

STIMULUS VERSUS RESPONSE

The following 3 page article comes from Stephen R. Covey's book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. [You can buy it here](#). While I don't agree with everything Covey says, for many people the ideas presented here can be truly liberating. Sometimes Covey leans too far away from the scriptural truth that our ability to choose is limited, that things happen to us beyond our control, that God is sovereign, and that it is God, not us, who is the ultimate master of our destiny. He gives little grace for the reality that sometimes we are simply weak and do not live up to our ideals. But with that caveat, I challenge you to read this excerpt with an open mind, and ask God if there is anything here that you needed to hear. As you read, consider difficult relationships you have or have had in the past.

Habit 1: Be Proactive

As you read this {article}, try to stand apart from yourself. Try to project your consciousness upward into a corner of the room and see yourself, in your mind's eye, reading. Can you look at yourself almost as though you were someone else? Now try something else. Think about the mood you are now in. Can you identify it? What are you feeling? How would you describe your present mental state? Now think for a minute about how your mind is working. Is it quick and alert? Do you sense that you are torn between doing this mental exercise and evaluating the point to be made out of it? Your ability to do what you just did is uniquely human. Animals do not possess this ability. We call it "self-awareness" or the ability to think about your very thought process. This is the reason why man has dominion over all things in the world and why he can make significant advances from generation to generation. This is why we can evaluate and learn from others' experiences as well as our own. This is also why we can make and break our habits.

We are not our feelings. We are not our moods. We are not even our thoughts. The very fact that we can think about these things separates us from them and from the animal world. Self-awareness enables us to stand apart and examine even the way we "see" ourselves -- our paradigm, the most fundamental paradigm of effectiveness. It affects not only our attitudes and behaviors, but also how we see other people. It becomes our map of the basic nature of mankind. In fact, until we take how we see ourselves (and how we see others) into account, we will be unable to understand how others see and feel about themselves and their world. Unaware, we will be unable to understand how others see and feel about themselves and their world. Unaware, we will project our intentions on their behavior and call ourselves objective. This significantly limits our personal potential and our ability to relate to others as well. But because of the unique human capacity of self-awareness, we can examine our paradigms to determine whether they are reality- or principle-based or if they are a function of conditioning and conditions.

The Social Mirror

If the only vision we have of ourselves comes from the social mirror -- from the current social paradigm and from the opinions, perceptions, and paradigms of the people around us -- our view of ourselves is like the reflection in the crazy mirror room at the carnival.

"You're never on time."

"Why can't you ever keep things in order?"

"You must be an artist!"

"You eat like a horse!"

"I can't believe you won!"

"This is so simple. Why can't you understand?"

These visions are disjointed and out of proportion. They are often more projections than reflections, projecting the concerns and character weaknesses of people giving the input rather than accurately reflecting what we are. The reflection of the current social paradigm tells us we are largely determined by conditioning and conditions. While we have acknowledged the tremendous power of conditioning in our lives, to say that we are *determined* by it, that we have no control over that influence, creates quite a different map. There are actually three social maps -- three theories of determinism widely accepted, independently or in combination, to explain the nature of man. *Genetic determinism* basically says your grandparents did it to you. That's why you have such a temper. Your grandparents had short tempers and it's in your DNA. It just goes through the generations and you inherited it. In addition, you're Irish, and that's the nature of Irish people.

Psychic determinism basically says your parents did it to you. Your upbringing, your childhood experience essentially laid out your personal tendencies and your character structure. That's why you're afraid to be in front of a group. It's the way your parents brought you up. You feel terribly guilty if you make a mistake because you "remember" deep inside the emotional scripting when you were very vulnerable and tender and dependent. You "remember" the emotional punishment, the rejection, the comparison with somebody else when you didn't perform as well as expected.

Environmental determinism basically says your boss is doing to you -- or your spouse, or that bratty teenager, or your economic situation, or national policies. Someone or something in your environment is responsible for your situation. Each of these maps is based on the stimulus/response theory we most often think of in connection with Pavlov's experiments with dogs. The basic idea is that we are conditioned to respond in a particular way to a particular stimulus. How accurately and functionally do these deterministic maps describe the territory? How clearly do these mirrors reflect the true nature of man? Do they become self-fulfilling prophecies? Are they based on principles we can validate within ourselves?

Between Stimulus and Response

In answer to those questions, let me share with you the catalytic story of Viktor Frankl. Frankl was a determinist raised in the tradition of Freudian psychology, which postulates that whatever happens to you as a child shapes your character and personality and basically governs your whole life. The limits and parameters of your life are set, and, basically, you can't do much about it. Frankl was also a psychiatrist and a Jew. He was imprisoned in the death camps of Nazi Germany, where he experienced things that were so repugnant to our sense of decency that we shudder to even repeat them. His parents, his brother, and his wife died in the camps or were sent to the gas ovens. Except for his sister, his entire family perished. Frankl himself suffered torture and innumerable indignities, never knowing from one moment to the next if his path would lead

to the ovens or if he would be among the "saved" who would remove the bodies or shovel out the ashes of those so fated.

One day, naked and alone in a small room, he began to become aware of what he later called "the last of the human freedoms" -- the freedom his Nazi captors could not take away. They could control his entire environment, they could do what they wanted to his body, but Viktor Frankl himself was a self-aware being who could look as an observer at his very involvement. His basic identity was intact. He could decide within himself how all of this was going to affect him. Between what happened to him, or the stimulus, and his response to it, was his freedom or power to choose that response.

In the midst of his experiences, Frankl would project himself into different circumstances, such as lecturing to his students after his release from the death camps. He would describe himself in the classroom, in his mind's eye, and give his students the lessons he was learning during his very torture. Through a series of such disciplines -- mental, emotional, and moral, principally using memory and imagination -- he exercised his small, embryonic freedom until it grew larger and larger, until he had more freedom than his Nazi captors. They had more liberty, more options to choose from in their environment; but he had more freedom, more internal power to exercise his options. He became an inspiration to those around him, even to some of the guards. He helped others find meaning in their suffering and dignity in their prison existence. In the midst of the most degrading circumstances imaginable, Frankl used the human endowment of self-awareness to discover a fundamental principle about the nature of man: Between stimulus and response, man has the freedom to choose.

Within the freedom to choose are those endowments that make us uniquely human. In addition to self-awareness, we have imagination -- the ability to create in our minds beyond our present reality. We have conscience -- a deep inner awareness of right and wrong, of the principles that govern our behavior, and a sense of the degree to which our thoughts and actions are in harmony with them. And we have independent will -- the ability to act based on our self-awareness, free of all other influences. Even the most intelligent animals have none of these endowments. To use a computer metaphor, they are programmed by instinct and/or training. They can be trained to be responsible, but they can't take responsibility for that training; in other words, they can't direct it. They can't change the programming. They're not even aware of it.

But because of our unique human endowments, we can write new programs for ourselves totally apart from our instincts and training. This is why an animal's capacity is relatively limited and man's is unlimited. But if we live like animals, out of our own instincts and conditioning and conditions, out of our collective memory, we too will be limited. The deterministic paradigm comes primarily from the study of animals -- rats, monkeys, pigeons, dogs -- and neurotic and psychotic people. While this may meet certain criteria of some researchers because it seems measurable and predictable, the history of mankind and our own self-awareness tell us that this map doesn't describe the territory at all! Our unique human endowments lift us above the animal world. The extent to which we exercise and develop these endowments empowers us to fulfill our uniquely human potential. Between stimulus and response is our greatest power -- the freedom to choose. "

Proactivity" Defined

In discovering the basic principle of the nature of man, Frankl described an accurate self-map from which he began to develop the first and most basic habit of a highly effective person in any environment, the habit of Proactivity. While the word proactivity is now fairly common in management literature, it is a word you won't find in most dictionaries. It means more than merely taking initiative. It means that as human beings, we are responsible for our own lives. Our behavior is a function of our decisions, not our conditions. We can subordinate feelings to values. We have the initiative and the responsibility to make things happen.

Look at the word responsibility -- "response-ability" -- the ability to choose your response. Highly proactive people recognize that responsibility. They do not blame circumstances, conditions, or conditioning for their behavior. Their behavior is a product of their own conscious choice, based on values, rather than a product of their conditions, based on feeling. Because we are, by nature, proactive, if our lives are a function of conditioning and conditions, it is because we have, by conscious decision or by default, chosen to empower those things to control us.

In making such a choice, we become reactive. Reactive people are often affected by their physical environment. If the weather is good, they feel good. If it isn't, it affects their attitude and their performance. Proactive people can carry their own weather with them. Whether it rains or shines makes no difference to them. They are value driven; and if their value is to produce good quality work, it isn't a function of whether the weather is conducive to it or not. Reactive people are also affected by their social environment, by the "social weather." When people treat them well, they feel well; when people don't, they become defensive or protective. Reactive people build their emotional lives around the behavior of others, empowering the weaknesses of other people to control them. The ability to subordinate an impulse to a value is the essence of the proactive person. Reactive people are driven by feelings, by circumstances, by conditions, by their environment. Proactive people are driven by values -- carefully thought about, selected and internalized values.

Proactive people are still influenced by external stimuli, whether physical, social, or psychological. But their response to the stimuli, conscious or unconscious, is a value-based choice or response. As Eleanor Roosevelt observed, "No one can hurt you without your consent." In the words of Gandhi, "They cannot take away our self-respect if we do not give it to them." It is our willing permission, our consent to what happens to us, that hurts us far more than what happens to us in the first place.

I admit this is very hard to accept emotionally, especially if we have had years and years of explaining our misery in the name of circumstance or someone else's behavior. But until a person can say deeply and honestly, "I am what I am today because of the choices I made yesterday," that person cannot say, "I choose otherwise."