



Self Preservation

In the Corporate World

A simple, primal need drives action

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Introduction

Eons ago, survival belonged to the fastest runner or the strongest fighter. Muscular legs, powerful arms, hearty lungs and a sturdy heart were all that was necessary to stay alive. The only intelligence required was to choose between running for safety or staying and fighting. When face to face with a dinosaur, the cave dweller's reaction was an increased heart rate, shallow breathing, and adrenaline pumping through their veins. If the cave dweller made the wrong choice, he was killed.

Eventually man progressed from the cave dweller to a more civilized society. Pioneers traveled great distances by covered wagon and on horseback. Unfortunately, they were attacked by native American Indians hollering, wearing war paint and waving arrows. The pioneers' reaction? Increased heart rate, shallow breathing, and adrenaline pumping through their veins.

Quite similar to the cave dwellers' reaction. Both scenarios invoked the 'fight or flight' syndrome. Our innate survival instincts are to run to escape, or stand to fight. This insured that only the fastest runner, most accurate shooter or most intelligent person survived the attack. Literally, survival of the fittest prevailed.

The brain remains wired for these threats. Experiences pass through the limbic system; specifically the emotional brain (Amy/Andy). Amy/Andy has not matured to discern differences between the literal-life-and-death threats that the cave dwellers experienced, and today's business challenges. Both create the same physical reactions of accelerated heartbeat, shortness of breath, adrenaline and cortisol through your body.

If your Amy/Andy does not sense a threat, control is relinquished to Tex, your rational brain. This allows you to think objectively, see a variety of perspectives, discuss and collaborate, and recommend solutions. This is the brain that should be in control at all times. (Read my article, "The Brain behind your Mind", for a more in-depth explanation of these two parts of your brain.)

Reaction Tracks

Parts of the brain have not adapted to today's technology. The purpose of Amy/Andy is "Does this situation threaten me?" 'This situation' could be an email you viewed as offending, or uncertainty about an upcoming change. Amy/Andy interprets the situations as ones that can 'kill' you. Let's walk through this

- if your job (income) is threatened, you will not be able to pay your bills >
- which will result in eviction and your friends won't let you live with them for very long >
- you will then be homeless and living on the street, fighting for food and shelter =
- your very survival is threatened.

That progression can occur mentally and emotionally in a split second. One minute all is well, the next you are homeless, friendless and living on the street. Plain and simple. You laugh – yet it is very real. You have the same physical reaction as the cave dwellers did – your heart rate increases, your breathing becomes shallow and adrenaline and cortisol shoot through your veins. The most rudimentary point is the reason for your reaction. When an unexpected event occurs, your brain will take one of three actions:

Freeze

Think back to prehistoric times: when the prey sense a predator, one tactic they use to escape is to become 'invisible'. The hope is to blend into the background. Remember the beginning of Jurassic Park I when Dr. Alan Grant told Tim as they crouched by the jeep, trying to hide from T-Rex: "Don't move ... if you don't move the dinosaur cannot see you"? That is the instinctive reaction you are duplicating.

Flee

You can flee in a literal sense by walking away from the offending person or situation. You can also flee by withdrawing mentally or emotionally. By doing this, you consciously or unconsciously withhold information. In the midst of a heated discussion, deciding that continuing the argument is not worth the effort is a deliberate choice of mentally walking away and does not fall under this flee reaction.

Fight

You will fight for that which you believe affects your survival. Fighting is an offensive aggression tactic, believing your chances for success increases if you 'throw the first punch'. During the fight, as you defend your position or opinion, you most certainly will offend others with your words, voice tone or actions.

Flight: Based on Fear

Fear grabs and imprisons us. If left to unattended, it can shackle us into inaction, and intensify our fear. What do we fear? Doubts about our own identity, our own capabilities or our own self, in addition to repercussions in the form of being mocked, looking like a fool or simply being incorrect. In this case, think back to what was said, and perhaps more importantly, how it was said.

In the meeting, Sally was getting ready to give her views on the change in project direction. However, when Joe belittled Jane and her experiences, Sally did not want to suffer that embarrassment and chose to keep silent for the rest of the meeting.

A second type of fear is when a person surrounds himself / herself with others that they feel are subordinate: hiring someone with fewer years or unrelated experience or from a smaller company, a degree from a less-known university, or someone that is not as assertive.

James is a visionary leader yet is not really in touch with his employees. His trusted advisors and direct reports are passive, not bringing up any potential problems. After meetings, they struggle to juggle the mechanics of accomplishing directives. They become aggressive and authoritarian to their own direct reports, intimidating them into submission.

So why are we afraid? Remember, the freeze-flight-fright-fight reaction originates in the emotional brain (Amy/Andy) and is an instinctive response to a threat to survival. Running away from the threat is one method inbred into us to escape the terror. Today's threats are not literally life-threatening; since Amy/Andy has no concept of time, this has the capacity to drive us to ruin and kill us.

Several top situations we fear are:

FF1. The status quo and/or losing our 'comfortable' situation. The current situation, the status quo, represents a comfort; we know what to expect, we are not surprised, we are not caught off-guard. Keeping quiet occurs when we believe that the alternative is worse than these experiences.

FF2. Losing the respect others have for us and looking weak. This can reinforce our low self-worth. "What will they think of me if I speak up?" is the primary question associated with this fear.

Fight: Based on Anger

The brain sees the situation as a power struggle which will result in definite winners and losers. To survive we must aggressively conquer and defeat our opponents. Intimidation tactics are used for the sole purpose of appearing larger in the hopes of scaring off the attacker. Think of a puffer fish – when confronted, this fish puffs itself up so it will be too large to fit in the predator’s mouth.

Standing in Jim’s office doorway, Brian asked (he thought) in a non-threatening manner for an example to help him understand what he was to do. Jim immediately berated Brian, including telling Brian that he didn’t pay attention to the morning’s conversation. Jim yelled so loudly that everyone in the general area heard, and watched silently as Brian slinked away.

Anger can also be disguised as exaggerated actions and/or sarcasm, bitterness or snarky comments. The target can be another person or another idea.

Linda did not agree at all with Lois’ participatory leadership style. Whenever Lois asked for others to share their views, Linda whispered to whoever was sitting next to her derogatory comments such as “she doesn’t know how to do it”, “why is she asking us? She wants us to do her job” and “doesn’t she know how stupid she looks when she asks us?”.

These are some examples of what we do when we unconsciously choose the ‘fight’ response. This leads to the question: What are we fighting for? What does Amy/Andy see is threatened?

FA1. Status quo/comfort. Fighting to maintain the same situation reveals a lack of confidence, a lack of flexibility and a lack of optimism. It is anger rooted in the perceived inability to adapt, to maintain preciseness or perfection, or belief in oneself (similar to #FF1 above).

FA2. Our ego or pride. This morphs into fear of looking weak (see #FF2 above). How many times have you continued arguing or stubbornly dug in your heels because you thought backing down would show a weak spot that could be your downfall?

FA3. Injustice/values. This is triggered by the mistreatment of others, especially to those that cannot help themselves: children, the elderly or animals. This anger promotes positive action and a proactive stance.

Determining your trigger

We react to our emotional memories stronger than how we respond to objectivity and logic. The person experiencing the freeze/flight/fright/fight reactions are on an emotional rollercoaster and those emotions need validated. We tend to rationalize that which we do not understand, or do not want to accept and deal with.

Think back to when you initially felt your heart pounding and your breathing quicken. What was said that Amy/Andy reacted to? What did you misinterpret, or what assumptions are you using against yourself? How did you feel? Seeing and understanding these subtleties, along with being cognizant of your own behaviors, takes energy. Stress, fatigue and preoccupation eat away at your energies, leaving less for you to handle emotional issues.

Conclusion

We are feeling humans that think. We react emotionally before we respond rationally. Choose your battles. Don't aggressively fight or submissively withdraw. Watch your thoughts. Release those thoughts that fuel your destructive emotions. Take a step back to impartially review the situation, taking special note of what was actually said, what was implied and your reactions to what you believe you 'saw'.

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For additional information

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