

Ongoing Discussion “Thought Piece”

Prepared by

Peter Stonefield
peter@slgllc.com

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Ongoing Discussion Host: Bill Bellows
(William.bellows@pwr.utc.com)

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Self-Management-Learn How to Dis-identify, By Peter Stonefield

We are being evaluated by a new yardstick now; not just how smart we are, or by our training and expertise, but also how well we handle ourselves and each other. A recent article in the Harvard Business Review entitled, *How Toxic Colleagues Corrode Performance* cited studies that show the effects of poor self-management issues such as anger, frustration, berating bosses; employees taking credit for others' work, blaming, or spreading rumors; and excluding teammates from networks. All of these cause job satisfaction and performance to fall. The research indicated that people exposed to inappropriate behaviors reported a

- ▼ 48% decreased their work effort,
- ▼ 47% decreased their time at work,
- ▼ 38% decreased their work quality,
- ▼ 66% said their performance declined,
- ▼ 80% lost work time worrying about the incident,
- ▼ 63% lost time avoiding the offender,
- ▼ 78% said their commitment to the organization declined.

Most of us, contrary to our values and good intentions, engage in defensive strategies when faced with the competing perspectives of others. We automatically push our viewpoint, attempt to "win", and try to avoid being seen as wrong or not knowing. Frequently we don't even realize when we are doing it. No matter how much we improve organizational structure and processes, or how effectively and quickly we get the right people together, with the right information, our planning and decision making cannot thrive without altering these defensive patterns. We will continue to experience limited results if we do not learn *self-management*.

Think about your experience in meetings you show up in. Consider the following personal questions;

What kinds of things push your buttons?

How often do you get emotionally upset, frustrated, defensive or angry?

How often are you very critical or judgmental of self or others?

How often are you a party in unproductive conflict?

How often are you anxious or fearful?

How often do you avoid productive conflict?

How often does your mind wander and you end up distracted and lose your focus?

How often do old habits, styles or "Success Strategies" limit your effectiveness?

How often do you avoid challenging or difficult situations?

How often do you experience difficulty sustaining your motivation when faced with the less enjoyable aspects of your job?

How often do you set goals and not follow through?

How resilient or adaptive are you when faced with change?

How often have you wished you could change something about your behavior and didn't?

Do you believe there are skills, behaviors, attitudes or ways of thinking, which if you had them would cause you to be much more effective?

What prevents you from acquiring them?

Are you aware of how you are thinking about these questions right now?

Much has been written about how to self-manage. We are instructed to do these seven things, practice these twelve steps and hold these five values. We are told, do this or that in different situations. Think differently. Develop Emotional Intelligence. Check your mindset, beliefs and intentions. Be an active listener. Seek to understand before being understood. Make your thinking visible. Look for common ground instead of focusing solely on differences. Don't take it personal. Keep calm. Keep a positive mental focus. Be more assertive. Don't offer advice unless asked. Get a coach and take some assessments like DISC, Social Style Profile, the Enneagram, Myers Briggs or any of the other personality profiles. Build on your strengths. Downplay or ignore your weaknesses. The list grows daily.

Sound familiar, they seem to be saying the solution to self-management is longer 'do better' lists. Don't get me wrong, I agree with much of the advice. But, the systems engineer in me thinks that they are getting lost in the trees and not seeing the forest. The problem with all this good advice is that it is very difficult to implement.

We are creatures of habit. We show up in situations and behave more or less automatically. For example, some people get visibly reactive, defensive and ineffective when somebody disagrees with or trashes their idea or work product. They take it personal. Reminding themselves, not to take it personal, rarely helps if they even remember to remind themselves. Others, want to listen actively, but can't pause their hard driving expansive verbal styles long enough for others to feel understood. Great problem solvers have difficulty regulating their impulse to offer advice even when they know most people don't want advice. They can't stop, even when it is counter productive to their intention of developing other people's problem solving skills. Many quick thinkers continue to get very impatient and dismissive with those who can't keep up, even though it turns off the very people they need to be successful. Experts at dialogue or systems thinking can become so dogmatic about how to dialogue or think together that they end

up wasting a lot of time. The central issue is, *how can one adjust their behavior successfully to the various situations they face when they can't regulate their old habitual ways of doing things?* Knowledge of these issues alone doesn't resolve them. We need to do the very same thing all living systems have done for centuries. To enable the emergence of a new meta level self-system capable of altering system dynamics.

Dis-identification

So you guessed it, I'm going to add another item to the 'do better' list. However, this is a meta-cognitive technique that enables easier deployment of all the other 'do better' items. Learn how to dis-identify from sensations, thoughts, feelings, habits, values, beliefs, styles or "Success Strategies." Before we discuss dis-identification lets understand what identification is.

It is in our nature to crave a sense of identity or oneness with needs, goals, means and cultural memes, values and behaviors. In doing so, we form powerful psychological attachments. We seek to define who we are in so many curious ways: through the roles we play, the balance of our checking accounts, how much we know, loyalty to sports teams, ways of thinking, the beliefs we hold, even the brand of car we drive. The list is endless. The advertising industry spends billions of dollars trying to get us to identify with their brands or the people in their advertisements.

In human systems everything organizes around identity. Like all systems, our psychological system is comprised of many subsystems such as the various roles we play. Each of these roles is comprised of a need, want, habits, mental model, thoughts and feelings. As we move through our day we automatically identify with whatever role, emotion, assumption or idea has the greatest pull on our sense of "I-ness." For example, when we say or think "I am angry," "I am afraid," "I am a systems thinker" or "I am the greatest" we become identified with that subsystem. We in effect "switch heads" with out thinking about it. Our "I-ness" shifts from one sub-system or consistently recurring pattern of behavior, one social role, one aspect of our overall identity to another.

We are different with our bosses than with our subordinates. Different with our kids than with our customers. Different with our close friends than strangers. Different when reactive or defensive. Different when presenting in front of people. Different when seeking knowledge from others. Different when providing knowledge. We have multiple personas. In one situation we may play the role of "leader" or "manager". In another we are a "follower" or "doer". And after we leave work we may act as "father", "mother" or "friend." We have a repertoire of consistently recurring patterns of thought, feeling and behavior - roles, reactive defensive strategies and habits. All of these partial identities are specializations, sub-personalities or "success strategies" that self-organized to satisfy needs in a particular context. They are adaptive sub-systems that our personal operating system turned into habits to save time and energy.

When we identify with something our "I-ness" becomes embedded in it and it becomes the central aspect of who we are in the moment, determining how we perceive reality and

behave. For example, when one is identified with the role of “manager” and say “I want .. or I think we should do this or that...” they are referring to themselves in the role of “manager” and not as a “mother” or any other role they play. We in effect put blinders on. When identified as a “manager” the beliefs and values that shape perception are typically very different from those when in the role of “mother.” The same is true when we get upset. Once the upset feeling or sub-personality traps our “I-ness”, we become the upset and perception is filtered by the upset. Virtually all interactive breakdowns and unproductive conflicts are a result of over-identification with some point of view. Once our “I-ness” becomes embedded in a point of view, differences are often perceived as “personal attacks.” We are like a man who has been in jail so long he ceases to notice the bars which contain him. Marriage counselors and mediators spend 80% of their time getting the participants to step back or dis-identify from a point of view.

Dis-identification loosens the grip of the “role” or “success strategy” on our “I-ness”. Think about it as going from hard wiring to soft wiring. It is stepping back from tight blind automaticity to loose flexible automaticity. My first experience of dis-identification occurred spontaneously many years ago when I was a District Director for Bunker-Ramo Corporation. At the time, I didn’t have a clue about anything psychological. It was about 9 pm and I was exhausted. I had just returned from an extended business trip and wanted some R&R alone with my wife. But, my 7 year old daughter Beth just wouldn’t have it. Every 5 minutes she would get out of bed, come down the stairs and tell us “I can’t sleep”. After about 5 cycles, I became increasingly frustrated. I was just about to get angry when I spontaneously recognized a very clear difference between me and the frustration. In that moment, I felt as if I were two people, one calm and detached the other frustrated and pulling me towards it. Recognizing the distinction gave me momentary pause. For a brief moment time stood still. In that stillness, I spontaneously saw Beth in another way. I saw her as my beautiful brown-eyed girl. Instead of letting my frustration take me over, I asked her to come over and sit down next to me. I put my arm around her and told her how much I loved and missed her and how happy I was to see her. Two minutes later she got up and said, “I think I can sleep now” and went off to bed.

Over the next several weeks I had several similar experiences. When I began to get angry or frustrated the same phenomena spontaneously occurred. In one of those situations, I was on the phone criticizing Tom W., a Branch Manager, for not getting something done. After a few minutes Tom responded, “Peter this isn’t working. Every time you criticize me like this, it just turns me off. Instead of focusing more, I want to take the afternoon off and play golf.” As Tom spoke, I could feel my frustration and anger begin to rise. Words like “you’re fired” came into my head. Then, pop, once again I experienced a split between me and the frustration. In that stillness, I saw Tom as he really was, hard working and doing the best he could. I decided to end the conversation quickly. I thanked Tom for the direct feedback and suggested we get together the following week and review a number of projects.

A few weeks later, a most curious experience of dis-identification occurred. Don, my new VP, came to town to give me my annual review. Don started the review by criticizing me for not meeting our goals to date. He then moved on to describing me as unwilling to take

direction. As he went through his list of issues, I felt my emotional temperature rising. I thought, Don has only been my Boss for six months. I've had a total of about 20 brief conversations with him and he never gave me any direction. What the is he talking about? My district ranked number 2 in the world last year. I have been promoted 5 times in 7 years. I was just about to say something and the now familiar split occurred. However, this time something strange occurred. I began to imagine what this conversation would look like from the ceiling. Don went on for several minutes more. When I felt he was done I paraphrased my experience. I told him, in a very calm and detached way, "That I imagined I was on the ceiling looking down on the conversation and felt perplexed. The choices for me from this perspective were to hear you out, accept the criticisms and go along with the process or defend myself and argue with you. I want a better option and am uncertain about how to get there." Don looked at me strangely, but remained silent. Before anything came out of my mouth, Don made some notes on the review and stated "You are the smartest guy I know in the company. Let's go to lunch early." That was it.

After Don left, I wondered what happened. Was Don thrown off balance? Did he think that I was being clever with the on the ceiling view? A few months later Don and I were having a beer and he recalled his experience "as you were telling me a part of you was on the ceiling, my initial reaction was, you gotta be kidding me. Then all of a sudden, I wondered what it would look like from the ceiling and quickly realized that I was using the review to establish my authority with you and it wasn't necessary". Later, when I became a Psychologist, I came to understand what happened. I dis-identified and then Don dis-identified as well. What probably facilitated Don's dis-identification was my *presence*. Being dis-identified, is being calm, somewhat detached yet fully aware and present in the moment. That kind of presence has been shown to reduce defensiveness in others by not giving their reactive defensive strategies anything to react to and creating a subjective connection with a more "centered aspect of their personality."

Over the next few months, my frustration emerged several more times. Occasionally, I couldn't stop it. But the trend line was clear. A few months later I discovered how to dis-identify from other habits and behavior. As part of Wilson Learning's train-the-trainer program for managers, I took their Social Style Profile. The multi-rater instrument identifies your Social Style as Driver, Analytical, Amiable or Expressive. My profile defined me as an A1 Driver. According to the profile, A1 Driver's are highly assertive, action oriented, "take charge" types. They are high on task and low on relationship consideration. So the Driver's responses tend to be direct to the point with little sensitivity or concern for others. The instructor told us that we were pretty much hard wired this way and it was extremely difficult to change.

The profile was a real eye opener for me. It helped me understand my Driving Social Style. It wasn't long before I could recognize elements of it in action. I began to notice when I was demanding, criticizing, taking charge and aggressively telling others my viewpoint. I also began to see when pushing and driving was less effective, when it actually got in the way of getting the results I intended. I also became aware of when I wasn't the "Driver". In non-business situations I frequently didn't "take charge" or highly

assert my viewpoint. I was quite amiable, patient and relationship oriented, particularly with long time friends. With high school buddies I was downright emotionally expressive. When I found myself solving complex problems and thinking like an engineer, I was quite analytical and a loner. I discovered I was all the styles *depending on the context*.

More importantly, I began to discover that I could frequently step back from my Driving style at work and express something different. I could push aggressively one minute and back off and become amiable the next. I was highly analytical when meeting with engineers and let it rip emotionally when presenting to sales reps. The feedback was very supportive. My interpersonal effectiveness dramatically improved.

Roberto Assagioli, MD puts it this way;

"We are dominated by everything we become identified with. We can master, direct, and utilize everything from which we dis-identify ourselves."

Dis-identification is not getting rid of, or necessarily finding fault or making some old habits bad. It is the experiential process of making a distinction between you and your experience or behavior in the moment. It is recognizing the old pattern as something you have and some times who you are. Dis-identification doesn't in any way diminish the talent or strength contained in the "success strategy" or subsystem. On the contrary, dis-identification helps you use the talents and strengths more flexibly and effectively. Dis-identification is recognizing when you are or about to become identified and when you are already identified.

Minimizing Resistance to Change

Dis-identification enables accelerated learning by minimizing resistance to change.

Resistance to change generally comes down to one of three stances:

I want to, but "*I'm unsure*"

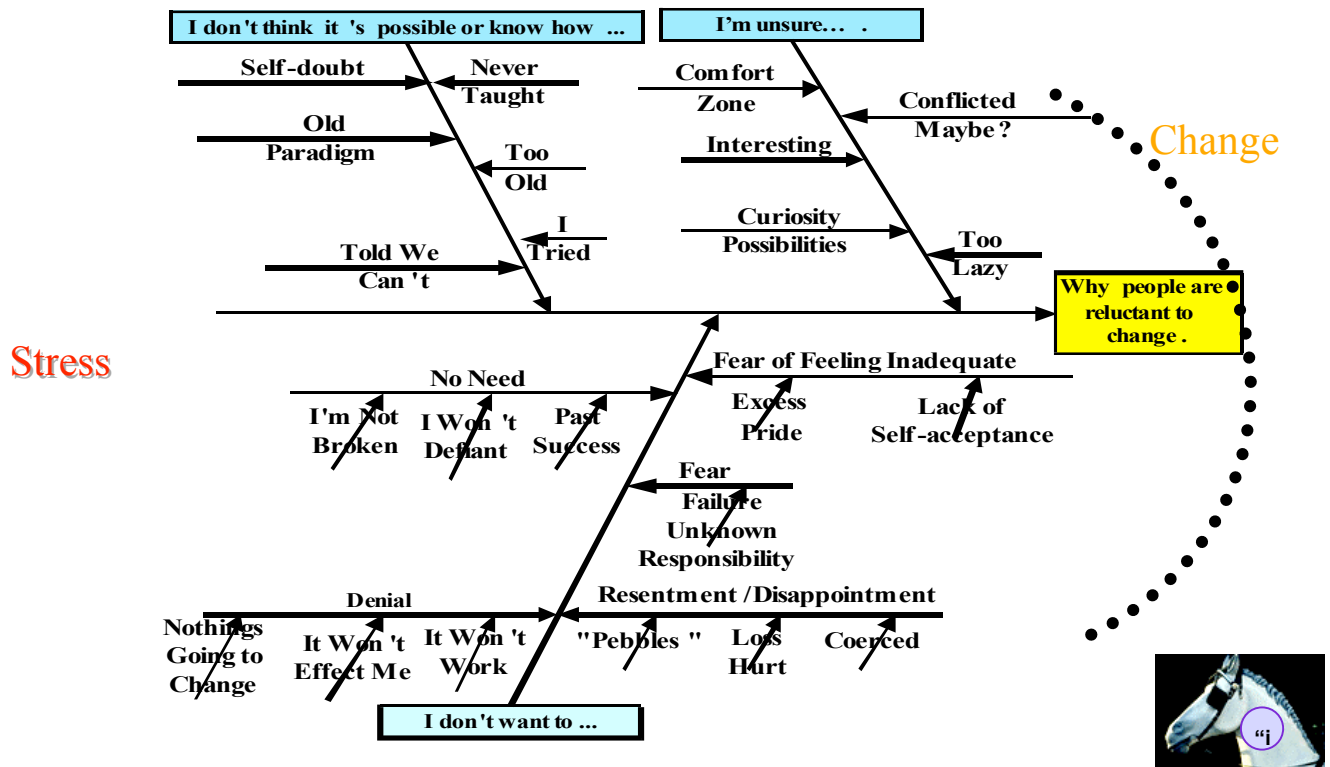
I want to, but "*I don't think it's possible or know how*" or

I don't want to (*disconfirm something I am identified with*)."

I want to, but "*I'm unsure ...* " This is the easier objection to facilitate because there is some curiosity and interest and intention to change. I want to but "*I don't think it's possible or know how*" stance generally results from self-doubt, being caught in the paradigm that people can't change or past experience. The danger of this stance is that it can quickly change into "I don't want to." What's needed to head off that objection is information - evidence, if you will - that shows change is possible and, in fact, is already happening.

When you hear "I don't want to ... " it is resistance to disconfirming some aspect of identity. While "I don't want to" has many looks, it is usually accompanied by some form of denial of the need to change. The denial is usually sustained by justifications like, "I

got to where I am today because I've been doing things right ... so why should I change now?" Researchers at Lutheran University discovered a root cause of "I don't want to" when they tested experienced managers with MBAs and found that, while they rated themselves high in self-worth, they ranked themselves low in self-acceptance. Their current identifications as "Perfectionist", "The Greatest" or some other exaggerated self-worth "success strategy" prevented them from accepting their limitations and imperfections. So when someone comes around and tells them they need to change, they begin to feel inadequate and that something is wrong with them which threatens their sense of self or identity. This frequently leads to denial and other defense mechanisms and can evoke a "Tyrant success strategy" who shoots the messenger. Most reluctance to change and virtually every crisis, every stuck place in a person's life are signals telling them: "Let go, you are over-identified with something that is now too small for you." Letting go is dis-identifying or stepping back from some role, "success strategy", mental model, attitude, belief or behavior and letting something new emerge.



I Don't want to... (disconfirm something I am identified with).

Chris Argyris, in his Harvard Business Review article *Teaching Smart People How to Learn* labeled the ability to assess the environment and to make minor changes as

"single-loop learning". He pointed out there is another level of learning: the ability to look at ones mental models (i.e. our assumptions about how the world is and should be) and how it affects ones behavior. This Argyris called "double-loop learning". The successful people within an organization are usually good at single-loop learning. But fundamental changes in the environment call for fundamental changes in behavior. Unless these people have the capacity to dis-identify and question their own perceptions, they may inhibit personal and organizational development by reasoning defensively and not being receptive to feedback that suggests ways for them to improve. Everyone needs to recognize that being smart doesn't necessarily mean being a better learner. Dis-identification helps you find the leverage point in your personal operating system and reduce the strength of the negative feedback loops that block double loop learning and maintain automatic identification with existing mindsets. It also enables you to smooth the progress or gain of positive feedback loops that create new identifications or "success strategies."

Take for example, Rob, a VP at Bank of America. He learned how to dis-identify and realized extraordinary results. Rob had a highly analytical and emotionally detached style at work. He was highly objective and was recognized for the meticulously accurate work of his staff. Many perceived him as somewhat aloof and occasionally condescending. However, on the weekends he was a musician in a band. As a member of a band, he was good at "connecting" with people in the audience. As a band member, he knew how important it was for everyone to play "together" and share the recognition and credit. Learning how to dis-identify enabled Rob to bring them both to work. He learned how to check his "Analyzer" and deploy his "Musician" when appropriate at work. His "Musician's" ability to connect and emphasize teamwork complemented the distant and sometimes aloof "Analyzer". Within 6 months, Al's department reduced the average work time per service transaction by 40 percent while reducing staff 11 percent in the face of a 43 percent increase in volume. Telephone response time went from 65 seconds to less than five seconds. The department's customers were so impressed that they spontaneously started writing letters to senior management. Rob's team attributed it to "chemistry". Six months later Rob became a VP in the acquisitions area and was instructed to work his "chemistry" on new acquisitions.

Learning How To Dis-identify

Dis-identification requires some awareness and understanding of the role, behavior or "success strategy" as it is occurring. So, the first step is identifying and understanding some of the various roles you play. Try answering the question, Who am I? My list includes a "Teacher", "Driver", "Dreamer", "Psychologist", "Inquirer", "Coach", "Negotiator", "Problem Solver", "Manager", "Collaborative Leader", "Engineer", "Skeptic", "Golfer", "Discerner", "Fighter", "Justifier", "Good Friend", "Father", "Brother", "Lover", "Abstract Systems Thinker", "Loner", "Writer", "Seeker", "Expert", "Story Teller", "Rascal", etcetera. Each of these distinctly different patterns of thought feeling and behavior were self-organized to satisfy needs in a particular domain. Most are visible to the world. Others, like my "Thinker" are private. They are the ways I tend to define myself in different contexts. Most people can identify at least 20 identifications,

roles or distinct ways of being and doing. Understanding involves some awareness of the mindset, mental model, need and want as well as its talents and strengths in what context.

Basic Dis-identification Exercise

One way of gathering this information is to conduct an evening review on a few of your “success strategies”. Set aside 15 minutes just before retiring and review your day with your selected “success strategies” or reactive behaviors you want to manage in mind. Pick one or two. Sit in a comfortable and relaxed position. Then just close your eyes and let yourself relax. Be aware of your breathing; focus on the inward and outward flow of your breath.

Pick one and just recall when it emerged and how it thought or behaved. Try to discern what its strengths, need, want and mindset were. Allow an image to emerge that captures its character. Draw a picture of the image and make some notes. This awareness will enable you to recognize it in the moment.

Now replay the situation in your mind. As you do become the role or reactive feeling. Identify with the role or feeling. Deliberately exaggerate it. Then step back from it. Dis-identify –let it go. Now make any changes you think are appropriate in your imagination. Repeat this a few times. This basic dis-identification exercise will enable you to dis-identify when appropriate so you can alter or complement your behavior.

After a month or so look back over your notes and consider your progress.

Biography

Peter holds a B.S.E.E., M.A., Ph.D. and is President of the Stonefield Learning Group (www.sglc.com). In this capacity, he serves as an executive and technical staff coach, consultant and trainer. He was an electronic engineer, marketing and sales executive for the Bunker-Ramo Corporation before becoming a psychologist. Peter was inspired by psychologist Carl Rogers and one-on-ones with two-time Nobel Prize winning marine biologist Albert Szent-Gyorgyi regarding his theory of a 'Drive In All Living Matter To Perfect Itself'. Roberto Assagioli's Psychosynthesis transformed his life and his studies with general systems theorist, Eric Jantsch, author of "The Self-organizing Universe", gave him a more scientific understanding of psychosynthesis. Finally, W.E. Deming's work opened the door to taking this knowledge into business and government.

Peter has taught graduate-level courses on Cognitive and Creative Process, Psychosynthesis, Counseling Psychology, the Integration of Mind and Feelings and Mind Meditation and Creativity. Some of the business training programs he developed are The Will to Excellence, Optimal Thinking, Managing Innovation, TQM, Agile Communications, Agile Leadership, Knowledge Management, Managing Change, Creative Thinking and Architecture for Teamwork. He has also facilitated the development of 10 knowledge leveraging "Communities of Practice" in engineering and marketing organizations. He was the principal consultant to Region IX of the US Dept. Of Labor, the winner of the 1992 US President's Quality Award for Managing Change and the 1994 winner of the GSA Administrator's Quality Award for Managing Change.

Peter's mission is to catalyze and accelerate the evolution of organizations and people. He is currently working with high tech startups in Silicon Valley.