

HRm

HUMAN RESOURCES MONTHLY

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Can I read your mind

by MARNIE TISOT

Many successful people swear by their ability to read others and use 'gut feeling' to make decisions. But is there a hard science behind reading people, and can it be learned?

Most of us like to think we are good at reading and understanding people. After all, that's why we're in HR right? But one indicator of our ability is knowing when people aren't being honest, and studies show that most people's chances of detecting deception are no better than flipping a coin. With recent research indicating that about a third of Australian job applicants lie during interviews, wouldn't recruiting (and indeed many other HR activities) be much easier if we could tell when someone wasn't being truthful with us? Some claim an innate ability to do this, but aren't able to explain how. Often referred to as 'gut feeling', some swear by it and others warn us about relying on it.

My interest in this topic was piqued while working with someone with this uncanny talent. Time and again I sat in meetings or interviews asking myself 'how did she know that?' or 'why didn't I see that?' She was able to influence those above, below and around her and I was constantly fascinated by how this was done. These experiences made me realise that there were far greater rewards in knowing what a person was really telling me, as opposed to what they were saying. I also realised that recognising this discrepancy was as much about the ability to read personality and motivation as it was to detect deception. If I could learn this ability, I could build stronger relationships, make better decisions, and ultimately achieve better outcomes as an HR practitioner.

DOES IT COME NATURALLY?

There has been extensive research into some people's natural ability to read others, perhaps one of the most interesting studies being the work done on 'truth wizards'. Over two and a half decades, Professors Paul Ekman and Maureen O'Sullivan identified only 50 people who had the ability to spot lies after testing more than 15,000 people (including psychologists, intelligence professionals, judges, law enforcement officers and the general population). They called these people 'wizards of deception detection', or 'truth wizards', and they represent less than 1 per cent of the population.

What can we learn from those with this ability? During her research Professor O'Sullivan showed that while some wiz-

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PROFESSORS PAUL EKMAN AND MAUREEN O'SULLIVAN

ards used known aspects like vocal clues and non-verbal behaviour, others based their judgements on behaviours and word usage that had not previously been identified by researchers. One truth wizard in Chicago, who goes by the pseudonym Eyes for Lies, explains that "spotting the truth and understanding people is about watching for inconsistencies. People who are deceptive are inconsistent. People give off different inconsistencies — one may leak body language clues while another may leak verbal clues, and yet another may leak emotional clues, or a combination of them. You never know what will give away a person until you watch and listen to them".

Clearly there is no single area that enables us to successfully read someone; rather it is a combination of factors unique to an individual. "For every trait you show me that identifies a liar, I can find an honest person who does the same thing. That's why I rely on inconsistencies. Three or more inconsistencies and something is usually amiss," says Eyes for Lies.

CAN IT BE LEARNED?

With such a variety of factors contributing to understanding and reading people, the question is whether this can be learned as a skill, or whether it is reserved for the few with natural talent. One person who can answer this question is Steve Longford, managing director of New Intelligence, an Australian organisation dedicated to the 'hard science of



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human skills'. The short answer, according to Longford, is yes. "Some people who come to us are looking to back up their natural ability with some hard skills," he says "but a lot of people come to us because they lack the ability to read and understand people, and it's affecting their capacity to do their job".

Traditionally, these skills are taught in professions such as intelligence, law enforcement and customs. In fact, it was during his career as a profiler in the police force that Longford first became interested in this science. "Profiling is about using scientific principles to derive characteristics of an unknown person by analysing a crime scene to determine what behaviours may have occurred. It works most reliably for serial killers and sex offenders. It became obvious that deriving characteristics from behaviours of someone who was right in front of you had to be easier and more accurate. This works for just about anyone in any situation."

The interest in these skills from the HR profession is growing. "We are seeing more people from HR sectors seeking training that helps their employees be better people. They are over the "soft" approach to these skills. They want to see some science behind the training and observable change in their people". Interestingly, more than half of the participants in these programs report that the first place they actually see improvement is in their personal relationships. "They take it home first because for most people those are the relationships that matter the most. Once they get it right there it tends to make its way into the workplace and also tends to be more effective," says Longford.

So what's involved in learning to read



people? New Intelligence utilises a 'behavioural intelligence framework', that draws from a number of widely recognised tools and techniques. "There are lots of individual disciplines like body language, psychology, neuro-linguistic programming, influence and negotiation, but there needed to be a framework that could be used on a practical level without having to gain the knowledge or practice of a psychologist. The fundamental human skill is reading people and without it, higher level skills such as building and testing rapport and influencing are impaired," says Longford.

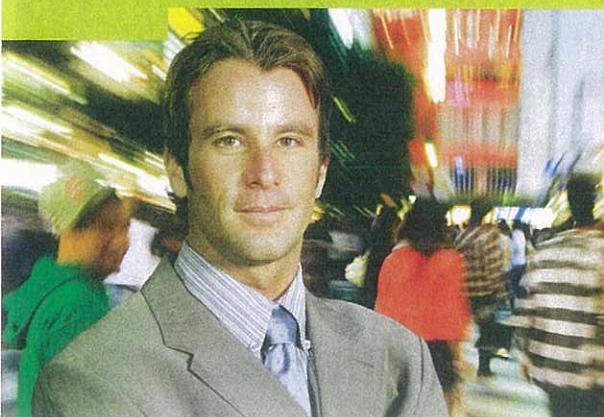
Eyes for Lies echoes this and emphasises that the prerequisite skill to understanding people is the ability to read and understand human emotion. "When I ask people to identify what elements make up emotions and distinguish them from fake emotions, few people have that knowledge," says Eyes for Lies. That's where Eyes for Lies helps people first; she teaches them basic emotion recognition before any frameworks or criteria.

Despite what the popular media may imply, through shows such as *Lie to Me* and *The Mentalist*, reading people is not easy.

Building your skills is based on detecting and interpreting cues across four key areas:

- Non-verbal communication, which includes posture, facial expressions, eye contact, breathing.
- Verbal communication, which involves analysing a person's use of language.
- Paralinguistic communication adds meaning to verbal communication and includes aspects such as pitch, volume, intonation and pauses.
- Indicators including anything that provides insight into the motivation or attributes of another person including dress, grooming, jewellery, vehicle, house, office, books, hobbies, music or status.

But like any new skill it takes time and practice. Steve Longford uses the competency acquisition model to read people, both intuitively and in training programs. "It's just like driving a car - unconscious incompetence is when we sat in the back and thought it would be easy to drive. We became consciously competent when we tried to do it and thought that there was no way we could ever master all the tasks needed to drive a car. With effort and practice most of us became consciously competent - we have to concentrate but we got to where we needed to go without crashing or run-



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ning over anyone. Now, as unconsciously competent drivers we can not only drive but talk on the mobile phone and drink a coffee at the same time, notes Longford, who says it's the same for reading people. "When our participants go out into the world and look for the cues they actually begin to see them – the more cues they see, the more they are encouraged to look for other cues and the whole thing snowballs. Over time they see things most other people don't and the effort required diminishes. Seeing things is the first big step; it's like letting the clutch out without stalling the car; you can't move until you can engage."

There are definite risks associated with learning to read people. Going too fast too early nearly always ends in tears, and practising in high pressure environments can result in crashes that discourage the learner and make them wary of trying again. Driving lessons only prepare us for going out into the real world and practising – that is where the real learning is done.

That learning needs to be done on a regular basis and in conditions that allow for mistakes and errors. After all, research proves

that the human brain learns best from mistakes.

One of the most common areas that we make mistakes in is the interpretation of what we see. While a wizard can make quite accurate assessments on people very quickly, the rest of us need to exercise caution. "We are much better at reading those we know well than those we have just met," explains Longford. "This is because we have established norms and baselines against which to measure their behaviours and we have had the luxury of time and space to learn the distinct meaning of each of the deviations away from these baselines. This is much harder for people we do not know."

The research of Richard Heur, a former CIA analyst, clearly shows that our brain likes to jump as quickly as possible to conclusions in order to reduce our uncertainty. This can hinder our ability to interpret cues, and so part of the skill of reading people is about suspending judgement. For example, when someone tells us that they think that climate change is a load of old rubbish, research shows that we are more inclined to judge that statement as it compares to our personal

belief system than derive meaning about the individual from it. In reading people parlance, this is an engagement based on content rather than meaning and it limits our ability to use a further question to gain understanding – 'What makes you think that?' rather than 'Can't you see the evidence?'

Regardless of some of the difficulties and dangers associated with reading people, it is a skill that can be learned and the potential rewards far outweigh the risks and effort. And it is not just intuitives or wizards who seem to have somewhat magic powers. My training has enabled me to look at clients and colleagues with new eyes, and I have found a fresh respect for them as I look and listen with an open mind. As for driving, I may still have my P plates but each day I get to where I want to be more quickly and smoothly, and to my delight my passengers actually enjoy the ride. **HRm**

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