

Perceive-Explain-Evaluate

Everyday use of an unordinary differentiation

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The way we experience the world around us obviously has a strong effect on how we feel. The notorious half-full or half-empty glass is a good metaphor for this and our way of experiencing the things around us. So seeing the glass as half-full or half-empty really does have a strong impact on how things will proceed in a particular situation, interaction or relationship: An interaction partner whose behaviour I would interpret as bold and invading would be treated much differently than an interaction partner whose behaviour I would interpret as really interested and caring in my regard. And depending on my own behaviour, my interaction partner would change his/her behaviour as well, which in turn would lead to another interpretation on my side. Thoughts, such as "I knew that he would start telling me what to do" or either "If I have a particular problem I can always come to him/her" will always cause a specific reaction from my interaction partner and consequently also a certain way of us both experiencing a particular situation, etc.

The way we experience a particular situation leads to specific interpretations and, vice versa; our interpretation also leads to certain experiences. How is a relationship with a client, an employee or my boss proceeding? How exciting or not the task I am currently working on? How productive or unproductive will the meeting that I am currently having be? All the answers to these questions have to do with the way I actually perceive, evaluate and explain my respective situation. From this angle, the way I interpret the world around me is absolutely crucial for the way the world will be for me and what will happen in it.

The most wonderful thing is: We automatically interpret what we perceive. We do not even have to make an effort to do it, we just do it - and very often we are not even aware of the fact that we do interpret at all. Our mental picture is: "This colleague *is* helpful" "That colleague *is* arrogant", "My boss *is* a peculiar person", etc. The fact that we mostly interpret in a completely automatic way and according to the scheme "That is how it is" gives us quick inner orientation and allows us instant decision-making and effective action-taking whenever quick response is vital. **At the same time, this unaware and unquestioning way of interpreting obviously leads to an enormous potential for misunderstandings, bad humour, negative self-fulfilling prophecies, delusions and escalations.**

A good method to reduce such risks and to increase the chance for a positive and productive (inter-)action is **to register and to consciously differentiate between three elementary approaches to our way of experiencing the world around us**, namely: perception, explanation and evaluation. Perception is the process of experiencing the things that surround us with all our senses. I could, for instance, become aware of the fact that the client I came to see has placed our competitor's brochures and information-leaflets on the table, of the fact that I have been hearing a high frequency beeping sound in my ears and of the fact that I see that my boss is constantly staring at the wall behind me. All these facts can be observed.

But observation is, of course, never free of evaluation. Already by deciding what you focus on, you put a certain stress on things and you also automatically start evaluating: You have to decide if you focus on your competitor's brochures lying on the table or your client's smile while s/he is greeting you, or even the sun-lit park outside the window that your client is standing in front of. What you focus on will set the course for the image you get including all impressions, emotions, reactions, etc. Nevertheless: What our mind is set to can be easily categorized, analysed and recorded by others in the most different ways, e.g. by use of technical equipment, such as cameras or audiotapes. Perception is therefore always the most objective decisive approach in terms of intersubjectivity and comparability.

We always either explicitly or implicitly, obviously or less obviously, consciously or unconsciously form hypotheses that are based on what we perceive. This means, we try to have a guess at what is actually happening around us. You could, for example, concentrate on the fact that this client has placed your competitor's brochures and information-leaflets on the table, because s/he has a very good and strong business relationship with them. You could also interpret the high frequency beeping sound that you hear as a stress-related auditory disorder or a starting tinnitus. You could always explain the fact that your boss is staring at the wall behind you while you speak, as him/her not being interested in what you have to say. So you could always make up all of these different hypotheses, but, of course, you could also form very different hypotheses that could derive from the very same experiences: You could also think to yourself "this client wants to have different sources of information; s/he wants to be able to compare our offer to our competitor's", "the beeping sound I hear comes from a nearby electrical device, and as soon as I leave this room, I won't hear it any more" and "my boss is staring at the wall, because s/he is thinking about what I have to say and while s/he is doing that, s/he is just letting his/her gaze wander over the wall."

It is obvious that different hypotheses can have very different results when it comes to experiencing a particular situation, how you feel in it, what you will do in it and how things are going to proceed. The same also and especially goes for different situational evaluations. **Evaluations are your personal reaction to what is happening around you and to how things are happening around you.** You could say, for example: "My chances of convincing this client are very small.", or either: "Very good that he has obviously not yet opted for our competitor's offer - otherwise he would not talk to me at all." You could think: "This beeping sound is excruciating.", or "It does not bother me, because I am focussing on something else entirely." You could be of the opinion: "My boss is disrespectful.", or also: "It is a good thing that he is thinking about what I say." All of these thoughts are actually evaluations, and they very obviously produce very different consequences. **That is why it is always helpful to be aware of one's current hypotheses and evaluations,** because very often we are not.

During my management communication workshops, I often make the following little experiment: After having explained the difference between perceiving, explaining and evaluating very thoroughly, I ask a participant to describe - not to explain or to evaluate, I make that very clear – in what way another participant is sitting on their chair at the moment.

In 95% of the cases I get answers, such as "S/he is concentrated, relaxed, open-minded" or else: "Already a little tired", "Would like to have a coffee, is nonetheless interested", etc. All of these statements are actually no descriptions at all, but hypotheses and evaluations. Actual descriptions of perceptions would rather be: "S/he is sitting in an upright position with his/her back at the back of the chair and has his/her their legs crossed", etc. And even if I ask for concrete perceptions, I often practically get close to zero actual descriptions of perceptions. And this is exactly what happens in our professional and private everyday life as well - at each and every moment, which is not very surprising: **The rule is that people believe they describe something while they are actually evaluating and producing personal hypotheses.** This happens, because on the one hand, we automatically form hypotheses and evaluations as soon as we start perceiving anything; on the other hand, we are very used to our personal way of forming hypotheses and evaluations, as well as to the way we consider ourselves and others. And because we are used to it, we think to ourselves: "That is, how it is, of course: The client is reluctant. The beeping sound is a problem. The boss is uninterested", etc. And in this way, and without intending to do anything at all, we create a situation or a relationship that will develop a lot less favourable than it could.

One thing will certainly not work and that is constantly asking yourself what exactly perception, hypotheses and evaluations are in order to analyse things until there is nothing left to analyse. It would just not be practicable, because it would stop us from acting according to our assumptions and evaluations. Beyond this, such permanent analysis would not even be necessary, because, in most cases, our judgement and evaluations are perfectly suited to our personal objectives. But if you should ever become aware of the fact that a relationship requires always more effort, if you should ever start to get always more critical and sceptical about it, if this relationship were stuck on a specific matter on which you have not been able to make any progress at all, then it would be high time, and it would make sense, and it would be professional (at least when you have to work with people in complex settings and situations in your professional life) to ask yourself what your underlying hypotheses and evaluations are, what consequences they might have and what other and maybe more positive possible hypotheses and evaluations you might be able to come up with after having evaluated the things that you are actually able to perceive. You could also try to come up with alternative hypotheses and evaluations and use them in an experimental way, and you could just have a look at what would happen if you approached things with a different set of inner expectations.

All of the actions above require the following three instruments:

- 1. the will to put one's own hypotheses and evaluations to the test, even if they may seem perfectly evident,**
- 2. the will to have a disciplined look at what can actually be observed, apart from all hypotheses and evaluations,**
- 3. as well as the will to really consider possible alternative hypotheses and evaluations that, considering the desired outcome, might have a more favourable effect.**

Whoever applies these three instruments will be rewarded with at least two very interesting experiences: on the one hand, you learn that very often even the most difficult and stuck situation can be changed into a productive one, and on the other hand, you learn that one's own repertoire of evaluations and explanations of another one's and one's own behaviour can be continuously improved. Both lessons are worthwhile and good reasons to actually put the knowledge about the difference between perception, explaining and evaluating to a systematic use. Even though one rarely differentiates between the above mentioned three instruments, distinguishing between them strongly improves everyday private and professional life.