See Your Blind Spots: Discover How You Come Across

Annabelle Story

Annabelle is a superstar - fast, creative, tireless, and careful. She remembers birthdays and she is charming as hell.

And everyone on her team is sick of her. But it is not because she is a bully or backstabber. Just the opposite - she really cares about her team and their happiness.

But in her second 360 review in three years confirmed again that they see her as "difficult, impatient, and doesn't treat us with respect" - she feels targeted and if something else is going on - since they said the same things before and she had been working on being better.

The thing that is really going on is that she is **sending unconscious signals** that are undermining her efforts to be less "difficult, impatient, and to treat them with respect."

Tony from her team notes: "When Annabelle is under pressure, she is difficult to work with. She says please and thank you, but **underneath** she's full of impatience and contempt. If I go to her office with a question, she rolls her eyes and answers sharply. Then she'll show me the door, which, she cheerfully reminds me, is always open."

Annabelle knows how she intends to come across, but she is blind to her actual impact on others.

Some other examples of blind spots in others:

> Zoe thinks she's supportive of new ideas, but is always the first to shoot down a creative suggestion.

> Mehmet takes neutral questions ("Did you have a good weekend?") as criticism ("Do you assume I didn't?") and is confused about why others see him as prickly.

> Jules keeps talking long after you've signaled you need to go. Even, sometimes, after you've already gone.

How can people be so oblivious? Is it possible we are too? It is, and in fact, there is **ALWAYS A GAP between the self we think we present and the way others see us.**

The good news? **The ways we are understood and misunderstood by others are amazingly systematic and predictable.**

▼ **The Gap Map**
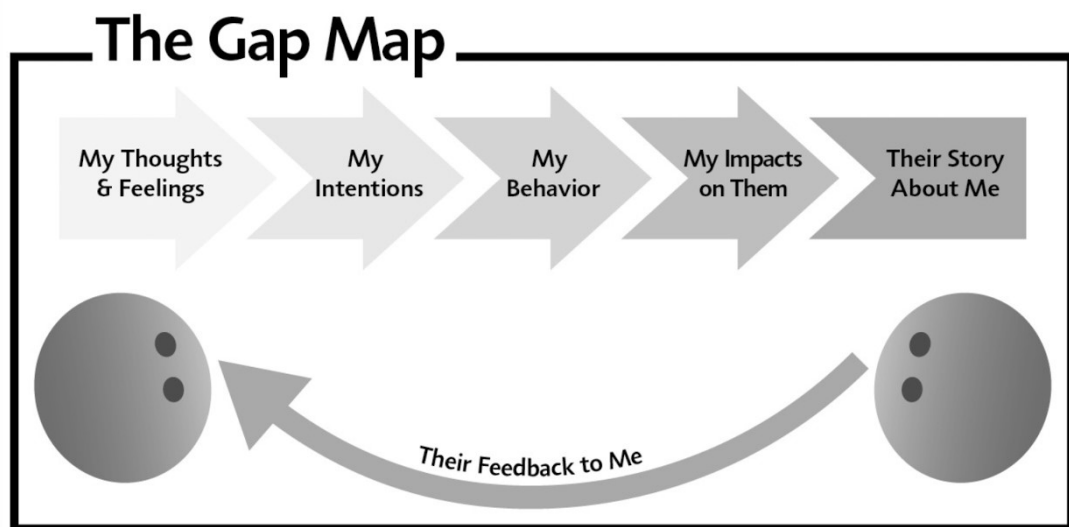
From left to right - we have thoughts/emotions and these lead to our intentions - what we are trying to do or to make happen - and to get shit to happen we put our behavior out into the world which impacts others, and then they create a story about our intentions and our character. Then we get that feedback.

It can be like the game telephone - messages can get garbled.

Annabelle Gap Map

With her first 360 she was told that her subordinates felt that she did not treat them respectfully - and she was dismayed and wants to be nice to them so she worked on being more respectful ever since the feedback.

This means her focus was on changing her behaviors (arrow 3 above) but - and here is the thing - her thoughts and feelings remain unchanged. This is a problem.

Annabelle's actual thoughts and feelings about her team are embedded in expectations and assumptions that have accrued over many years - she has high standards for herself and for those around her - a result of her personality and early family life and school where she received a lot of positive feedback about her resourcefulness.

"Like a town that slowly takes shape on the curve of a river, these experiences accumulated into a village of values, assumptions, and expectations about what it means to be "good" or "competent."

Thus the cross-currents swirling around her situation: Annabelle is often dismayed when team members come to her with the kinds of questions that she would have felt eager to figure out on her own. She believes they aren't trying or don't care enough. As a result she often feels impatient, annoyed, and disappointed in her team.

This creates a MISALIGNMENT between her internal thoughts and feelings on the one hand (arrow 1 , and her intentions on the other (arrow 2) .

Annabelle THINKS she is keeping this misalignment hidden, but those internal thoughts and feelings **LEAK INTO HER BEHAVIOR through her facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language.**

Her team members read this behavior and they wonder about her intentions. She sees them as positive - "I want my colleagues to feel respected and I am trying hard to act respectful."

But her team members see her as deceptive and even manipulative - "you want us to think you respect us when you don't. Now you're not just disrespectful, you're disingenuous."

Annabelle and her team, after the second 360, are in a challenging downward spiral.

Behavioral Blind Spots

A blind spot is something we don't see about ourselves that others do see.

My behavior is in **your** awareness and mostly not in **my** awareness. Bottom line: **our behavior is largely invisible to us.**

Your Leaky Face

Everyone can see your face, except you. Our own face is a blind spot. We are looking out, and we don't know what we look like in the world. Only in the mirror.

Humans are master face readers - of other people that is - all so we can cooperate with others to survive.

But we also compete - so some are trying to help you, while others are competing with you.

So it became important to distinguish the two - friend from foe - and to do so you need to make smart guesses about the feelings and motivations of others.

Words uttered and what others say about their feelings and motivations may be deceiving - so we need a way to assess them without relying on intentional communication - thus reading faces and with this we formulate a "theory of mind" about the other person.

Those on the autism spectrum lack this ability to read faces, while the rest of us read them constantly and largely unconsciously.

Science writer Steven Johnson notes that we can measure "other people's moods just by scanning their eyes or the corners of their mouth," adding that it's a "background process that feeds into our foreground processes; we're aware of the insights it gives us but usually not aware of how we're actually getting that information, and how good we are at extracting it."

Your Leaky Tone

How we say things matters, a lot. Studies suggest 38% of meaning is from how we say things.

"I love you" can be said a hundred different ways with different meanings. Passion, resignation, confidence, or doubt, proclamation, or question.

Intonation contours = tone, pitch, and cadence - can enhance or subvert meaning.

> **Superior Temporal Sulcus STS**
>
> Infants sort what they hear through this area of the brain and at 4 months of age ALL auditory info passes through here.
>
> By 7 months, babies start sorting out human voices as the ONLY sounds that trigger attention from the STS
>
> The STS showed markedly heightened activity if the voice carries emotion.
>
> STS is dedicated to taking in language and reading tone and meaning.
>
> BUT GET THIS When we speak the STS turns off. So we do not hear our voice in the same way that we hear other's voices.
>
> This is why our voice sounds so unfamiliar in recordings - we hear ourselves every day, but not really.
>
> It explains our reactions like "Tone? I'm not using some kind of tone!"
>
> Top opera singers have "outside ears" - voice coaches because what the singer hears is not what the audience hears.

In addition, **we are usually so absorbed in our own thoughts** that we don't really hear ourselves. And out attention can only be on one thing, so that is usually our thoughts and figuring out what the fuck we are trying to say.

So our tone often betrays our thoughts and feelings in ways that we do not realize.

We try to sound relaxed but come across as uncomfortable. Confident can become bombastic and insecure.

Your Leaky Patterns

The little things like a furrowed brow's impact are easy to understand - but we can even be unaware of big, seemingly obvious patterns of behavior.

They gave the example of a 5 yr old son miming his father on the cell phone pacing and barking into it - the other kid yells "its daddy" and the father winces and says "how is that me?"

Because you are *always* on your phone his son says. The father actually thought that he was doing a good job minimizing his phone use around the family, because he wanted to. But there you go.

E Mail Body Language

We all know how we all try to discern the emotional tone in emails and how we use emojis and caps etc to convey emotions - just more evidence as to how important this stuff is.

They May Be Wrong About You

The point here is that how we read another's leaky face or tone may or may not be correct. **It is only a hypothesis.**

You are shy and at cocktail party and you linger by the door - could be seen as aloof or too good for the rest of us.

Or as with Annabelle, the eye rolling, sighs, and tense smile - she has sprung a leak and it is true.

Three Blind-Spot Amplifiers

Other's observations of us - the things we cannot see - our blindspots, **become their hot spots**. But there are three amplifiers that widen the gap between how we see ourselves and how others see us. And the 3 are interrelated.

Amplifier 1 Emotional Math

This is about emotional contagion - and how when we are caught up in an emotion - say anger, or sadness after a break up with a lover - we can lose track of the impact of our emotions on another person.

Put another way: We subtract certain emotions from the equation: "That emotion is not really who I am." But **others count it double**: "That emotion is exactly who you are."

They give an example of Olga who complains a lot to a close friend about her breakup - and then she hears through the grapevine that her friend thinks she is self-obsessed and victim'y

Likewise with anger we are obsessed with the threat and the provocation - and I know this from much experience with myself and my wife - we think our tone and pitch is not yelling but the other person perceives it as such. Been there a hundred times over. I have learned to better catch when my voice volume is escalating and changing tone.

And it is the threat or provocation we remember later - while the other person remembers your anger and your anger is now their threat.

We often blame the environment for all of this rather than understanding that it is a part of us. "It's not that I was angry," we think, "it's that the situation was tense." But situations are not tense. **People are tense.**

**Amplifier 2 Situation Versus Character** Examples:

1. When I take the last piece of cake at the party, you say it's because I'm selfish (character). I say it's because no one else wanted it (situation).

2. When I hop on a conference call five minutes late, you say I'm scatterbrained (character). I say I was juggling five things at once (situation).

3. When I take another personal day, you say I'm unreliable (character). I explain that I had to arrange transportation for my ailing aunt Adelaide (situation).

These are examples of **Fundamental Attribution Error** - when we describe the behavior of others we overemphasize their character in our judgment, whereas we overemphasize the situation as the cause.

These two extremes - situation vs character - are alternate ways of telling the story.

Amplifier 3 Impact Versus Intent

Back to the Gap Map - note how we judge ourselves by our intent, while others judge us by our impacts on them. Thus, even good intentions can result in negative impacts.
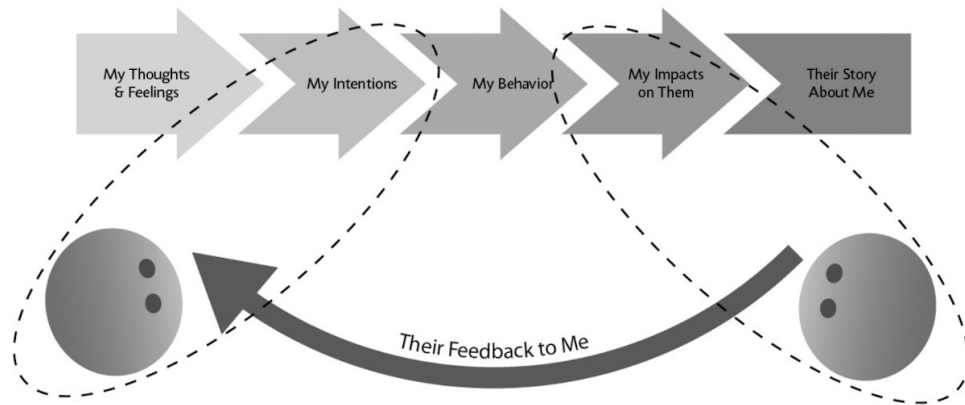
Annabelle is a classic example of this - her frustration and contemptuous feelings leak out despite her wanting them to feel happy and appreciated - but it doesn't work. He intentions have a negative impact - she is difficult and insincere.

This is **a common pattern. My story** about my interactions with others is driven by **my intentions**. I have good intentions—I'm trying to help, to guide, even to coach. I **assume** my good intentions lead to good impacts—they feel helped, guided, and appreciate my efforts to help them grow. Hence, people must know I'm a good person.

But for those around us, our impact drives their story. Despite my best intentions, I may have a negative impact on you; you feel bossed around and micromanaged. You then assume that I'm acting purposefully, or at least that I know I'm being bossy and don't care enough not to be. And if I have negative or negligent intentions I must be a bad person. Now you give me feedback that I'm bossy and controlling, and I'm shocked and bewildered. I discard it because it doesn't match who I am. It's wrong. And you conclude that I'm either oblivious to who I am or so defensive that I refuse to acknowledge what everyone knows is true.

The **cure or fix for this stalemate** is to **separate intentions from impact** when discussing feedback.

For Annabelle this looks like: "I've been working hard to be more patient [arrow 2 above, her intentions]. And yet it sounds like that's not the impact I'm having [arrow 4 above]. That's upsetting. Let's figure out why."

Conversely, the feedback giver also confuses impacts and intentions - as their feedback is usually packed with **assumed intentions.** Instead of saying, "You try to steal credit for other people's ideas" (intentions), instead share the impact the behavior had on them: "I was upset and confused when you said it was your idea. I felt I deserved the credit for that idea."

The Result: Our Generally Positive) Self

Those 3 amplifiers above add up - to statistics like this 37% of Americans report being victims of workplace bullies. Of course this is not the only cause of bullying, but the impact of people who are unaware of their impact is massive.

They:

1. Judge themselves by their **intentions**: "I was just trying to get the job done right!"

2. Attribute other's reactions to their hypersensitivity - i.e. **character.**

3. Attribute other's reactions to the **context**: "Look it was a tense situation, anyone would have reacted that way."

Telling them not to bully makes no sense since they don't see it - instead discuss the impact of specific behaviors, and prohibiting when appropriate.

We Collude To Keep Each Other In The Dark

We don't want to hurt someone's feelings or start a fight.

We figure they must already know.

Or that it is someone else's job to tell them.

The result: the person whose behavior is an issue can take misplaced comfort in the absence of corroborating views - if what you are saying is true why hasn't anyone else told me?

What Helps Us See Our Blind Spots?

What does not help? Looking harder. Most just conjure up explanations of the other persons ulterior motives or their personality disorders. We have the same Gap Map reaction to them as they do to us. I.e. - they have an agenda or something is really wrong with them.

Use Your Reaction As A Blind Spot Alert

When you actually think "what was their agenda" or "what is wrong with them?" your next thought needs to be: **I wonder if this feedback is sitting in my blind spot.**

Ask: How Do I Get In My Own Way?

Do not ask general shit like: "How am I doing" or "do you have any feedback for me?"

Instead ask: **"What do you see me doing, or failing to do, that is getting in my own way?"**

They may start timidly ("Well, on occasion I suppose that you sometimes . . ."), but if you respond with **genuine curiosity and appreciation**, they'll be able to paint you a picture that is clear, detailed, and useful.

Look For Patterns

When you get feedback that stings, AVOID reaching into your pockets and pulling out past positive feedback that counters the current feedback. It is only an ego protection move.

Do not do this kind of move: "You say I'm self-absorbed? Then how come I won the community service award last year?" "You think I interrupt? Let me stop you right there . . . because I practically had to sit on my hands last week during your inane presentation."

Instead, take a **breath, stay curious, and look for consistent feedback** - in two ways:

1. First - to what extent are you **both describing the same behavior but interpreting it differently**. They may misunderstand you (shy vs aloof) or you may be unaware of your impacts (outgoing vs overbearing).

How I See Me	How You See Me
Shy	Aloof
Upbeat	Phony
Spontaneous	Flaky
Truth Teller	Nasty
Passionate	Emotional
Smart	Arrogant
High Standards	Hypercritical
Outgoing	Overbearing
Quirky	Annoying

2. Second, ask yourself: **Where have I heard this before?** If it is not the first time you have heard it, then a pattern is likely present. Patterns are what we are trying to discover.

Get A Second Opinion

If the feedback does not resonate, take the whole set of questions to a friend.

But DO NOT say: "this can't be true can it?"

Instead, **lay out the problem explicitly**: "Here's feedback I just got. It seems wrong. My first reaction is to reject it. But I wonder if this is feedback in a blind spot? Do you see me doing this sometimes, and if so, when? What impact do you see it having?" You have to let your friend know that you want honesty, and here's why.

Honest Mirrors vs Supportive Mirrors

Supportive Mirror - we go to someone who is a supportive mirror for reassurance. They show us our best self, wellrested and under a flattering light. Yes how you acted was not the greatest, but it is not how you really are - no big deal, toss it out as an aberration, you are a good person!

Honest Mirror - shows us what we look like right now, when we're not at our best and our bedhead is bad. It's a true reflection of what others saw today, when we were stressed and distracted and leaking our frustration. "Yes, you really did come across that way. It's not a good thing."

We consciously or unconsciously often ask people to be Supportive Mirrors - e.g. we share a piece of feedback from a nurse, implicitly inviting our friend to be on our side: "He's overreacting, right? He just doesn't understand I've got bigger things to worry about, right?"

Asking this stuff of our friends and loved ones can put them in a bind: they are concerned because they don't want to upset us and they are confused - they are not sure if being just supportive is the right thing.

They are right to be concerned. When someone has been a supportive mirror, we can feel betrayed and blindsided if they suddenly become an honest one.

In what measure are you looking for honesty or needing support? Being clear will help avoid crossed wires. This takes real courage!

Record Yourself

This can be ENORMOUSLY ILLUMINATING as it enables us to hear our tone and see our behavior in ways that are normally invisible to us.

If possible, ask a team member to record - it gives them some control, it alleviates concern that you are actually recording them, and it sends a signal that you take the feedback seriously.

They gave a great example of a situation with Zoe who was nicknamed Annie Oakley by her colleagues because she routinely shoots down every idea in meetings. She had no idea, and actually prides herself on nurturing creativity.

But upon hearing herself she was stunned to see that the first words out of her mouth were always negative. 'Here's what I'm worried about,' or 'Here's why I doubt that can work.' It's so obvious on the recording, but I had no idea I was doing it."

What was going on under Zoe's mental hood is a conflict between the concern about wasting time and her genuine belief that fresh ideas are the lifeblood of the company. **Her anxiety about time undermined the conversation - with her concerns about going down unfruitful paths.**

The impact of becoming aware of our blind spots is enormous: Across contexts as different as business teams, speed-dating, and political opinion polling, approximately **40 percent of variation in outcomes**

can be attributed to social signaling, behavior mostly occurring in our own blind spots.

Focus On Change From The Inside Out

Back to Annabelle - she heard their complaints as being about her behavior - "They don't like it when I act disrespectful, so I'll work on acting respectful."

But her colleagues didn't want her to seem respectful; they wanted her to **feel respectful**. Annabelle should assume that people will **ultimately read her true attitude and feelings, whatever they are.**

So she has two choices. She can do one, the other, or both:

1. **Discuss her true feelings**—explain why she is frustrated with her colleagues, where her expectations come from, and what would help. This can take pressure off - she can make her expectations explicit and then problem solve with the team: Are the expectations realistic? If so, how do we get team members to meet them? And what is Annabelle doing that might be hindering them from stepping up? If she's secondguessing their efforts, it won't take long for them to stop first-guessing.

2. **Work hard to change her feelings** - not how she comes across but her genuine underlying feelings. This is not about concealing or pretending but developing authentic empathy and appreciation for her colleagues. She may need to **see her colleagues' efforts in a new way, get to know them better as people, or work harder to see what they are doing well.**

As she is dealing with this stuff she can enlist the support of her team: "I get frustrated easily when I'm under pressure. I'm learning that I show it in ways I didn't realize. I'm working on reacting better under pressure, and you can help me by pointing out my reaction in the moment."