

Assessments for Action

We are the thinking animal. Our capacity for language allows us to plan the future, reflect on the past, and have conversations in the present. Through language we live in stories about the world and our lives. When we embody our stories, when our actions are coherent with what we say, we are aligned and on purpose; and we are able to move with power. When we are centered in our speaking, we are seen as trustworthy, authentic, and connected to what we care about. When what we say is different than what we do, we are fragmented and our actions are ineffective. Language then is not simply words coming out of our mouth, but the synchronization of mind, body and spirit. Communication is a commitment to life—not just transferring information—and life is lived through the body. As human beings, we do not just communicate, we ARE communication. Effective communication is the unity of speech, action, emotion, and intention. When we act as a unity, we are able to move with power, dignity, wisdom, and compassion.

Speech Acts

We communicate for a variety of reasons. We have conversations for intimacy, for speculation, for innovation, for inspiration, for analysis, and for action. Conversations for action are based in five speech acts that produce commitment:

- Declaration: A commitment to a future possibility. "Next year we will increase our revenue by 20%."
- Request: A commitment to a future action. "Can you have next year's projected financial report to me by the 15th of this month?"
- Promise: A commitment to producing satisfaction. "I'll get you the report by the 15th of this month."
- Assessment: A commitment to intimacy and future action. "You did a great job on the report."

- Assertion: A commitment to a reality that already exists. "The report is complete and there are 5 copies available to pass out."

Assessments

Assessments inhabit our stories and conversations more than any other speech act. We are continually making evaluations, opinions, judgments, and verdicts about ourselves, others, and the world. When we learn the skill of making and receiving assessments, we create distinctions that allow us to move powerfully for our identity, our relationships, our careers, and our commitment to the future. If, for example, we speak of someone as being reliable, of a software package as being useful, or a process as being ethically wrong, we are creating a reality which opens or closes possibilities. To be able to deliver powerful grounded assessments becomes a valuable offer to others and creates a powerful identity for ourselves.

In order to learn how to effectively deliver and receive assessments, it is necessary to confront our automatic interpretations about assessments. Do we go into shame, fear, doubt, righteousness, or confusion? When we receive a constructive assessment do we believe, 'it is true' and collapse that one assessment into all the other areas of our life? Often we're afraid of hurting others when we assess them. We imagine that a positive assessment means we will be expected to always perform at the same level or better. Or we think that assessments are facts, and when assessed we will be frozen into that particular identity. By attending to and practicing the following distinctions, we can learn to deliver and receive assessments that produce dignity, intimacy, and action.

Delivering an Assessment – Embody These Distinctions:

- Have you been given the authority to make the assessment?
- Are you competent to make the assessment in this domain?
- For the sake of what are you making the assessment? What relationship or future action do you want to produce?

- Are you in the proper mood to deliver the assessment?
- Are they in the proper mood to receive the assessment?
- Is it appropriate to shape the listening of the assessment?
- Can you ground the assessment?

Receiving an Assessment – Embody These Distinctions:

- Have you given them the authority to make the assessment?
- Are they competent to make the assessment?
- Remember: it is their interpretation, it is neither true nor false.
- Are you in a proper mood to receive the assessment?
- For the sake of what are you making the assessment? Do you need to ask them this?
- Is it grounded?
- What does the assessment open for you? Do you accept it?
- Are you open to learning more from this person?
- If you are gripped by your conditioned tendency, return to center.

Self Assessments

We also make internal self-assessments. If we look closely, we can see that most of these internal self-assessments are unbidden, negative, and ungrounded. They are historical, learned, and live in the background of our thinking. This constant negative self-evaluating chatter is an aspect of our conditioned tendency and is the core of much of our suffering and lack of self-esteem. If we don't attend to and reflect on these assessments, we automatically shape our bodies, emotions, and relationships around them. This negative internal conversation is the cause

for much of our acting out and being gripped “mysteriously” by negative moods. By attending to these internal voices through the sitting practice, and by understanding the nature of assessments, they will have less of an impact on us.

We have focused on how language in general, and the skill of receiving and delivering assessments, is critical for living a life of peace, power, wisdom, and dignity. It is also necessary to mention the power of connecting to the life that is before language. When we make assessments, we distinguish and divide the world so we can navigate through it. Through our stories, we invent a world that we live in with others. This world, by its nature, excludes other worlds. The act of opening one world closes another, and we move down a path in which our assessments direct our choices. The sitting and jo practice produce a sensibility in which one begins to contact the energy that is before language. This is a world of sensing, feeling, image, and effortless power. The practices that allow us to enter this world do not prejudice one assessment over another. We simply note that thinking and assessing are present, and then return to the life energy that animates us. What is important is to know when to be the energetic space before language, when to be language as a coherent unity, and when to move between them.

By becoming a skilled observer of how we live in our bodies and how we live in language, it becomes possible for us to design the practices that will allow us to become more powerful leaders, and to produce a fulfilling and satisfying life. When we see that we can invent and shift assessments of ourselves and others, we can better honor ourselves and dignify others.