

It's Never Too Late To Learn Your ABCs

During the past ten years I have worked with over 350 family-owned businesses, trying to help them improve owner-family-associate relations, or in some cases, trying to help them resolve conflicts between or among these various groups or individuals. When I first ventured outside the safety of my university office some twenty years ago to work with business groups, I felt a little uncomfortable, but my uneasiness diminished when I found that working with angry or disagreeable professors was just like working with business-people who were fighting or difficult to get along with in the work setting.

Few people lose their jobs because they are not smart enough to do the job...they lose their jobs because they can't get along with their fellow workers or their bosses. The main culprit in most work-related problems is anger. Anger is the problem we have to deal with, but the reason most people get angry is because they do not think logically. Their thinking is messed up and they don't know how to get out of the vicious cycle, which leads to more anger, more problems, and more damaged relationships. Almost every business team I've reviewed is in conflict not because of a difference in opinions or ideas, but because some of the parties are being very illogical and their lack of logic is causing a great deal of anger. Let's look at several cases.

Case 1. Al, chairman of the shipping department, is having a difficult time retaining employees. He has fired several associates for insubordination. Al has difficulty with

employees who challenge his authority. He tells workers in the plant exactly how to do things and doesn't want them to challenge his years of experience. Exit interviews with fired employees seem to indicate that the people who were fired believed that they were giving AI suggestions on how to improve efficiency and were very hurt that they were fired for "talking back to the department head."

Case 2. Bob, the owner of a 30-person company, constantly gets angry with his secretary (he just seethes, he doesn't tell her), because she gets her reports done only minutes before the deadline. She tells fellow workers that she loves her job, but feels sorry that her boss is angry so often. She assumes that he must be having family problems.

Case 3. Carl, son of the elderly owner, and president of a 50-person company, is a perfectionist and expects everyone in the company to be perfect too. He drives everyone crazy by being so picky. Lots of associates can remember when the "old man" ran the company and long for someone else to be president.

What is happening in these case? AI, the supervisor, gets mad when he believes that people are challenging his authority. Bob, the owner, fumes when his secretary doesn't get projects completed early. Carl, the president, is a perfectionist and like most perfectionists is picky and judgmental (another form of anger). These people need to learn their psychological A-B-Cs. Let me explain.

Everyday we're faced with many Activating Events...we'll call each of them A. Someone might take the parking space you've been waiting on for three minutes. Your husband may be late for dinner. Your son may tell you he is thinking of having his nose pierced. Someone may tell Al that there is a better way to do a job. Bob's secretary may get the project completed "just" on time. Carl may chastise his foreman for not completing his reports in ink. For each of these events there is a consequence C. Some people believe that A causes C (see diagram 1).

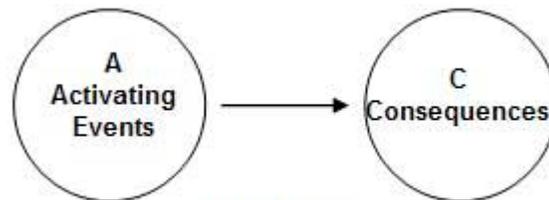


Diagram 1

Some people believe that a stolen parking place causes your anger, that being late for dinner causes anger, that giving you suggestions causes your anger, that imperfect reports cause your anger...in other words, that the actions of others cause you to be angry or disgusted or disappointed. People who believe that A causes C are in for a life fraught with problems because they erroneously believe the actions of others cause them to be angry, anxious or sad. Isn't it crazy to believe that if some idiot honks his horn at you a microsecond after the signal light changes, you should get angry? Do you want to give up your self-control to every person who honks a horn or disagrees with one of your opinions? Do you want to be a leaf in the sky or a cork in the

sea, or do you want to take control of your own life? What do you need to do? You need to convince yourself that A never causes C. If A never causes C, then what causes the anger and other negative emotions? The answer is simple....your beliefs (B) about all activating events (A) cause the consequences (C). (See Diagram 2)

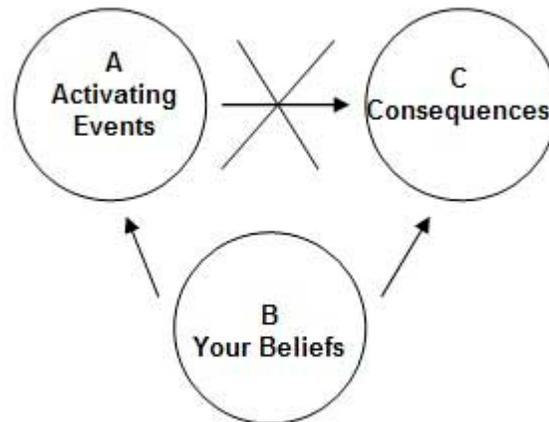


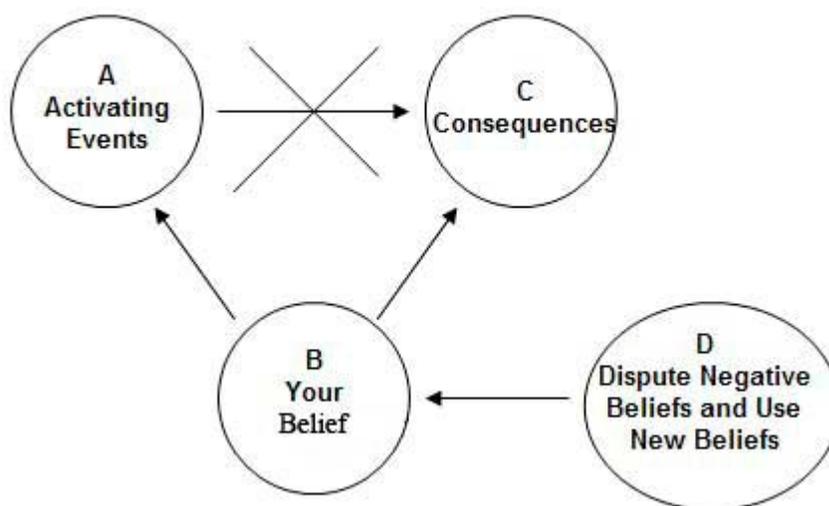
Diagram 2

What you think about having your parking place stolen determines your emotion. What you think about your husband being late for dinner determines the way you feel. You can say "Thank God I'm not the kind of person who takes other people's parking spaces," and look for another parking space; or you can honk your horn, shout obscenities and consider a plan to get even with the thief (revenge in another form of anger).

You can say "I'm grateful that he usually comes home on time...he is such a great husband" or you can pout (another form of anger) and ruin the evening for both of you. The sad thing about the latter courses of action is that they are very damaging to the person getting angry. Getting angry takes

its toll in headaches, stomach problems, tight muscles, and increased blood pressure, to name a few. Most anger in our lives is irrational. We revert to a childish state, but instead of taking our ball and going home, we blame other people for our own faults, become loud and abusive or slam our fist on the table and call a hurried end to the meeting.

When we realize that our most negative emotions result from our own thinking, rather than from the actions of others, we can stop blaming others and gain control of our own lives. How do we get rid of the negative (irrational) thoughts that have been controlling our emotions and causing us to be angry, depressed or fearful? Again, the answer is simple, we need to dispute (D) our non-workable, irrational beliefs and start using new beliefs, which result in consequences that are positive and generate positive relationships and a stable lifestyle. (See Diagram 3)



Challenging your own beliefs is sometimes difficult because you've been using these particular negative (irrational) beliefs for many years. The key to change seems to be looking at yourself and deciding if a particular belief is working in your life. Are your beliefs working when you embarrass your friends and family by getting angry with every other motorist? Are your beliefs working when the evening is destroyed by temper tantrum with a mate?

Are Al's beliefs working when he loses good people because he is insecure about his own leadership and gets angry? Are Bob's beliefs working when his own lack of assertiveness and poor communication style confuses others and causes him inner turmoil? And lastly, are Carl's beliefs working when his perfectionist (judgmental) behaviors result in his employees resenting his leadership and him feeling that his workers lack attention to detail? The answers are obvious. These beliefs aren't working and each of these people need to dispute/refute/change their non-working (irrational) beliefs and start using beliefs that work in their lives.

If some of you know you have certain beliefs that aren't working and you would like to make some changes, here are my recommendations:

a) Identify some small problem in your life that you know needs work. For example, you get angry while driving. (Save the larger problems until you gain some confidence in your ability to calm your emotions with clearer thinking.)

b) Determine the thoughts that cause your particular negative emotion. For example, you get angry when someone honks his horn at you when the light changes. What are you thinking when the anger occurs? Common thoughts include...that idiot is looking for trouble...I'd like to take that horn and...I'll get behind him and toot at him...and so it goes.

c) Recognize that your current beliefs aren't working.

d) Think of new beliefs that you might use that will be more positive. For example, that guy is in a real hurry, maybe his little boy is sick...I want to get there, but I'm not in that big of a hurry...thank goodness I'm not that impatient.

e) Act on these new beliefs and feel satisfaction that you have taken control of your own emotions. You are no longer going to surrender the control of your emotions to someone else.

It is never too late to learn your psychological ABCs. Being out of control of your own emotions is anxiety producing and being in control of your own emotions builds self-confidence. This model works on small problems ("He took my parking place") and large problems ("Everyone should love me and everything I do"). The key to balanced mental health is attributing the consequences in your life more to your own beliefs than to the activating events you previously thought controlled you. When someone can blow their horn and "make" you angry, you don't get it. If you do enough work on

your ABCs, I promise you'll graduate to a higher level of positivity in your life, and you'll be a better worker, supervisor, owner, and yes, person.