCE	OUTCOMES IF THE FOCUS IS ON EXPECTATION
1	We continue to experience the feelings by reliving the dissonance between expectation and experience. From a positive perspective, this is true as well. During celebration, each time someone yells out, "We WON... can you believe it?" others join in and erupt into cheers. Just by repeatedly highlighting the gap between our expectation and experience, we feel the same elation again. This is also true when I say, "I can't believe they hit me"; even days after the incident, I may feel the same irritation and vulnerability all over again. Just reliving the feeling over and over does not create change or even impetus for change.	We take our body's message (feeling) and work with it to change the result rather than amplify the feeling. Validating the feeling calms it down and allows us to work in a place where we are much less emotional.
2	We all know strong feelings hijack our mind and inhibit learning. For example, if you are nearly drowning, you are not learning in that moment — you are just reacting. It is only after you have been rescued and have "calmed down" that you can learn from what you have experienced. By continuing to focus on the experience and the dissonance, we revive the feelings and continue to block learning.	Without these strong feelings present (because they have been heard), we are putting ourselves in a prime learning environment.
3	We typically take a "me versus you/them" blaming mentality, which only perpetuates the judgement and shaming. Too often, by focusing on the experience, we try to change our experience by demanding that the other person change.	We not only stop the "you vs. them" blaming mentality, but we also invite the other person to become our partner in meeting the expectations. We typically also become more curious about the dissonance rather than judging it.
4	In line with the previous point, the language I then use is much more about changing the other person's behaviour; we all know how well conversations go when we try to change someone.	When our language changes and our focus is off the other person's behaviour, we are more open to discussing our expectation and the possibility that it plays a more important role than the experience. Our language shifts, making conversation more human and collaborative.
5	Ultimately, when we focus on the experience, we are giving all the power to the other person (or experience). When we perceive that the other person or experience has control of the result, we become quite powerless, which perpetuates our negative feelings. Inversely, and just as dangerous, it could exaggerate the power and control we have in a "positive" situation.	Finally, we remove the ability of the experience or other person to control the result. This puts us in the driver's seat with enough power to change the outcome without overpowering the others involved.



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PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

As I promised, there is a lot that shifts when we simply move our focus from our experience to our expectation. Applying this to my previous examples demonstrates what it might look like in actuality.

We wake up to rain. Immediately, our cue that we have an unmet expectation is the negative feeling we experience. Rather than focusing on the experience, focus on the unmet expectation with the following expression, “I was expecting it to be sunny today for our picnic.”

At this point, you may say “But yeah, that’s just semantics.” And yes, it is just a small shift. But, when we do this, firstly, we implicitly validate our feelings and own them. Secondly, we shift our focus away from amplifying the feelings and, hence, allow our brain to switch into learning mode. And thirdly, we are more willing to negotiate that our

expectation may need to shift for us to be prepared for the picnic.

We wake up at 8:30 a.m. We immediately know we have dissonance and already imagine the unpleasantness and embarrassment. However, when we focus on the expectation of the alarm clock ringing at 7 a.m., we put ourselves in a much better place to learn and be in control of the result. Furthermore, when we express ourselves by saying, “I expected my alarm to ring at 7 a.m. and realized I had set it for 7 p.m.” versus “My stupid alarm clock didn’t go off.” I will let you judge which one is more authentic and believable.

So the next time we have a client or co-worker who doesn’t show up on time, let’s not focus our language/ thoughts around:

“Why did you not show up?”

“I notice you have been late the last four days; what’s going on?”

As you will now notice, both

statements focus on the experience and the other person’s behaviour. Rather, let’s focus our language/thoughts on:

“I expected you here on Monday; I am wondering if we can chat?”

“I notice you were having difficulty being here by 9 a.m. the last few days; can we chat?”

This small, subtle shift has the potential for huge transformation in our conversations and, ultimately, our relationships. The net result is a completely different way of communicating and relating to others that is less judgmental and more collaborative and compassionate. ■

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