

## Observing Yourself by Donna Soules

In my early twenties, I was having difficulty talking with my husband about the hard stuff in our relationship. I took a leap of faith and went to New York City to take a course from an enlightened man named Oscar Ichazo from Chile. I learned an important life lesson from him: observing the self is the key to personal development and successful relationships.

Self-observation—or being conscious of our self-talk—helps us become aware of the messages and stories we make up about others, and the messages, beliefs and perceptions we have of ourselves.

Critical or judgmental self-talk that fosters negative messages about ourselves or others often creates conflict. When we are unconscious of the messages we are saying to ourselves, the results can be destructive to our relationships at home or at work. The more mindful we are the better chance we have of healthy and constructive communication. Messages creating destructive dialogue cause defensiveness and confusion. In many cases our self-talk is the source of our own conflict.

Most people believe their perceptions are reality and their views are correct; and if someone else has a different perception, they are wrong. “I’m right, you’re wrong.” You can get into an arguing spiral of “Yes you did” ..... “No I didn’t.” Most people don’t stop to ask questions about the two different points-of-view on the situation. Being curious and willing to understand differences helps us listen and resolve conflict.

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Metaphors provide powerful clues to help us step outside the position of “I’m right—you’re wrong” patterns. Here’s a great story about a young father having problems with his 13-year old son. He changed this relationship pattern so he could listen to and understand what was important to his son by turning himself into a DVD player and hitting the pause button. When he stopped trying to convince the son he was wrong, the father learned new information that changed his perception. His empathy for his son increased. This created what is called a “mind shift” for the father. He bridged the gap between their differences and they came up with an outcome that was surprisingly good for both of them. This new way of talking improved their relationship and set a new pattern to talk about the hard stuff.

When you hear yourself or others using war metaphors, something is leaking out underneath the message. For example, people often say statements like:

“I was blown away.”

“I was stabbed in the back.”

“I was caught off guard.”

“They shot down my idea.”

“I was caught in the crossfire.”

These metaphors could mean people are feeling betrayed, vulnerable, not valued or acknowledged, to name a few emotions. Focusing on and being curious about what is underneath the statement fosters understanding.

A more peaceful or constructive metaphor might be “I need to walk around the block one more time on this one.”

Think of a conflict you had in the past that didn't end well. What metaphors would you use to describe this conflict? How would you describe the situation now? Your language will reveal clues about what was troubling you. Instead of being abandoned, you might have felt it was important to you to spend more quality time together, as opposed to saying “You don't care about me.” Which message would be more helpful or useful? One position is blaming and the other states what is wanted or needed.

I will leave you with one of the more recent things I learned from Oscar at a workshop in Hawaii. I asked him, “If you are an enlightened communicator do you still have conflicts?” His response was, “Yes. You just get off it quicker.” Developing self-observation has been a valuable practice both in my work as a mediator and in my relationships.

Over the years that I have been teaching this theory, I think this concept holds up. I have also learned from my personal and professional life that defensiveness often hijacks our best efforts to manage conflict. It is too easy to believe our movie is more correct than the other person's movie. Changing these patterns is life work and self-observation helps when you're in the labyrinth of the hard stuff.