

How Does A Tennis Ball Know That You Will Follow Through on Your Swing? *The Invisible Power of Positive Intent*

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When my tennis coach tells me that I didn't follow through on my swing, I ask myself how the ball "knows." The trajectory of the ball is influenced by all of the nuances of my stance, approach, contact and follow through because they are all connected in one fluid motion. Similarly, each interaction we engage in is influenced by the nuances of our facial expression, body language and verbal tone as well as the words we choose. Those subtle and powerful conveyors of meaning are a result of the intention with which we approach the interaction, *as well as* the intention we presume the other person brings to the party.

With a few good lessons, most people could significantly improve their tennis game or most any other sport. What often separates the Olympian from the amateur is *mindset*, that invisible factor that drives physical performance. We've all heard the saying "Never bet against the person with passion." Similarly, even the most skillfully worded communication falls flat without the key mindset of positive intent.

Once we have an interaction with someone, it creates a new file folder in our brains. Each interaction adds a file to the folder. Over time we stop verifying or questioning the information that we are taking in. Instead we began to enter into the interactions based on the beliefs formed from our previous experience. This learning is adaptive so that humans don't have to constantly re-learn previously mastered information. However, operating on inference alone takes away our power to reshape our lives.

As leaders, our reactions to a subordinate's performance are colored by the conclusions we draw and the beliefs we adopt about that person. We start with simple assumptions based on behavioral observations. The problem is, we're the ones selecting the data to observe and we naturally form assumptions about that data—assumptions that may be accurate though most likely are untested and can be misguided. Assumptions solidify as conclusions and then we form beliefs. The stronger the beliefs, the more likely we are to make biased observations in the future, literally but unconsciously looking for data that reinforces our beliefs.

If this sounds like an unfair assessment of human nature, consider some everyday examples.

As a spouse we ignore or become incensed by mundane transgressions depending on whether we believe the act was intentional. Have you ever drawn a conclusion then later, after learning the true motive behind a loved one's action, regretted your *re*-action? Think of a time when a friend behaved in a way that appeared insensitive or inconsiderate. Did you give her the benefit of the doubt or take the behavior as a personal affront? Why or why not? Our assumptions and intentions shape our world just as the presence or absence of follow through influences the flight of a ball that has already left the racquet strings. Transforming a viewpoint allows us to choose new approaches and achieve different outcomes.

Mental or physical rehearsal builds muscle memory for future performance. If the tapes we repeat in our head are negative about a person or situation, we psych ourselves up for a bad experience. Sometimes the assumptions and associated learning is correct, for instance why burn your finger the second time on a hot pot? However in many situations, blaming or rehashing why you are justified in your position feeds anger, and anger, whether inwardly or outwardly focused contributes to arguments, withdrawal or feelings of hopelessness. Over time relationships and self-confidence erode. So, take a moment to ask: "In what situations am I operating based on long standing assumptions, conclusions and beliefs?" How could you start with a simple assumption that the person is doing the best they can? What self-fulfilling prophecies are operating unconsciously for you right now, sabotaging the best result?

I worked with a CFO who had a habit of taking an idea I voiced in a meeting and restating it as his own later in the conversation. It used to really bug me and it seemed inconsistent with the rest of his personality. Upon reflection, it occurred to me that he is an introvert and processes information more slowly, to himself. So while I, the extrovert, continued talking away, he was processing the information. So his voicing my idea was really a compliment to and acknowledgement of my “brilliance.” If I stayed stuck in the mindset of him stealing my idea, we would have never accomplished the outstanding results that we produced collaboratively.

If you engage with positive intent as the starting point, you can concentrate on getting the desired outcomes. Listen actively to the other person’s viewpoint. In most conversations we focus on getting to the answer instead of really understanding the other points of view or truly clarifying our own. When you understand where someone is coming from, you can perhaps find common ground to begin a neutral conversation that can progress in a healthy way about the stickier points. The humility of acknowledging your own role in an uncomfortable situation goes a long way in opening up a solution-focused dialogue with the other party.

It seems that some people more naturally embrace the notion that most people have good intentions while others believe that we are driven by more negative motivators. Each of us can remember a time in which we were misunderstood or falsely judged. Take a moment to reflect on the change of outcome that would have likely occurred if the other person had assumed positive intent and believed that you were doing the best that you knew how. This reflection highlights why we should avoid jumping on the negativity bandwagon.

An example I recently heard will illustrate how we let small things color our lives and how in the absence of information, people sometimes interpret actions in a less than positive way. A friend described how her sister-in-law visits their lake house without bringing any food or drink to share. And while she is there she doesn’t help out. My friend’s assumption is that the woman is self centered and lazy. I asked questions as to whether the person had the same social skills or expectations. I suggested that maybe she doesn’t know what she should bring. I inquired whether my friend ever asked her sister-in-law specifically to do certain tasks. Her answer was no, that the woman should just know when to pitch in and help. I suggested that some guests don’t want to interfere with the way the owner does things. The outcome of this simple conversation was that my friend was going to give her sister-in-law a short list of things she could bring and would be specific in asking for her assistance in the next visit. As friends and perhaps especially as leaders, our best gift is asking the “dumb questions” that lead to an examination of intent rather than indulging in the “ain’t it awfuls” or finger pointing. As Brian Greene, author of *The Elegant Universe*, suggests, “a change of perspective is often the most powerful way to make a change.”

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