THE JORDAN HARBINGER SHOW

Worksheet for Malcolm Gladwell | What We Should Know about Talking to Strangers (Episode 256)

To long-time listeners of this show, Malcolm Gladwell is probably a household name. He's written bestsellers that are likely on your shelf right now — like *The Tipping Point*, *Blink*, *Outliers*, and *What the Dog Saw* — and he writes and hosts the popular Revisionist History Podcast, which goes back and reinterprets "something from the past: an event, a person, an idea. Something overlooked. Something misunderstood." An interview with him has been on our wish list for more than a decade, so this is especially exciting for all of us at Harbinger HQ.

In this episode we talk to Malcolm about his latest book (which he considers his *angriest* work to date), *Talking to Strangers: What We Should Know about the People We Don't Know*. We discuss why the tools we have when we talk to our friends betray us when we talk to strangers — and what we can do about it — as well as delve into Malcolm's intense research, writing, and project selection process.

We Evolved to Trust

When we encounter one another as strangers, our initial perceptions aren't always — or even often — accurate. We jump to conclusions based on factors that may not even be connected, and we create connections from thin air founded by inaccurate preconceptions. We tend toward believing that a stranger is telling us the truth (see Truth Default Theory below), which can be leveraged against us by con artists (like recent guest Frank Abagnale). At first glance, it may appear that we're operating at a disadvantage, but Malcolm points out that society couldn't exist as we know it if humans hadn't evolved with the ability to trust at a high level.

"No higher order activity can proceed without the presumption of trust," says Malcolm. "It is hugely adaptive to be a truster. But if you are someone who trusts, you also have to accept the fact that this leaves you vulnerable to deception. There's no way around that. You have to accept that trade off — that '95 percent of the time, I am better off because I trust implicitly. But five percent of the time, that means I'm going to get scammed.'"

Just being aware of the human tendency to trust goes a long way in safeguarding you against your own vulnerabilities. Do you consider yourself highly trusting or highly suspicious? Note examples in recent memory when your instincts have helped you and when they have hurt you. Does it generally serve you better to trust or not to trust?

Truth Default Theory

We believe that the information we gather in face-to-face human interaction is uniquely valuable. For example, you'd never hire a babysitter without meeting them. But trusting such an interaction isn't that accurate — take the CIA's failure to detect numerous Soviet-aligned Cuban agents within its ranks during the Cold War as just one glaring example.

"If an agency of the most sophisticated agents in the world — full of people who are trained in the arts of detecting deception — can be so easily fooled by a tiny little country with very few resources sitting in the middle of the Caribbean, what hope do the rest of us have?" wonders Malcolm.

Timothy Levine's Truth Default Theory posits that we default to believing a stranger is telling us the truth, and this is overturned only in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. If you're taking in this evidence while interacting with someone but working hard to explain it away, try to keep TDT in mind so you can be aware that you might just be rationalizing someone else's bad behavior. Jot down instances in the past when you've been duped, and the surrounding evidence you ignored that might have warned you otherwise. Notice a pattern? What can you learn from it?

Mismatched by TV

On '90s sitcom Friends, Malcolm notes there's "Cartoon-level congruity between what's on [their] face and what's in [their] heart. They do that because they're trained actors. That's why, even though the plots of Friends are absurdly complex, no one in history has ever watched an episode of Friends and said 'They lost me!' Why? Because everything is perfectly cataloged. If you watch a lot of TV, you can come to the false impression that that's the way things work in real life. But that's not true at all. A significant number of people are what are called mismatched — their facial expressions, under certain circumstances, do not match the way they feel on the inside. And those people give us fits!"

Contrary to what TV would have us believe, we don't always express our emotions in ways that are easily read by others — and vice versa. In fact, we may exhibit a facial expression or gesture that indicates the complete opposite of what we're trying to convey, but this might be lost to someone raised on sitcom reruns.

Do you regularly exhibit a facial expression or gesture that is commonly misinterpreted by others? If so, how might you better clarify your intentions whenever you're mindful of this mismatch?

Reappraising Face Value

Although he was paralyzed with motor neurone disease and unable to speak for the majority of his life, late physicist Stephen Hawking's brilliant mind forever enriched humanity's understanding of the mysterious ways our universe works. But imagine if he had been dismissed from academia by someone in a position of authority who wrongly attributed his physical appearance to an inability to mentally perform. The world would have suffered for this misperception and be none the wiser for it. But these types of misperceptions happen all the time — in job interviews, startup pitches, networking events, neighborly introductions, and anywhere a face-to-face meeting might actually work against the launch of a beneficial relationship.

"Abilities are not manifest in physical presence," says Malcolm. "We have to take these misperceptions we have of strangers seriously; you really have to think about how do we structure the world so that we can account for these kind of errors?"

Think of a time when you've met someone in person and judged them solely by a trait that had zero bearing on their competence or capabilities. How did you come to realize that your judgment may have been in error? In what ways did you attempt to remedy the error? Going forward, how might you remind yourself to reserve judgment of someone until you know them on more than a surface level?

Full show notes and resources for this episode can be found here.

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