
Shedding the Shackles of Judgment for Better Decision-Making



By [Schon Beechler](#) , INSEAD Senior Affiliate Professor of Leadership and Organisational Behaviour

Passing judgments of others and ourselves hampers our ability to learn. By asking questions differently, we can learn more and make better decisions.

I recently set off for a business trip to India. When I boarded my flight at New York’s JFK airport, I arrived at my seat and saw that my seat-mate, a man in his 50s or so, was already there. I smiled and said “hello” as I stowed my luggage and settled in, but I got no response. The man didn’t look up or even acknowledge my presence. I immediately jumped to a conclusion. “What an unpleasant guy” I thought to myself.

It had only taken me a few seconds to arrive at my conclusion based on very little data. This is what learning scholar, Chris Argyris, calls “moving up the ladder of inference”. I noticed only one of the many pieces of data in my environment, attributed meaning to it, made an assumption and settled on a course of action; I wouldn’t bother to engage him further.

Luckily, I know from both science and my own experience that the human brain tends to judge things instantly and is often dead wrong. In fact, snap judgments can lead to missed opportunities or can cause us to make serious mistakes, especially with those around us.

So, when my seat-mate awoke after sleeping for the first six hours of the flight, I tried again. “You must have been tired?” I said. He replied that he was. He told me he was a pilot, dog-legging the trip back after flying to the U.S. from Delhi where he lived in a small flat. He told me he spent most of his time in France, on his houseboat. Intrigued, I asked a few questions and our conversation started.

For three hours, he shared an unexpected and remarkable story. He was a gypsy with only an elementary school education. His grandparents had been interned in gypsy camps during the Second World War, but had survived. When he was 14, the authorities forcefully settled their caravan into a camp and his parents helped him flee on foot to Austria for a better life. He never saw them again.

From there, he’d studied in France, the U.K. and travelled around Russia. He’d even helped multinational companies set up businesses in Eastern Europe and Russia with his extensive knowledge and fluency in seven languages. He wove his story in vivid colors, sharing with me both the beauty and the pain. He winced as he told me of death of his wife and young son during the Serbian War and proudly recounted his fiery mother and the image he held in his memory of her riding a horse, her long curly hair ablaze in the wind. He spoke passionately about the discrimination against his people and of his advocacy for the Roma in Europe and America. He shared the history of the gypsies through the ages with me, from the mountains of Afghanistan through India and to Europe. He taught me more in three hours than I ever would have imagined.

Overly self-judgmental

By putting judgment aside, I emerged from that flight enriched and inspired, more than I would have if I had trusted my original assumption. Such judgments are detrimental, not only to our own learning, but they can lead us to make poor decisions, lose opportunities, and to alienate others. Furthermore, it’s not just others we’re capable of judging, but also ourselves.

Most of us have a running monologue in our heads with explanations for what has happened to us in the past and our expectations of the future. This “self talk” can have an overly positive bias in the form of overconfidence and lack of humility. For others, “self talk” can be unnecessarily punishing, stripping us of confidence and raising our stress as we colour our internal world with an overly negative brush, questioning ourselves or beating ourselves up.

For example, in my teaching, I came across a bright, personable and successful executive, Bill, who confided that despite his accomplishments, wasn't sure that he was “good enough” to successfully lead his organisation and was afraid to try something new and risky to turn his business around. Often known as the “imposter syndrome,” this kind of thinking often starts young. My daughter proclaimed “I'm no good at math” when she was 5.

From “judger” to “learner”

Most of us believe that self-criticism is what keeps us in line, but research shows the opposite. While persistence is a driver of success, it's the persistence of the “learner” in us, rather than the “judger” that fuels our success.

Marilee Adams, a psychotherapist, personal coach and leadership trainer has developed a very useful framework to approach these situations. According to Dr. Adams, we all have both a learner and judger self and we can choose, moment by moment, which of these two selves we want to invoke. When we invoke our “judger” self, we ask, “What's wrong with me? Whose fault is it? Why bother?” On the other hand, our “learner” self lets us ask, “What do I want? What works? What are the facts I need? What are my choices?”

With some coaching, the talented but self-doubting Bill was able to change his question from “am I good enough?” to “what am I great at? How can I use my strengths to turn the company around? Who can help me?” It wasn't long before he told me that he had become bold enough to take a new approach to turn his company around. He also had a new-found respect for his co-workers and employees.

Change the question

The good news is that we can overcome judgmental behaviour, both toward others and ourselves. But it involves changing the questions we're asking

ourselves and those of others. My colleague Hal Gregersen, INSEAD Professor of Innovation and Leadership, has discovered one consistent characteristic across the companies he's studied in [The World's Most Innovative Companies](#); the ability of these leaders to ask lots of deep, provocative questions to which they don't have the answers. In essence, they're inquisitive learners.

For leaders, the impact that having a learning mindset has on their own behaviour can be profound, but it also influences those around them. By building a space safe enough for those around them to be learners and ask questions instead of operating within a ring fence of judgments or assumptions can yield innovative and creative environments for both leaders and employees.

In some senses, we have to unlearn our unquestioning habits before we can reclaim our unjudgmental questioning nature. Young children at school are naturally curious and ask lots of questions, until about the middle of first grade, when they start to realise that evaluation and the right answers are most important and become more so as the years of school progress. We have been socialised to suppress our "learner" mindset in order to excel.

But the uncertain and complex world in which we live calls for new questions and many answers. I turn to former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin who made a point of asking his children not "what did you learn in school today?" but "what questions did you ask today?"

What are you doing to encourage yourself and your co-workers to be "learners" and not "judgers"? What questions are you living and what questions are you encouraging in others?

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/shedding-shackles-judgment-better-decision-making>

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