Judgment In The Workplace

Understanding and Overcoming Judgment

By Gail Sussman Miller

Have you ever said, “She/he is so judgmental” about a boss, co-worker, girlfriend, parent or others? We tend to think being judgmental is not flattering behavior. Well, guess what? All of us are judgmental! The good news is this natural behavior helps us evaluate the world around us and can protect us. The bad news is when we act based on inaccurate, incomplete or fear-based assumptions about people and events, we can hurt our relationships with others and ourselves at work and at play.

Why we do it

We begin judging and evaluating early in life. As babies, we tried to put everything into our mouths to explore our world. As adults, we form judgments by observing other people and situations, comparing them to what we know and then drawing a conclusion we hold as true. We make a “value judgment” and try to determine whether a person is good or bad, friend or foe, safe or unsafe. This same process helps us identify opportunities and risks. Sometimes we judge others critically so we feel elevated and happier about ourselves, when self-pride is what is really needed. Alas, let’s not forget how we also judge ourselves. How does making judgments serve you?

Let’s explore the role judgment plays in our lives, especially in negative ways, and how you can shift your thinking and actions to improve relationships, communications and results.

When we do it

Think about assumptions you might make about a stranger the first moment you see him or her. Even before someone speaks, we tend to draw conclusions based on their clothing, their body shape and size, the color of their skin, cultural upbringing, age, gender, the way they speak or mannerisms. We categorize and form perceptions based on their clothing, their body shape and size, the color of their skin, cultural upbringing, age, gender, the way they speak or their body language. We may assume someone is nervous or lacking confidence. A boss who twirls hair on her finger might seem nervous or lacking confidence. Someone who makes eye contact and smiles might seem friendly and strong, while the opposite may seem true if they don’t.

Think of all those happy hour or lunch conversations with coworkers where you’ve heard or said things like, “He always speaks up at meetings and hogs the floor. He’s trying to brown nose.” Or, “She doesn’t seem very friendly so I don’t try talking to her.” Or, “It’s been a week and he hasn’t returned my phone call. I must have done something wrong. Now I won’t get promoted.”

Tips, advice, action steps

The important thing is to accept that you instinctively judge others and situations for a variety of reasons. Below are 10 tips to shift your mindset so you can be conscious of and choose your reactions. These guidelines are very useful at work and can apply at home and in relationships with others and ourselves. Try on some new thinking and actions. As you read these steps, think of a time when you did not get an email from someone in the timeframe you expected about something you really cared about.

1. First, observe the trigger event. It’s actually quite neutral and has no meaning. You simply have not received an expected and desired email.
2. Instantaneously your brain processes the data collected and, depending on previous life experiences, habits, beliefs and “rules,” your mind kicks out an analysis. Be aware and notice this.
3. Your emotions get triggered based on how you feel and you make a biased decision from which you respond. Choose to make this decision more consciously.
4. After you form a judgment, simply notice your assumptions and the story you imagine being true.
5. Ask yourself, “What else might be true?” Might it be they are on vacation, out sick, have an overactive spam filter or their dog ate their computer? Use humor to keep from taking things too seriously.
6. Ask yourself how much of what you are judging is about them or about you. If they are not being responsive by your standards, what’s going on with them may have nothing to do with you. Step back and detach.
7. Remember you are only 50 percent responsible for the communication exchange and relationship. Don’t take all the responsibility.
8. Do take 100 percent responsibility for your actions. How might the instinctive response you are considering, based on your judgment, contribute to improve or hurt the situation or relationship?
9. Suspend your judgment long enough to get curious, ask questions and validate or withdraw your assumptions. Then make a decision on your next action. Be open and willing to look for the good in this person or situation.
10. Since judgmental behavior can be a protective response, put some boundaries and safety nets in place. Take a small step, consider another communication method or timing or take another path to accomplish your goal.

It is human, natural and true that we all judge others and ourselves. Accept that and look at how this tendency affects your life. Make conscious choices about what you think, your interpretations and how they influence your actions. Notice, respect, accept and celebrate differences in your world so you can do and be your best.

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