



Rewired to Relate - Text

Chapter 4

Why do they behave the way they do?

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All of our interactions and relationships with others are two-way. Understanding the way other people behave and why they might react the way they do can build connection and help you work together effectively.

How others react

When you spend a lot of time with someone, including in a working environment, you begin to notice how they react in different situations.

Your friends and colleagues are human too, so you might occasionally witness reactions or behaviours that seem a bit, well... irrational!

Sometimes our colleagues' behaviours may seem inappropriate, irrational or unpredictable. But if you consider that their behaviour is the result of the limbic system trying desperately to get some needs met, it might all make a lot more sense.

The limbic system is always on, assessing and interpreting social situations based on pre-programmed preferences, needs and fears. Then it influences us to behave in ways that were appropriate for survival on the savannah, but today can be inappropriate and cause damage to team connections and relationships.

Eons ago, on the savannah, a hint that we would be banished from a tribe truly was equivalent to a death sentence. A desperate or dramatic response might have been appropriate and lifesaving. Unfortunately, we are still run by this programming, and it doesn't always serve us in our 21st century world.

Emotions and reactions

Emotions happen, it is a fact and a part of being human. Trying to cover them up, control them or pretend they don't happen will just create further problems.

So our first step in understanding others is to normalise emotions. Be curious about them and try to learn from them – what is happening that is causing pain, upset or neediness?

Situations that can cause limbic threats

Many emotional reactions are an expression of unmet needs or a limbic threat. Identifying that need or threat works wonders for understanding someone and defusing volatile emotions. The Be SAFE & Certain model that you learned in Chapter 1 provides a powerful framework to interpret people's behaviour. You will find the vocabulary gives you a way in to a new level of understanding.

Online, we have four videos to consider how threats happen in the workplace and the emotional responses they can cause.

Micromanaging

Consider this example of a leader who creates specific and detailed plans. Notice how the Be SAFE & Certain elements of Certainty and Autonomy affect team members in different ways.

Us vs them

Us vs them situations can look like teams not getting along or silos forming. Take a look at this example and notice how Belonging can sometimes create disconnection as well as connection.

Creating uncertainty

In this example you will see how accidentally creating uncertainty can destabilise a whole team or organisation.

Gossip and rumours

Feelings of uncertainty can drive the spread of untrue stories. Take a look at how it can happen in this example.

Toxic colleagues

Many of us will have encountered a colleague who regularly uses toxic behaviours (strong behaviours caused by limbic threat reactions). These destructive behaviours can sap energy from a team as frustration and irritation increase, slowly destroying team morale and performance.

Have you ever had a colleague who did the following?

- waited until after a meeting to talk about issues they didn't bring up in the meeting and disagreed with decisions that had been made
- said yes in public but failed to follow through on that agreement
- gossiped regularly, spreading rumours and creating drama
- was quick to grab the glory when things went well, disregarding the effort of others
- acted as if they knew everything already and was closed-minded to change

All of these are examples of unhelpful behaviour that can cost teams and organisations dearly. A [Harvard Business School study](#) of 50,000 employees found that the cost of a toxic colleague can run into the millions of dollars. Because of a toxic colleague, nearly half of employees "decreased their work effort" and intentionally spent less time at work, two-thirds of employees felt their performance declined, and nearly 80% felt less committed to the organisation.

Tool:

Contagion protection

Your colleagues' emotions can be contagious. You might have experienced this yourself if you have found your sense of Certainty or Belonging has been threatened after a colleague has shared their worries with you.

Consider how you can protect yourself from catching other people's limbic reactions.

Recognise, Protect, Prepare

When a colleague in the office starts sneezing, you know what to do. You keep your distance and wash your hands regularly.

When the same colleague starts regularly complaining, gossiping or behaving aggressively, do you know how to protect yourself from catching their reaction?

You can Recognise, Protect, Prepare.

Recognise the contagion

The first step is to know that emotional contagion exists. Just knowing that our emotions can be influenced by others (and that our emotions can influence others) is an important first step.

Start to notice how you feel when confronted with someone else's emotions. Try to observe and name their emotions rather than be affected by them.

Protect yourself

When your limbic system responds automatically to someone's emotions, there is little opportunity to be conscious about your response. With practice, you can learn to slow down and be more conscious and intentional about your responses – choosing a response that supports collaboration, or better working relationships.

Use the **Aware, Breathe, Choose (ABC) model** to calm your limbic system and bring you back to your PFC where you will have access to different options of how you could respond.

Becoming masterful at responding consciously takes practice. Try it out, notice the impact and keep practising. You will notice a difference in your ability to respond over time.

Prepare yourself

Have you had a chance yet to practise using ABC before you go into a potentially heated situation? This short exercise will allow you to get yourself grounded, and to choose a mindset that will protect you from limbic and toxic behaviours from others and enable you to stay in relationship. Give it a try.

You may also find it useful to use ABC when you want to keep a supportive mindset going into a conversation. For example, when you need to give someone feedback that might be difficult for them to receive, getting to a mindful state before the conversation will help you be constructive and support or develop the other person rather than blame or criticise them.