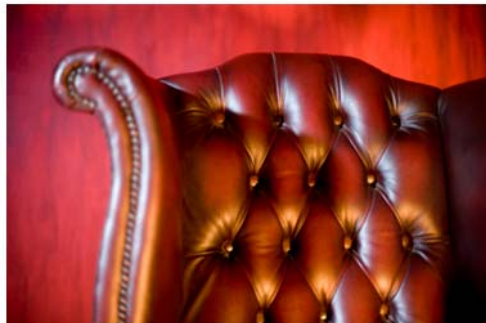


Why We Hold “Our” Objectivity So Dearly



The truth about objective
statements—and 44 golden
nuggets of systemic thinking

ABR Executive Coaching
Annette B. Reissfelder, PCC
Moorreye 88, 22415 Hamburg, Germany
info@an-edge-for-you.com www.an-edge-for-you.com
Tel. +49 (0)40 – 531 7506 Fax +49 (0)40 – 533 94 63 Mobile +49 (0)178 – 97 515 97

The Objectivity Trap

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Introduction – Why we hold “our” objectivity so dearly

Let’s face it – we are terribly fond of the concept of objectivity. Perhaps even more though we are fond of the idea that we ourselves have objective representations of the world, and the things and people in it. We take it as a matter of course that we have more objective notions than other people – if not all. Particularly when these people happen to have different opinions...!

One of our basic problems as human beings is that we are surrounded by people who do not – in fact, cannot – share our understanding of the world. These people are everywhere: in our families, in the office, and – particularly annoying – sit in our conference rooms, boardrooms, and other places where we are really concerned about the outcome... This takes high tolls on our time, energy and nerves, and does not always let us produce the desired results.

Admittedly, the notion that two or more people look at the same diagram and have the same thought processes is tempting. But just how realistic is that? Unfortunately, in the following we will come to see that we have to do much more than just offer the same information to different people – and why that is.

You may, however, already have directly experienced this phenomenon: how we can take a leap forward in negotiations, if we are able to really understand and connect to the concerns and thought processes of the other parties, and make sure we get this message across. On the other hand, it is very difficult to achieve results as long as we stay in our framework of thinking about people who have different opinions and agendas as

manipulators, opportunists, great worriers, grumblers or optimists – and disqualify their contributions accordingly.

How is it possible to understand our own filters that conveniently “edit” our perception, and make sure they don’t unduly interfere with our perception? For people who are permanently stressed about results and pressured for time, this is especially demanding – which is why this is an important topic in my executive coaching practice. And even though many people find the time and energy to filter messages from clients and their own bosses, they find they don’t do that with their own closest co-workers...

Coming back to the conference room – what helps you to really get your message across, especially when you are not communicating from a position of power? Before we address this question, I invite you to join me on a little journey. What do you stand to gain from this exercise?

*It is so human to believe that our own way of thinking must be the “objective” way, certainly more so than anybody else’s. How tempting to think we could convince others that we had the ultimate opinion on things. Deep down, we all know that things aren’t quite so easy – what if those others also believed that their way of thinking was the objective, the only objective way! What an uncomfortable thought - if people seriously CANNOT see things the way you do, would they still be competent, and could they be trusted? **Many people are literally “trapped” in this way of thinking. Find out where you stand – and if the ideas presented could have practical value for you!***

Let me put it in this way: some people are willing to challenge even the most unambiguous statements and observations. Which may mean that they are just trying to be difficult. In which case we have an attitude problem. Or it can mean they don’t see the same things that you see. In which case we have an information problem. It is much easier to deal with an information problem!

You may be surprised to hear that the latter explanation is fully in line with our neurobiological disposition: we can’t help seeing the world “our way”. If you find this very irritating, chances are you will find this e-book helpful for boosting your interaction with and impact on those complex systems all around you. And maybe you’ll even decide to inject the process with some high-octane fuel...

I wish you an inspiring and inspired journey!

PS- Please feel free to pass this e-book on to colleagues and friends who might appreciate it. My copyright remains unaffected.

How Our Thinking Arises

We clearly come from an objectivist tradition. At school and often beyond, these are the categories in which we have learned to think:

- 1) Galileo Galilei: Everything should be measurable. If it is not, it has to be made measurable.
- 2) Isaac Newton: Things occur independently of our perception.
- 3) Everything takes place in accordance with direct causality (linear causality, mechanistic physics, the Newtonian-Cartesian model).
- 4) René Descartes: Everything is formed of smaller parts. Anything can always be broken down into smaller parts and then put together again (rationalist approach).

Conclusions:

- Matter is objective.
- The world exists independently of us.
- Matter has only one form at a given moment.
- The existence of reality is shown by comparing the results of two mutually independent observations (the paradigm of the scientific understanding of the world.)
- We are inhabitants of the physical world, which is composed of physical objects and their qualities.
- There exists an objective reality, which is independent of perception.
- By perceiving we are only trying to take hold of the world; language portrays the world and a proper knowledge of reality is provided only by sense perceptions.
- All that we perceive is merely a representation of objects in the world. The brain performs only a passive depiction of realities that are independent of it.

The Revolutionary Challenge From Tradition to Constructivist Roots

Quantum physics (1940s-50s, Heisenberg, Bohr, Einstein)

In the early 20th century, new impulses came from gestalt psychology and art - e.g. by Franz Marc, Vasily Kandinsky, the Blaue Reiter group, or the German art critic and

psychologist Rudolf Arnheim. As Arnheim writes around the First World War: *“What we developed at the university was a reaction to the scientific method. The scientific method is based on the assumption that you can put an item under examination together piece by piece, thus define every piece separately and then get the sum of the definitions. But what appears is that in biology, psychology and other sciences there are things whose essence is a product of the relationship between its parts, so that you cannot define the individual parts.”*

The field of physics has also been put into turmoil. Quantum physics, namely findings by Heisenberg, Bohr, and Einstein, has been further complicating the mechanistic world view since the late 1930's. Their troubling observations included the following:

1. When observing smaller and smaller particles: the results of activity at the sub-atomic level differ, according to the type of observation (observer and means of observation).
2. Light behaves either as waves or as particles, according to the way in which the observer looks at it.
3. One electron sent off into space was simultaneously observed in two different places.

Reaction: matter is not objective, but probable

- System theory postulates that a system is not the sum of its parts
- Introduction of circularity replacing linear thinking: cause A results in consequence B, which in turn results in consequence C - and that either confirms or casts doubt on cause A (it becomes a consequence), which confirms or casts doubt on B...
- Gregory Bateson: Each cause is at the same time part of the consequence, and vice versa (circular causality).

The magic circle of objective knowledge: handle with care

- To know that a depiction of an object is correct means to compare it with reality
- That would mean comparing it with a depiction of reality before the object has been perceived
- We do not, however, possess that, since we know only depictions of what we perceive, and we cannot compare it with anything ‘outside ourselves’ - we can only talk about those depictions that we perceive....

So what is the conclusion?

- There is no 'objective reality' that is independent of us. We are constructors of reality.
- Even if there were an objective reality, we would not have access to it, given the way our brain operates.

N.B. I recommend that you enjoy the following pages of quotes in a quiet moment, and accompanied by a special glass of wine, a nice pot of tea, or whatever you prefer to indicate a special moment of reflection for yourself. Very probably, if you go through these pages in "browsing mode" on your computer screen, they won't produce any lasting effect. So why not print off the following pages!

From the Treasure Chest of Systemic Thinkers: 44 Gold Nuggets

The following quotes are collected from a wide variety of sources. There are simplifications of very complex neurobiological findings and philosophical theses, authored by natural scientists, systems theorists, and researchers from the fields of cybernetics, communication theory, and neurophysiology in the second half of the 20th century. Some though are what I call “naive systemics” from earlier centuries. This eclectic group comprises German classics like the works of Immanuel Kant, Georg Lichtenberg or Johann Wolfgang von Goethe – as well as Antoine de Saint-Exupéry and Lewis Carroll...

1. If complexity did not exist, we would have to invent it.
2. All understanding in interpersonal communication consists of more or less useful misunderstandings. From the point of view of understanding, communication means only more or less useful failure to understand.
3. At each moment of his or her existence, a person does only the best that he is able to at that moment.
4. A map does not equal the territory (Korzybski). Words and what they mean are not the same thing.
5. Everything that is one way can be another way.
6. Mere words can lead a person to bliss or to the depths of suffering.
7. It is easier to begin something than to end something.
8. The world, as we see it, is our discovery. We are constructors of reality.
9. All the things we have available to us are only constructs of our brain. There is no access to ‘objective reality’.
10. We cannot say that something like reality exists. We have no access to a reality independent of us.

11. Everything that exists, exists from the point of view of an observer.
12. If person A says something, he never knows what person B will do. It is unforeseeable, and depends entirely on B's structure.
13. We cannot enter the head and body of someone else, and we also cannot change anything there. That means that only the structure of the other person decides whether change happens or not.
14. We have to constantly reassess so-called reality. We have only our own picture of reality, and have no choice but to compare our picture with other people's pictures.
15. Concepts of past and future are constructs of the mind. We only ever live in the present.
16. Learning is only the acquisition of experiences. This means increasing or optimising the alternatives, adding to the potential ways of behaving. At present, we behave in accordance with the ways we have always behaved in the past.
17. Memory is a permanent experiencing and verification of what I know - whether it is useful, whether it is appropriate.
18. When two people impact on each other, one cannot change the other, they can only 'perturb' them - incite them, push them and so on. The resulting effect always depends on the other person alone.
19. We can differentiate systems (for example, a person) into:
 - a. trivial machines, which means that 'x' goes in, and 'x' comes out *as happens with a non-living machine constructed by humans.*
 - b. non-trivial machines, where 'x' goes in, and inside something like learning goes on, we adapt and modulate 'x' in the present, and it cannot be foreseen what will come out, which means that 'y' comes out.
20. School and similar approaches typically regard a person as a trivial machine. Through education, X is imparted, and it is demanded that X' should come out. This approach trivialises people, taking away their ability to create and to learn by themselves. They call only for reproduction.

21. If I go to the doctor, for example, in order to get rid of a headache, I am treating myself like a trivial machine.
22. Everything that exists arises only in my head. There is no division into stimuli, perceptions and so on.
23. If an observer wants to explain something, then either he:
 - a. postulates objective reality independent of himself, which means that he establishes reality as a necessary pre-condition which exists without evidence,
or
 - b. puts objectivity in brackets, because it is dependent on him, and considers the existence of as many realities as there are people.
24. The first way is the foundation of knowledge, education, management and control. It means enforcing the values of my world on others. The second is the foundation of tolerance, respect and the acceptance of others. It means the possibility of giving the same values that my world has to the worlds of others.
25. As living systems, we exist in complete solitude.
26. From the outside, only quantity is carried into the brain; quality is produced inside us. Outside there are no colours, notes and so on, only waves. Red and sound are created in our head. Sometimes this is difficult to believe...
27. Neurophysiological findings (in the early 1990s, *Varela et al.*) suggest:
 - a) Only about 20% of the stimuli which enter the brain's cortex come from receptors in the body's sense organs. Over 80% come from the reticular formation, the hypothalamus and other brain structures. The great majority of what we perceive thus arises in the brain, and is not connected with so-called reality.
 - b) The number of nerve cells for sense perception is small (between 1 and 10 million). Internal nerve connections are a hundred thousand times greater in number than the neurons on the periphery.
28. We cogitate, we live together and we think together only in speech (language). There are no objective entities, only speaking ("linguaging") beings.
29. In dialogue, we can only understand what the other person says – their descriptions etc. We cannot, however, understand the other person, events and so on. So-called 'hard data' do not exist.

30. Everything that is said, is said by an observer. There is no such thing as an observer independent of what is observed.
31. What an observer observes that another observer observes, is connected more to the observer than to what is observed.
32. The world is not a universe, but a multiverse. There are as many universes as a perceiver is able to differentiate...
33. Realities are arguments in conversation. The reality of each person is always truthful. What is held in doubt does not regard its truth, but its usefulness.
34. Reality, like objectivity, is a coercive argument, because there is only one. In this way, it is easy to exercise control – things are either bad or good.
35. No behaviour is problematic in itself. Only negative evaluation of behaviour gives rise to a problem. A problematic system is thus created by communication.
36. Everything that takes place between people is communication. No communication can be forecast. It is unbelievably changeable.
37. Communication arises only in the addressee. Even misunderstanding is communication (for example, person 'A' brushes away a fly, person 'B' understands it as 'hello,' and so waves. 'A' wonders what on earth he is doing, and doesn't understand him, but thanks to 'B's' reaction, it is now a communication.
38. Misunderstanding, expectations, problems, risk, chance and uncertainty are the motor of communication, and make it fertile. Their removal is typical of problem systems.
39. The one certainty which is guaranteed to us is the certainty that we cannot be certain of anything. If only even that were not so uncertain...
40. Action helps orientation.
41. *Paul Watzlawick*: I am fully responsible for each word I utter. But I am not responsible for anything that you hear...
42. *Eleanor Roosevelt*: No one can hurt you without your consent.
43. The world isn't there to be discovered by us, but for us to educate ourselves in. This is a Kantian idea (Lichtenberg).
44. Perceptions are also a life and a world (Lichtenberg).

A Word of Warning

The information I put together on these pages can seem rather unsettling at first... it certainly was for me! However, this is not meant to be just a philosophical speculation. These things have a dramatic impact, if put into practice – and they can work for YOU!

*Unfortunately, although some are quite self-explanatory, they are just the starting point for changing your management practice - forever! Which, at the end of the day, is precisely **why I am sharing all this with you**: with conscious knowledge of these principles, you are much more likely to act in a way that will get you the results you want.*

What has all this to do with management? Of course you cannot simply apply this one to one to social systems – i.e. our reality in the company, in the team, with the customer - transferred. But you can learn some valuable lessons from this.

Many leaders in the fields of politics and economics are still sticking to old reified concepts about planning. In these conceptions, the complex and vital relationships of people that feed on their positive and negative identifications and energies play only a very minor role. Therefore, these leaders experience when trying to “implement” their precisely planned and calculated strategies something that isn’t much different from Alice in Wonderland in her strange croquet game, of which she says: “--and you've no idea how confusing it is all the things being alive; for instance, there's the arch I've got to go through next walking about at the other end of the ground--and I should have croqueted the Queen's hedgehog just now, only it ran away when it saw mine coming!”

The focal point of every manager is implementation. It is measured by results, and the manager spends his time measuring results. Isolated, non-concerted actions are not suited to affect desired changes in complex systems. Anyone who tries will usually fail in complex cause-effect relationships. If “implementation” within the meaning of our linear understanding of cause and effect (i.e. I give an instruction, and the result is what I have defined as goal) does not work in complex social processes, what would be the alternative?

Some of the key words are “creating contexts”, “farewell to the central perspective” and “self-organisation”.

The practical potential contained in these principles is enormous: If you succeed in translating these principles into conscious, situation-oriented action, you are able to achieve your goals with less effort, faster and with a renewed power and creativity.

Invitation: Are you ready for an exciting journey?

Developing a new faculty is usually a process where phases of quick successes are followed by phases of stagnation. As a coach I am an expert on accompanying this type of process – rethinking, adapting and adjusting your management style / leadership style to situational conditions that match your personality, values and goals.

Now the choice is yours. You can leave it at that, as an inspiring and provocative exercise – or you can move your game up.

You can attempt to do this by yourself, or with a partner whose expertise is on precisely these processes – and who therefore brings a sound knowledge of the following to the table:

- what your personal process should look like, and why,
- what steps your plan absolutely has to include, and
- what helps you get going again, if you ever get stuck.

How relevant is this to you? Imagine for a moment that you could communicate with just anybody who you are trying to reach out to, on “their” wavelength. Imagine you could replace lengthy discussions, in which ultimately nobody convinces anybody else, with situationally adapted, customer-oriented conversations. In these conversations, you could seize new opportunities, and at the same time strengthen the relationship with your customer (or employee). And all this would not even cost you any special effort.

Would that be of value for you in your position? How would this impact you personally? How could your organization benefit?

If you want to learn more about investing in your personal performance and competitiveness, and about mastering these principles in people management, we should talk! For a first glimpse of who I am and what I offer, please visit <http://www.an-edge-for-you.com>.

Yours,


Annette B. Reissfelder



*As an executive coach with extensive international and intercultural experience, I have over 8 years of coaching experience with senior managers from different industries, backgrounds and varied professional targets. I have served as a one-on-one change agent with 40+ clients in board level/owner positions, and over 70 clients in board-1 and board-2 positions. I work in my native German, as well as in near-native English and Czech. I am based in **Hamburg** and **Prague**. Please contact me at annette@an-edge-for-you.com if you require more information.*