

Are You Tone Deaf?

It's my first meeting with Steven, a senior executive who has been sent from London to New York to oversee the trading operations for a major investment bank.

Steven's firm is filled with people who long for him to get a sense of how his aggressive interpersonal style is sabotaging the firm's profitability. Steven is blissfully unaware of this. To protect himself from uncomfortable feelings, Steven has mastered the art of swift and decisive retribution against anyone who tells him what he would prefer not to know – particularly when this refers to his personal style. Since Steven holds the purse strings for all leadership programs approved for his area, the multiple conferences on building corporate culture have all begun with a sea of applause for Steven who is the financial master of all he surveys. His direct reports admit in confidence that they lie when asked to give feedback on his management style. "It's not worth it," one top trader told me bluntly. "He'd be more interested in finding out who was criticizing him and punishing that person than he would be in taking the feedback to heart."

Steven's style of ruling by fear was tolerable as long as the firm stayed profitable. However, the organization had recently begun losing much of its talent to competitors who were luring away key employees with the promise of providing them with a more positive work environment. Human resources decided, in desperation, to get Steven a coach. As I headed down the hall with a nervous but well-intentioned managing director in HR, he confessed that they had tried coaching in the past, but Steven hadn't responded. "I hope you don't think we are throwing you to the lions," he told me with a wry smile, "but we have to keep trying different approaches."

I had hoped the lion metaphor was an exaggeration, but I was mistaken. My guardian didn't make it across the threshold. Steven saw us in the doorway and, glaring from behind his desk, he jerked his head at the HR executive and barked, "you can go." I was left standing in the doorway alone while Steven turned his head and apparently fascinated with his Bloomberg and oblivious to me.

After what I considered to be a polite pause, I ventured, "would you like me to come in?"

"If you like," Steven said waving at a chair absently and never taking his eyes from the screen.

"Why do you think I'm here?" I ventured.

Immediately, the lion roared. "It's bloody HR and their obsession that I need charm school or some such nonsense!" Steven bellowed in a heavy British accent. "What a waste of money and time...it's the time that's the truly valuable resource here...they obviously don't understand what makes money in our business..." seemingly captivated by the sound of his own voice, Steven's monologue took on a life of its own. After a few minutes, the crescendo died down and Steven sat facing me.

I sat completely still and waited...silent. Steven looked at me triumphantly expecting some response. I said nothing. After a long pause, he shifted in his chair and demanded, "Well, what do you have to say to that!?"

I searched my feelings to try and give him the most honest and respectful response I could muster under the circumstances. "You'll have to forgive me," I began slowly, "but you just frightened me so badly that my mind went blank and I found myself dissociating from what you were saying to try to find a way to feel safe. If you really want me to comment, I'm going to have to risk further enraging you by asking you to repeat yourself. As I am sure there were some valuable things for me to hear in the course of your passionate comments, I will try very hard to concentrate this time on what you are saying so I don't get thrown by how you are saying it."

Steven looked stunned. Not angry – just stunned.

After a moment he told me, "No one has ever spoken to me like that." His voice sounded much smaller than the roar he was emanating before.

"Do you think any of your other employees react to you the way that I just did?" I asked him gently. "Do you think they shut down and find it difficult to stay connected and hear you because they are scared?"

"If they do," Steven said thoughtfully, "does that mean I'm a bad manager?" He looked genuinely contrite.

One of the things you learn as a coach is that some of the most aggressive personalities in business serve as a protective mask for some of the most sensitive people. These people are so sensitive, in fact, that they will go to extreme lengths to protect themselves from uncomfortable feelings.

With this knowledge in mind, to accuse Steven of being a 'bad' manager would be an unfair simplification. It also leaves little room for constructive change and fails to acknowledge the skills of an executive whose leadership is being scrutinized precisely because he has attained a significant level of professional success.

"If being aggressive with people didn't get you what you wanted, I doubt you would do it," I told him frankly. "Like everyone else, you keep doing what seems to work. The problem is that you only have one note that you hit constantly on your emotional keyboard, and people tell me that that note is anger. I'm not suggesting that we do anything to mute your confrontational skills, you will always be great at this. However, I am suggesting that you learn to work with a few more notes on the emotional scale so that you have a choice of various ways you can respond to challenges. Right now, your style is managing you."

"So you think I have a problem with anger?" Steven asked me, with a tinge of defensiveness in his voice.

"That's too easy, and it's all about you," I replied with a smile.

“Then how would you describe the problem?” he demanded. Like most people in his situation, he knew there was one. He just didn’t know what it was or what to do about it.

I met his gaze and replied, “Steven, the problem is that you are tone deaf.”

What does it mean to be tone deaf?

As a coach, I consider a person’s tone to be the quality of their consciousness that will either harmonize or fragment their efforts. An individual’s tone will create a sympathetic resonance with other people around them that either serves to expand or contract other peoples’ sense of presence. Individuals who set a positive tone in work and in life create a field of consciousness that is expansive enough to make room for others to be more fully seen and heard. People who set a negative tone leave the people they interact with feeling essentially erased in their presence.

Your tone is not related to your IQ, it is related to a broader sense of knowing that comes from your overall life experience. There are many highly intelligent people who are essentially tone deaf. To be tone deaf basically means to be so preoccupied with the mental chatter in your head that you are cut off from your ability to discern how other people feel about themselves when they are in your presence. People who are skilled at working with tone can move beyond the superficial mental descriptions they have been given about others and connect with people in a more genuine and meaningful way. In life, this is the difference between role playing and intimacy. In work, this is the difference between leading people and renting them.

Tone has important organizational implications. When a critical mass of individuals within an organization become tone deaf, a tone deaf culture results. Symptoms of a tone deaf culture include the defection of top talent to competitors or ambiguous “other opportunities” to avoid remaining in an environment where they are not seen and heard in a way that honors their presence.

Tone deaf cultures lose productivity in a myriad of ways. Resentful employees often gleefully collect a paycheck and do only enough work to get by in a culture that runs on complex processes to gather data on costs but doesn’t know how to measure the value that various initiatives are adding. Lucrative contracts are frequently lost when employees are so drained by internal power games that they lose the vital energy that they need to focus on their business strategy and the needs of their clients. Also, savvy clients can sense when a culture doesn’t respect its people, and people who aren’t respected will frequently do the minimum to get by.

What causes tone deafness, and how do we cure it?

In this article, I will describe the four major ways that people become tone deaf and what can be done with each of these types to reverse the process so the individual learns to master his or her style of relating rather than being mastered by it. Tone deafness reflects a deficit in an individual’s ability to separate from his or her internal mental chatter long enough to listen to others and give them space to be authentically present. The mental

chatter that contributes to tone deafness varies with each type, so the path to helping people recover the caliber of consciousness necessary to operate more effectively differs as well. Please note that a caveat to this explanation is that most people are a composite of more than one of these types, and that different types of challenges can result in different types of tone deafness within the same individual.

The four predominant styles of tone deafness are illustrated by describing the link between the inner chatter and the outer behavior of the predator, the peacock, the clam and the mother hen. Readers will want to bear in mind that working with types to understand tone differs from Myer-Briggs and related personality-type indicators in that the aim is not to categorize the self to become the “best of type.” Tone work is based on the premise that we all have the potential to operate according to the most and least productive characteristics of each type. The goal of tone work is to help the client become the objective observer of a wide range of potential styles for reacting to any situation. This objectivity builds the skills clients need to move beyond their habitual reactions to others and maximize their interpersonal agility.

Readers will also want to bear in mind that working with tone differs in two important respects from doing 360-feedback for an executive. First, a 360-degree feedback exercise is aimed at getting an executive to listen to a collection of other people’s responses to a collection of questions about them. Depending upon the tone with which this information is conveyed, the information gleaned can either open executives up or shut them down to constructive change.

In contrast, tone work is not just about my idea of you and how this relates to your idea of me. It’s about getting to the deeper level of presence that exists between people in action and the skills involved in enhancing this. When third parties are solicited to help understand an executive’s tone more fully, these third parties are encouraged to speak openly on whatever area of business or interpersonal performance strikes them as vital. While open-ended interviews that are not restricted to a set of questions formulated by an outside party are more labor intensive, the topics that people choose to emphasize when they are not prompted by a structured questionnaire often provide the richest sources of insight.

Second, tone is about more than simply about getting people to listen to their colleagues. Tone work is about helping individual’s listen to themselves. Individuals who learn to work with tone are taught to gauge the subtle nuances of how they others are feeling in their presence so that they are eventually able to monitor this without their needing constant correction.

The research base for this project includes a series of progressive interviews exploring the causes and cures for tone deafness with over 800 executives in the financial services, pharmaceuticals and insurance industries. The questions explored with this population include, at what level in the organization does tone deafness tend to originate? At what level does tonal work cause the most powerful improvement in the organization? Is there a generational impact to the appreciation of and importance accorded to tone? How much can a single individual’s tone impact organizations profitability? How does this impact differ depending upon the individual’s seniority and the part of the organization where they

are currently employed? Throughout all phases of our research on tone, we remained acutely aware of a bias in most large organizations to trying to find a superior intellectual strategy to solve cultural issues. Tone work demands that individuals move beyond a strictly intellectual approach to processes and procedures and consider the way that personal presence and values impacts productivity.

As we delineate the major types of tone deafness, we will also offer solutions that have proven effective in helping each type overcome internal chatter and self-absorption and learn to trust and collaborate with others in a genuinely positive and productive manner.

Types of tone deafness

Early in our lives, most of us have been trained to adopt a behavioral style that we believe is most likely to help us overcome challenges and get what we want in life. The underlying tone that most people operate with in life is based on the roles they have learned to play and the way that they have learned to overcome challenges both in their families and in the early years of their academic and professional experience. The predominant tone that a person sets is most obvious when he or she is under pressure. It is interesting to note that the role a person plays under pressure is often more related to the internal buzz of beliefs, fears and ideals that runs through his or her mind than it is the external circumstances being face. This phenomenon is obvious to anyone who has had to endure a corporate downsizing. When a group of employees in a department all face the same challenge, the prospect of job loss for reasons they cannot control, some people will ignite in anger, others will withdraw emotionally and still others may become seductive and coy hoping to solicit support. When a person's mental chatter becomes so loud that he or she is unable to be conscious of the full range of motives and possibilities in a situation, they may jump to some unproductive conclusions under pressure. When a person has developed the habit of jumping to conclusions that justify his or her internal chatter, this person has become tone deaf. When you are tone deaf, your style has mastered you.

There are four predominant behavioral styles that indicate a person is tone deaf. Each style is the result of the type mental chatter that has taken over the individual's consciousness so fully that this person has suppressed other aspects of awareness that prevent him or her from being fully present.

The following four types define the styles that may be defining you:

Type #1: The Peacock –

You can easily spot a peacock at a party or convention because they are the person who is cheerfully holding court and talking non-stop. Peacocks have a compulsion to entertain those around them, and they are quick to fill silences in conversations with a skillfully practiced stream of patter. They are fabulous at a dinner party with a new client who is conversationally awkward. On the other hand they can be challenging on a long airplane flight when their special brand of tone deafness causes them to innocently miss the signal that a few hours of silence on the way back from an important meeting would be considerate.

The peacock craves attention. The peacock becomes tone deaf because he or she is constantly listening to an internal score keeper who ranks them against everyone else in the room (or the world) according to their social status, political power, financial resources or even their physical beauty. This constant scorekeeping creates such a non-stop buzz of mental chatter inside the peacock that he or she suppresses the physical and emotional cues that would indicate that it's time to stop orating and time to start listening.

Theresa sought coaching after being told that her style at her company's recent senior management offsite meeting has been a factor in her being passed over for an important promotion.

"I don't know what went wrong," Teresa lamented. "I tried to be as low key as possible, but the guy from Europe who is going to be in charge of my division gave me the impression that he couldn't get away from me fast enough. All I wanted to do was give him a sense of what I had accomplished for the organization, and it was if his eyes glazed over and he tuned out before I could take the first sip of my cocktail."

One of Teresa's colleagues, John, had a different read on the situation when I spoke with him to get some perspective on Teresa's style. "I bet she was baffled as to why our new boss was short with her at the offsite," John told me. "It was painful to watch the two of them interacting, but there was nothing I could do to rescue the situation."

"Help me understand," I encouraged him.

"Teresa is the corporate equivalent of an Amazon warrior," he told me bluntly. "She's great with most of our clients and customers because she has a big personality, and she's not afraid to take up space in a room."

"Why didn't her style work with Andrew?" I asked.

"Andrew is the kind of man that is quiet, soft spoken and strategic. He finds people who are overly boisterous grating, and he hates what he considers grandstanding of any kind."

Was Teresa grandstanding, in your opinion?"

"No, not exactly." John replied thoughtfully. "However, Andrew is highly sensitive to anyone who refers to their personal accomplishments without referencing the team. The kiss of death is when he starts counting the number of times that a person uses the pronoun 'I' in conversation. You learn over time to say 'we' a lot with Andrew."

As sad as this scenario was for Teresa, who lost an important job by making a poor first impression, the situation is classic. A tone deaf peacock is so focused on being the center of attention that he or she will often miss the opportunity to rescue the situation when other's are losing interest or possibly even frustrated with them.

"What could I have done?" Teresa asked me later as we were focusing on what she could learn from he missed opportunity with Andrew.

“When you noticed he was losing interest, did you try shifting the conversation to a topic that might be of more interest to him?” I asked her.

“You mean, like *him*,” she responded with more than a trace of sarcasm.

“Precisely,” I told her. Because they have attempted to master the art of being the most fascinating person in the room, Peacock’s often forget that other people enjoy attention as much as they do.

While peacocks tend to look positive and energetic, life can be exhausting for them. This is because the peacock’s constant score keeping causes them to harbor the secret belief that if they are not the best, they are nothing. While many peacock’s look confident as they perform a flawless monologue about their latest accomplishments, investments or celebrity spottings, don’t let their preening fool you. Peacocks are easily wounded by anything less than rapt attention from their audience. This is because peacocks are focused more on what other people think of them than on how they actually feel in most situations. Since they are trained to anxiously look outside of themselves to make sure they are measuring up, they are also terribly vulnerable to flattery and manipulation both on and off the job.

Because peacocks learn early to “own a room,” they often rise to positions of power in sales, politics or the entertainment industry. However, successful peacocks who are tone deaf can be dangerous to their organizations. This is because peacock’s often fall prey to the fatal charms of an emotionally Machiavellian subordinate who gets the peacock hooked on their flattery and then exacts an increasingly higher price for their continued loyalty.

Because of their flare for drama, peacock’s must be treated gently in the initial stages of learning to mute their inner chatter so that they can establish a more solid rapport with others. If a peacock is given too much challenging feedback in too short a period of time, this talented performer may stop playing the role of the corporate star and start auditioning for the role of corporate victim. When the inner chatter of constant comparison heats up, the dramatic peacock sees him or herself as either the best or the worst person in a situation. Helping peacocks work with tone involves helping them learn to stop performing and start developing a more genuine sense of presence.

Type #2: The Clam –

You are most likely to spot a clam in his or her office hunkered down over an important project...often in the dark. Clams like the shades drawn, the door shut and noise and conversation kept to an absolute minimum. Ask a clam a question...any question...and you are likely to get a one-word answer or a maybe even a grunt. Clams are strategic and non-communicative. Clams prefer data over people. This is because clams are highly risk averse, and their internal chatter constantly warns them of the dangers inherent in self-revealing conversations, excessive displays of emotion and unpredictability of any kind.

Clams can be quit caring and well-intentioned individuals. However, clams crave control because they live in fear of making a mistake. In some clams, this fear is so pronounced that, over time, an ocean of unexpressed feeling can build up inside their shells. In some cases this pent up emotion represents a wealth of creative potential and brilliance, and in

others a torrent of resentment and rage. One thing is for sure, regardless of what's actually inside that shell, most clams prefer to control their outer world than risk examining the contents of their inner one. Because of this, most clams are tone deaf because they have trained themselves to systematically suppress any nuances of emotion or even intuition that might lead them to relax their shell's tight grip.

Clams tend to develop a highly intellectual strategy for dealing with the world. As the clam becomes progressively more tone deaf, this intellectual approach can actually morph into a situation where the clam begins to live more in a self-created fantasy world than in reality. Clams create a theoretical universe because this has less emotional risk than being fully conscious of the factors in the real world that can cause people to respond in unpredictable and illogical ways. Clams who are operating in their own fantasy world are often genuinely convinced that they are smarter and more qualified than their peers. This is because, in their carefully created fantasy world, their reign is unchallenged.

In my first session with Edward, it was clear he was a clam with a shell full of feelings. Edward was a risk strategist working with complex financial derivatives for a prestigious investment bank. Edward had been passed over for promotion by a younger trader with a sparkling personality that Edward dismissed as a "bird brain." In Edward's mind, it was scandalous that his boss would pass him over for promotion for someone that wasn't his intellectual equal.

"It's not fair!" fumed Edward, "This guy isn't half as qualified as I am." Clams, who pride themselves on being experts in game theory and quantifying the merits of various courses of action, are obsessed with fairness. "There's no way that this guy should be in line to run our desk. We can just kiss our franchise goodbye if he ends up in that seat."

"Why do you think your boss made this decision?" I asked him.

"Just because he likes this guy better," Edward snapped, his voice dripping with resentment. "That's no reason to promote anyone!"

Edward, like many clams, had protected his tender center by creating a hard shell of intellectual superiority. In doing so, he had forgotten to consider that, in many situations, ideas don't make things happen – people do.

"Is this guy qualified?" I asked him.

"Well...yeah, but he's not as talented as I am," Edward replied defensively.

"Why do you think your boss, Jim, likes him better?" I asked him.

"This guy is always in Jim's office giving him new ideas and doing stuff just because it will make Jim look good. It's so obvious the way he plays up to him that I can't stand it. I'd never fawn all over Jim like that."

"What's your relationship with Jim like?" I pressed.

“Well, it’s a bit strained. After all, I’m a lot smarter than Jim is, and he knows it.” Edward responded defiantly.

“How does he know that?” I asked, suspecting we headed in an informative direction.

“Well,” Edward began self-consciously, “I’ll have to admit that I remind him in little ways. Sometimes I feel like I just have to put Jim in his place. After all, Jim couldn’t create the trades I come up with and we both know it.”

“So why aren’t you Jim’s boss?”

“Because the guy in charge of the department doesn’t like me much either,” Edward admitted softly.

Like everyone, clams long to be popular. However, because their risk-averse approach to life gives them a compulsion to hoard information, clams are often atrocious team players. Their tone deafness causes them to miss the nuances of when they need to be more inclusive with others. As a result, even though many clams are highly talented, they often find that their careers get stalled at the point where dealing with people becomes as important as dealing with concepts.

This is disillusioning for the clam, but even more disappointing for the organization. Clams are often the lifeblood of an organization’s intellectual integrity. Want the best answer to a complex question? Find a clam. Clams will hunker down in their shells and find strategic solutions to legal, accounting and financial questions that would baffle many of us. However, when an organization doesn’t know how to help the clam overcome his or her tendency to be tone deaf, this individual will often leave the organization just as their ability to add value is beginning to peak.

To help a clam, you’ve got to get them out of their head. This simple fact flies in the face of many attempts to teach leadership and management skills that are intellectually based. Since the problem with your basic clam is that they are overly intellectual, giving the clam new ideas to operate with is like trying to help someone put out a fire by giving them a book of matches. Clams must learn to take the risk of learning the unfamiliar and rewarding skills of becoming more emotionally articulate and interpersonally courageous as they learn to work with tone.

Type #3: The Mother Hen –

Mother hens are typically busy, beloved and exhausted. Wherever there are causes to be supported, wrongs to be righted and busy work that no one else will touch – mother hen’s are in their element. Since mother hen’s have difficulty saying no to anyone, they are typically overscheduled and frequently overcommitted.

Like all of us, mother hen’s crave appreciation. However, the torrent of inner chatter that creates a tone-deaf mother hen is laced with guilt. Mother hen’s are driven by a need to constantly help others, and their inner dialogue frequently urges them to do more and more to support those around them. While mother hen’s are often highly intuitive when it comes

to anticipating the needs of others, the relentless internal chatter that drives them suppresses their ability to be in tune with themselves. Having shut down their own sense of when they are becoming physically and emotionally exhausted, the mother hens' ability to discern the tone of what is going on around them is obviously impaired.

The mother hen is frequently considered the "heart" of an organization. When a mother hen reaches a position of power in a corporate hierarchy, and many of them do, this is an individual who not only has an open door policy – they have an army of people waiting in line to air their grievances and lobby for their causes. The mother hen will hear as many of them as possible and often become drained by trying to right all the wrongs that are presented to them.

In spite of the female connotation to the nickname, some of the most powerful men in corporate America today are mother hens. Andy, a member of the executive committee of one of the world's largest investment banks, is a classic example of this.

"I don't know why I don't just quit," lamented Andy in our first meeting. "I'm simply exhausted here. Our firm pays lip service to human values, but they don't treat people with the dignity they deserve when it matters most. The only reason I'm still here is all the men and women who have been loyal to me over the years. I feel I owe it to them to watch over them, but some days I'm so exhausted by it all that my wife accuses me of putting my health at risk."

One of the keys to helping a mother hen is to help them build the internal boundaries they need to keep from being swept away by the mental chatter that fuels their passion to help those around them. "As powerful as you are," I reminded Andy, "you simply can't right all the wrongs in an organization this large. If you choose to stay here, you are going to have to make some tough decisions about where you can help, and where you can't. If you can't learn to let some things go, you may have to leave. No one wants you to get physically sick. That won't help your firm or your family."

Most mother hen's battle a lifelong selfless streak. This makes beloved leaders, but as their tone deafness grows they eventually put their organizations at risk. This is because, as saintly as they seem, mother hens have difficulty executing on tough decisions and dealing with important confrontations. A mother hen's inner chatter can cause them to feel so guilty about disappointing others that they will often procrastinate when it comes to important business decisions if these involve firing people or cutting funding for beloved projects.

To help a mother hen, you often have to point out how they can help others more powerfully by becoming in tune with themselves. Many mother hens are shocked to realize that the tone they set when they rush around their firms like exhausted martyrs is often disastrous for morale. "But I'm rushing around to help all the people I can!" is the refrain I get from many mother hens when I point out that the example they are setting is less than constructive. One of the first lessons in tone that a mother hen needs to master is that setting a calm tone can be one of the most genuinely helpful things they can do for their colleagues. A tone deaf mother hen needs to learn that even though his or her

intentions are good, it's not just what you do but how you go about doing it that matters when you're working with tone.

Type #4: The Predator –

The predator craves “more.” Steven, the executive cited at the beginning of this article, is a classic predator. Steven meets the classification for a pure predator because he devours everything in his wake – people, projects, experiences – nothing fully satiates Steven. Although he eagerly consumes every opportunity he deems as valuable to him, he digests very little. This is the key reason why he always seems to crave more of everything.

You can spot a predator by the pace at which they operate in work and in life. Predators are focused, fast and frequently preoccupied. If you don't show a predator what's in it for them quickly in a meeting or social situation, they will step over you unsentimentally and move on to a more rewarding source of nourishment.

The internal chatter in a predator is a litany of concern over the fact that they might miss something. Predators are frequently anxious about not having the most, and the best, of everything on a non-stop basis. Because they are so focused on what they might miss, they often do miss what's right in front of them. As the predator's mind churns with a list of people, places and things that they believe they need to achieve their goals, they often miss the nuances of the present moment. Miss enough of these nuances, and you are essentially tone deaf.

“I can't believe one of my staff spent an extra workday in London to attend his father's birthday!” Steven thundered in one of our early meetings. “We can't run a business like this, and I'm going to let him know that he can't get away with it.” The irony of this statement was that ten minutes earlier Steven was showing off the expensive leather goods he had purchased for his family when he had taken the afternoon off during a business trip in Italy. Steven's hunger for more of everything, from his staff's time to the latest fashions, left him oblivious to the fact that he was setting a tone of insincerity because he didn't practice what he preached.

This tone of insincerity was amplified by the organization's insistence that all members of senior management were committed to an open door policy. Steven, a key member of senior management, secretly bristled at the idea that he should be so easily accessible. “I'm paid to keep this firm on the cutting edge. How are we going to stay ahead of our competitors if I get dragged into endless meetings where I'm forced to listen to the private agendas of my staff? We can't run a business without protecting the time senior managers need to find the space to think.” Thus, members of Steven's team who were naïve enough to believed that the firm-wide commitment to welcoming employee feedback included their boss, often found out the hard way that this was not the case.

While Steven was sensitive to his own need for privacy, he wasn't particularly thoughtful of his team's needs for similar consideration. Even when Steven was on vacation, he checked in with his staff multiple times a day. He was also notorious for sending lengthy e-mails on the weekends that required a response before Monday morning. Although

Steven paid lip service to respecting the work-life balance of his employees, he was unaware that his staff considered his demands on their time voracious.

Because of his tendency to drain and discard people, Steven's personal and professional relationships were constantly in flux. Steven's first marriage had finally ended in divorce, and his personal life had been a revolving door for the past several years. On the professional front, while he was a shrewd businessman, the best people his firm managed to recruit frequently left his employ. His firm's productivity was now in danger because so many critical employees had lost respect for him. Many people were secretly betting that if the firm ever merged with another organization in the industry, Steven's career would be finished.

What tone deafness costs the predator is empathy. Most predators, who want to be liked and respected as much as anyone, and would be shocked to learn that there is a huge gulf between what people think of them and the way they believe they are perceived. Because of their skill at capturing the prizes that they focus on and killing off their competition, predators often achieve high positions in an organization. However, once they reach senior management, predators are often reviled by subordinates who resent the predators lack of consideration for their needs to spend time with their families or be appreciated for their efforts.

While the word predator has pejorative connotations, predators are not all bad. In many cases, just like a lion in the wild, they can be noble. Predators can make tough decisions and act on their instincts. What's more, while predators are frequently lacking in empathy, they often have keen intuitive instincts about finding the strategic advantage in a situation.

The most common mistake in trying to support a predator is to try and confront them directly with the carnage created by their transactional interpersonal style. A predator will not respond to what's wrong with them, a predator will only respond to what's in it for them. Helping predators overcome tone deafness requires working with coaches and consultants who are skilled in the predator's line of business so that they can explain the bottom line advantages of learning to be more fully present to a client driven by an appetite for personal advantage.

Working with Tone

Over the years, my clients have taught me that their listening skills were vital to their ability to work with tone. A person's ability to hear the nuances of what is going on both inside of them and outside of them influences their tone. At the same time, an individual's tone is a powerful factor that affects both their internal and their external environment.

Working with tone is a two-stage process. The first stage involves identifying and eliminating one's mental chatter. Tone work begins with helping a people learn to observe the habitual tendency of their mind to produce a stream of mental chatter that drains their energy and dampens their senses. Clearing away this unproductive inner static not only makes it possible for people to focus more effectively on their jobs, it also enhances the overall vitality they bring to their work and their life.

The second stage of working with tone involves helping people recover their sense of subtlety. People whose minds have been dominated by mental chatter are often desperately lacking a sense of subtlety. Whether one's focus is on improving the performance of a single employee or an entire corporate culture, if an intellectual strategy that ignores the impact of tone is adopted, progress will rarely move beyond the stage of describing the challenges being faced. As employees recover a sense of subtlety, they learn to work with the nuances of thought and feeling that animate both relationships and markets.

Refining Your Inner Awareness

As simple as it sounds, learning to listen to your own mind more objectively can be tricky. Because many people are secretly nervous about what they might hear if they listened to themselves more closely, many of them have developed shrewd ways of protecting themselves from what they would prefer not to know about themselves. Clearly, each of the four types outlined in this article has its own style of avoiding unwanted information. For example, Steven used his predatory instincts to attack people who might force him to consider his style more objectively. In contrast, clams such as Edward are likely to avoid self-examination by mentally dismissing people who question them and behaving as if these people don't actually exist. Peacock's tend to avoid self-examination by becoming convinced that others are jealous of them, while mother hen's just rationalize that people who question them have lost their commitment to the greater good.

To help clients learn to spot the way that their style of mental chatter influences their tone more objectively, I will often tape record discussions with them. Most clients have found that listening to themselves on tape is extremely revealing when it comes to becoming more conscious of the nuances of inflection and pacing that shape the tone they are setting with others. This is because, in many ways, a person's recorded vocal tone is like a psychological fingerprint for people who know how to listen. As clients listen to a recording of themselves discussing a professional challenge they are tackling, they are encouraged to consider more than the factual information they are conveying. When do they sound most confident? When do they sound defensive? How does their energy level vary over the course of a discussion? Are they pausing so that others can comment, or do they tend to find other's contributions intrusive? Clients are forced to listen to themselves more deeply in order to answer these questions. As clients practice the skill of listening to their tone more objectively, they are eventually able to discern the mental chatter that has been fueling the underlying attitude which shapes their tone.

The recording of one of Steven's first coaching sessions gave him the chance to hear how often he hit the note of anger on his emotional keyboard, and how monotone his responses tended to be when he was challenged. The following is a description based on a segment of this recorded dialogue:

"I'm struggling to put into words what has been running through my head," Steven began thoughtfully. "When I take the time to focus on it, I'm forced to realize that my mind can be vicious, and I'm actually a bit startled at what I find myself thinking at some points."

"Give me an example," I encouraged him.

“Well,” he began hesitantly, “my mind basically blasted me with the angry thought that you were trying to get me to observe my thought process because you were trying to get me to lose my edge.” I noted that Steven’s tone became a bit harsher as he recalled this suspicion.

“How could observing your thought process cause you to lose your edge?” I asked him. “If anything, I’d say it would make you sharper.”

“Logically you are right of course,” he shot back, “but I still have the uncomfortable feeling that if I do this, I’m going to lose something.” Steven definitely had an edge to his tone now. I found myself wondering if he thought my question was argumentative.

“What would you lose?” I asked him.

“I’d lose the belief that everything I’ve done as a manager has been perfect up to now!” At this point his tone blasted me. While there was a hit of sarcasm in his tone, the overall impression he conveyed was that my last question was a frustrating waste of his time.

“Are you getting angry?” I asked him.

“Of course not!” he roared. “Why are *you* so defensive?” He asked, glaring at me.

I sat in silence looking at Steven after this outburst. Suddenly, he glanced nervously at the tape recorder as he remembered that it had been rolling the whole time and had captured every audible nuance of his frustration.

“How long do we have to go on with this before we can play that thing back?” He asked in a tone that conveyed a hint of impatience but was dramatically less aggressive.

“We can do it right now, if you’d like,” I told him.

We rewound the tape and listened together. Steven’s expression was thoughtful as he listened to the swift way his anger took him over. Finally, he ventured softly “I had no idea I sounded so angry...absolutely no idea.”

“How did you think you sounded?” I asked him gently.

Steven paused before he replied, “I guess I wasn’t thinking about how I sounded at all. I was just incredibly frustrated.”

“What frustrates you?”

“Waiting for almost anything frustrates me,” he began softly, “it’s like there’s this angry voice in me that’s always pushing me to move faster so that I don’t miss anything.”

Like many predators, the inner chatter that kept Steven anxious about losing something was actually costing him his ability to be aware of the tone he was setting with others.

As Steven learned to become more aware of how his mental chatter influenced his tone, he gradually became a leader who commanded more than fear, he commanded loyalty. Like many reforming predators, Steven was deeply moved by the goodwill he encountered from many members of his staff who were relieved by his tone shift. Most people long for a leader they feel genuinely merits their support, and when a reforming predator learns to stop pouncing and start practicing presence, this man or woman is often able to transform a mercenary culture into a dynamic where genuine talent is unleashed.

Recovering Your Sense of Subtlety

In work and in life, reawakening recovering a sense of subtlety makes people more strategic, persuasive and discerning. People who miss the nuances of the less obvious expenses and benefits associated with a wide variety of endeavors in life are frequently not investing their time and energy in the wisest manner. This is costly on many levels. At the individual level, I have worked with clients who took the wrong job because the paycheck looked good. Without a sense of subtlety, they forgot that some lucrative career opportunities can be emotionally expensive in ways that an attractive bonus cannot offset.

At the organizational level, senior managers who lack a sense of subtlety are often smugly confident that their organizations are teaming with efficient employees that are finding ways to add value based on their faith in the power point slides and reams of data that suggest this. Lacking the ability to gauge the nuances of how committed and focused their employees are, tone deaf senior managers do not understand the importance of spending time with the support personnel actually doing the firm's work to understand their perspective and inspire their loyalty. As a result, these detached executives are often shocked and teaming with questions when earnings estimates come in below expectations for mysterious reasons. How did we lose such an important client? Why aren't our recruitment efforts working? Why aren't our training programs improving morale? These and many other vital questions are clarified when employees recover their sense of subtlety and understand the importance of tone.

Each of the four types of tone deafness represents a distinct way of missing the subtle, and sometimes obvious, clues necessary to operate effectively. The predator is moving so fast to devour whatever has temporarily captured his or her attention that most nuances of a situation are obliterated in the thrill of the chase. The peacock is often so preoccupied with status that the ability to monitor how his or her claim to superiority is impacting others gets lost. The clam is so busy overemphasizing information that supports his or her personal fantasies and minimizing any detracting factors that the ability to distinguish the relative importance of various clues gets hopelessly distorted. Finally, the mother hen is so focused on saving the day that the capacity for discernment is often blurred by the frantic rush of his or her altruism.

An exercise that has proven effective in helping employees at all levels of seniority recover their sense of subtlety involves teaching them a new way of taking notes. For many people, note taking involves recording the facts conveyed in a particular meeting. When a client is working on recovering a sense of subtlety, I suggest that he or she draw a line down the center of their paper and in one column, they take notes in the traditional way. In the other column, which is referred to as the tone column, they are asked to record their

impressions of the tone they sensing and the feelings they are experiencing during the meeting.

Teresa found that this new method of note taking helped her overcome some of the less productive habits she had developed as a peacock.

“Learning to keep a tone column has become like a secret weapon for me in Andrew’s management meetings,” Teresa told me. “At first I wasn’t sure what you wanted me to write in the tone column, but once I figured this out, it gave me an enhanced ability to get my point across without sabotaging myself.”

“What’s have you found most helpful to note on the tone side?” I asked her.

“Well, one of the first things I noticed is that silence has a tone,” Teresa explained to me. “I began to realize that when Andrew was ready to move on to a new topic, he would give us all a challenging gaze and then ask curtly, ‘are there any other comments on this issue?’ Then, we would all sit in a chilly silence for a few moments knowing that if anyone peeped he would be more than a little irritated. It wasn’t until I started writing down what I was feeling during those moments that I realized the way that Andrew used silence conveyed a louder message than many peoples’ words.”

“Has that realization helped you deal with him more effectively?” I asked her.

“It’s taught me to be a lot more patient,” Teresa told me thoughtfully. “Last week, we were all meeting with Andrew to see how big a bonus pool we would get to pay the people in our divisions. This was my chance to make sure that the people who had worked so hard for me all year got the compensation they deserved. It’s a huge responsibility. I sat way down the table from Andrew, so I wouldn’t have to go first, and I wrote like crazy in the tone column.”

“What did you notice?”

“I focused on Andrew and tried to record my impressions of what caused him to be more receptive to what people were saying to him and what caused him to shut down,” Teresa explained. “I noticed that when anyone talked for too long, Andrew started to get bored. I also noticed that, while he didn’t say mention it directly, whenever anyone interrupted him or pushed back on a point he was making he looked really stern. I wrote in my tone column, ‘do not interrupt.’ That line saved me,” she added with a smile.

“How?”

“Just before it was my chance to talk about my team’s accomplishments, Andrew suggested that we take a break” Teresa told me breathlessly. I thought I was going to explode. I was all ready to make this great speech, and he wanted to get some refreshments! If this wasn’t enough to make me scream, when we got back he began making small talk with his assistant. I knew I had to act relaxed or I would blow it. Every cell in my being wanted to ask him if we could get back to our agenda, but when I saw the message ‘do not interrupt’ in my own handwriting, I realized this request might blow it.”

“What happened then?” I asked, fully understanding the challenge Teresa had endured. Asking anyone to put an important speech like this on hold is tough. Asking a Peacock to wait for their moment in the spotlight is torture for them.

“I focused on my tone column, and I stayed calm. I even started making small talk with the guy sitting next to me as if getting back to the annual compensation of my team was no big deal. Finally, Andrew said, ‘Teresa, are you ready?’ without a trace of consideration for how long he’d made me wait. I gave him a relaxed smile and answered warmly, ‘Absolutely, Andrew. I’d be delighted to begin.’”

“How did it go?”

“It went beautifully, because, since I knew my facts cold, I stayed focused on my tone the entire time,” she told me happily. “I remembered to speak slowly, to defer to him constantly and to act relaxed and in control no matter what happened. I’d noted in the tone column that people who began speaking more rapidly when he cross-examined them fared badly. I kept my tone cool, and I got my team paid.

Caveat on Groups

When participants take place in group coaching, they are invited a series of eight to ten successive coaching sessions designed to create an environment where the skills of working with tone are not only discussed, they are also practiced. Helping employees recognize and overcome tone deaf responses to workplace challenges involves making room for people to do the work of “unlearning” as much as it involves teaching participants new skills. When it comes to learning new skills, there are a variety of individual and group methods of instruction that can be valuable. However, when it comes to the work of “unlearning,” there is nothing like the power of a group.

The first stage of group coaching involves establishing a group presence that creates a tone of honesty and trust. This group tone is reinforced by the group’s goals. Each members’ progress is gauged not by his or her personal advancement, but by his or her success in advancing the career of another group member. This goal helps participants break the habit of being so preoccupied with personal gain that they are unable to be fully aware of the strengths and goals of their peers.

One of the most obvious ways that groups help people “unlearn” is that many people come to terms with their own developmental needs more easily by listening to others’ stories than they do by being directly confronted with negative feedback. Each style of tone deafness is reinforced by special defenses against loss that keep the individual from becoming aware of ways that his or her style has become a disadvantage. The predator, who is afraid of losing advantage, will dismiss uncomfortable feedback as naive if it prevents short term gratification. The peacock, who is afraid of losing attention, will be so preoccupied with looking good that he or she is likely to be overly sensitive and unable to accept constructive criticism in a balanced manner. The clam has an uncanny ability to translate whatever he or she hears into a message that reinforces his or her private version of reality. Finally, the mother hen, who is afraid of losing affection, is like to ignore

uncomfortable feedback by dismissing it as the opinion of someone who is insensitive and unappreciative of a heartfelt approach. Group coaching overcomes these defenses by creating an environment where all types are given the room they need to hear and react to the styles and stories of others. As participants learn to sense how their tone influences others, they are doing more than analyzing how tone works – they are experiencing it.

Since Andy was a recovering mother hen, and mother hen's are often shy away from helping themselves, getting him to participate in the series of group coaching sessions authorized for his division was initially challenging. "I'm concerned that many of you may not be able to speak freely with me in the group because of my position on the management committee," Andy said in the first meeting. "Therefore, I'm happy to step out if that will give the rest of you the opportunity to use this group more freely as a sounding board."

I could see the expressions of disappointment begin to dampen the group's initial tone of enthusiasm. I could also sense a tone of growing frustration as I watched some of the participants begin to shift impatiently in their chairs. Due to Andy's position in the firm, his tone had a powerful influence throughout the ranks. Thus, whether he realized it or not, he was creating a layer of mother hen's underneath him in the organization.

"Let's go around the room and see how everyone feels about what Andy just said," I suggested. The responses were courageous.

"If you are leaving the group, then I'm leaving too," said one of Andy's most successful division heads. "If you can keep up with the mounting demands of our growing organization without a sounding board of peers to help you when you are under pressure, then I'm not going to not going to admit that I need one. Hey, I can do more with less support than anyone in this room – including you."

Andy was stunned. "You make it sound as if I was trying to be competitive," he said. "I need support as much as the rest of you. In my position, I probably need it more. I only made that offer because I wanted to help you, not because I was trying to look tough," he added contritely.

"This whole discussion is making me realize that actions speak louder than words," volunteered a woman who had worked with Andy for more than a decade. "Some of the top producers on my team have told me that returning my e-mails late at night has gotten them into trouble at home. Their families want to spend time with them. I told them not to worry, because I didn't expect anyone to work as hard as I do. I just realized that by pretending that I don't have needs of my own, I'm being arrogant."

Over time, all of the members of Andy's group explored ways that by trying to be super-caretakers, they were inadvertently creating a cultural tone that didn't honor the balance that their employees needed to be productive. "People had tried to tell me in the past that by taking care of everyone but myself, I was putting our firm at risk. I couldn't hear them. However, listening to the tone of resentment and exhaustion that sometimes creeps into the voice of my colleagues has shown me that I don't want to be making decisions that will affect the lives of thousands of people when I'm jet lagged and stressed."

There are also situations where groups are able to validate people much more powerfully than individuals can. Collective approval taps into our deep desire for acceptance and, used in the right way, this aspect of group coaching can be a powerful catalyst for change. It's amazing to experience what happens when a group, operating from a unified tone of emotional honesty, encourages a member to take new risks.

Edward, a recovering clam, found that his group's support helped him take the risk of showing his boss that he expected to be appreciated for his efforts. "I'd stayed at the office late to finish a complicated and exhausting trade with a difficult client," Edward told our group. "We made a decent fee. The first thing that my boss Jim did when he got in the next morning was to begin ranting at me about another trade that he wanted me to begin working on immediately. Rather than silently resenting him and retreating to my office like I would have done in the past, I looked him in the eye and said firmly, 'Jim, can I have two minutes to celebrate yesterday's success?' First, Jim was silent. I could tell he was stunned. Then, slowly and tentatively, he smiled. 'I guess you deserve that,' he admitted. It took me a couple of minutes to realize that Jim was agreeing with me. It took me a couple of days to realize that Jim might not be as bad a guy as I had imagined."

Group work is particularly effective with clams, because everyone present in the group is expected to participate. A clam can't get away with sitting at the back of the room in silence and pretending that they've got it all figured out. Edward admitted to me, "If the people in our group hadn't been encouraging me to speak up about how I felt, I never would have taken the risk of being more open with Jim. Now that I've learned to set a tone that conveys that I expect to be appreciated, I get the sense that Jim likes me better. Funny, the more he appreciates me, the easier it is for me to appreciate him. I guess tone can be catching like that."

Conclusion:

Working with tone increases involvement. Once you have made the decision to consider how your tone is impacting your effectiveness with others, you have implicitly made a decision to become more deeply involved with the people and situations around you.

When we forget the importance of tone, we face a workplace where both organizations and employees have become so detached that loyalty has evaporated on both sides of the employment contract. Tone deaf managers think of their staff in abstract terms. This uninvolved attitude creates cultures that become oblivious to the honor that it is to have an employee decide to dedicate some of the most important years of his or her professional life to helping their organization succeed. Likewise, tone deaf employees forget the poignant investment that an employer makes by spending precious resources hoping these individuals will help make the firm's mission a success. When a tone of meaning and honor is absent from the employment contract, everybody is drained.

Working with tone reverses this wave of emotional detachment. Clients who learn to work with tone develop the skills necessary to connect with the deeper currents of emotion and inspiration that animate ideas. As a wise client once told me, "ideas don't make things

happen, people do.” At the individual level, working with tone helps people break out of a style that is no longer serving them and take profitable risks on their own behalf. At the organizational level, working with tone creates cultures that offer employees a sense of purpose beyond simply collecting a paycheck. At all levels, understanding tone helps people operate from a quality of consciousness that builds a more powerful level of rapport and involvement with others.

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