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Don't Assume They Meant It: *Disentangle Intent from Impact*

The question of who intended what is central to our story about what's happening in a difficult situation. Intentions strongly influence our judgments of others: If someone intended to hurt us, we judge them more harshly than if they hurt us by mistake. We're willing to be inconvenienced by someone if they have a good reason; we're irritated if we think they just don't care about the impact of their actions on us. Though either blocks our way just as surely, we react differently to an ambulance double-parked on a narrow street than we do to a BMW.

The Battle Over Intentions

Consider the story of Lori and Leo, who have been in a relationship for two years and have a recurring fight that is painful to both of them. The couple was at a party thrown by some friends, and Lori was about to reach for another scoop of ice cream, when Leo said, "Lori, why don't you lay off the ice cream?" Lori, who struggles with her weight, shot Leo a nasty look, and the two avoided each other for a while. Later that evening things went from bad to worse:

LORI: I really resented it at the party, the way you treated me in front of our friends.

LEO: The way I treated you? What are you talking about?

LORI: About the ice cream. You act like you're my father or something. You have this need to control me or put me down.

LEO: Lori, I wasn't trying to hurt you. You said you were on a diet, and I'm just trying to help you stick to it. You're so defensive. You hear everything as an attack on you, even when I'm trying to help.

LORI: Help!? Humiliating me in front of my friends is your idea of helping?

LEO: You know, I just can't win with you. If I say something, you think I'm trying humiliate you, and if I don't, you ask me why I let you overeat. I am so sick of this. Sometimes I wonder whether you don't start these fights on purpose.

This conversation left both Lori and Leo feeling angry, hurt, and misunderstood. What's worse, it's a conversation they have over and over again. They are engaged in a classic battle over intentions: Lori accuses Leo of hurting her on purpose, and Leo denies it. They are caught in a cycle they don't understand and don't know how to break.

Two Key Mistakes

There is a way out. Two crucial mistakes in this conversation make it infinitely more difficult than it needs to be — one by Lori and one by Leo. When Lori says "You have this need to control me or put me down," she is talking about Leo's intentions. Her mistake is to assume she knows what Leo's intentions are, when in fact she doesn't. It's an easy — and debilitating — mistake to make. And we do it all the time.

Leo's mistake is to assume that once he clarifies that his intentions were good, Lori is no longer justified in being upset. He explains that he "wasn't trying to hurt" Lori, that in fact he was trying to help. And having explained this, he thinks that should be the end of

colleagues, she is trying to put you down. When you offer suggestions to others in the same meeting, you are trying to be helpful.

When we're the ones acting, we know that much of the time we don't intend to annoy, offend, or upstage others. We're wrapped up in our own worries, and are often unaware that we're having any negative impact on others. When we're the ones acted upon, however, our story too easily slides into one about bad intentions and bad character.

Are There Never Bad Intentions? Of course, sometimes we get hurt because someone meant to hurt us. The person we are dealing with is nasty or inconsiderate, out to make us look bad or steal our best friend. But these situations are rarer than we imagine, and without hearing from the other person, we can't really know their intentions.

Getting Their Intentions Wrong Is Costly

Intentions matter, and guessing wrong is hazardous to your relationships.

We Assume Bad Intentions Mean Bad Character. Perhaps the biggest danger of assuming the other person had bad intentions is that we easily jump from "they had bad intentions" to "they are a bad person." We settle into judgments about their character that color our view of them and, indeed, affect not only any conversation we might have, but the entire relationship. Once we think we have someone figured out, we see all of their actions through that lens, and the stakes rise. Even if we don't share our view with them, the impact remains. The worse our view of the other person's character, the easier it is to justify avoiding them or saying nasty things behind their back.

When you find yourself thinking "That traffic cop is a control freak" or "My boss is manipulative" or "My neighbor is impossible," ask yourself why this is your view. What is it based on? If it's based on

feeling powerless, fearing manipulation, or being frustrated, notice that your conclusion is based solely on the impact of their behavior on you — which is not a sufficient basis to be sure of someone else's intentions or character.

Accusing Them of Bad Intentions Creates Defensiveness. Our assumptions about other people's intentions can also have a significant impact on our conversations. The easiest and most common way of expressing these assumptions is with an accusatory question: "How come you wanted to hurt me?" "Why do you ignore me like this?" "What have I done that makes you feel it's okay to step all over me?"

We think we are sharing our hurt, frustration, anger, or confusion. We are trying to begin a conversation that will end in greater understanding, perhaps some improved behavior, and maybe an apology. What *they* think we are doing is trying to provoke, accuse, or malign them. (In other words, they make the same mistaken leap in judging *our* intentions.) And given how frequently our assumptions are incomplete or wrong, the other person often feels not just accused, but falsely accused. Few things are more aggravating.

We should not be surprised, then, that they try to defend themselves, or attack back. From their point of view, they are defending themselves from false accusations. From our point of view, they are just being defensive — we're right, they just aren't big enough to admit it. The result is a mess. No one learns anything, no one apologizes, nothing changes.

Lori and Leo fall right into this. Leo is defensive throughout, and at the end, when he says that he sometimes wonders if Lori "starts these fights on purpose," he actually accuses Lori of bad intentions. And thus begins a cycle of accusation. If interviewed about their conversation afterward, *both* Lori and Leo would report that they were the victim of the other's bad intentions. Each would claim that their own statements were made in self-defense. Those are the two classic characteristics of the cycle: both parties think they are the victim, and both think they are acting only to defend themselves. This is how well-intentioned people get themselves into trouble.

it. As a result, he doesn't take the time to learn what Lori is really feeling or why. This mistake, too, is as common as it is crippling.

Fortunately, with some awareness, both mistakes can be avoided.

The First Mistake: Our Assumptions About Intentions Are Often Wrong

Exploring "Lori's mistake" requires us to understand how our minds work when devising stories about what others intend, and to learn to recognize the set of questionable assumptions upon which these stories are built. Here's the problem: While we care deeply about other people's intentions toward us, we don't actually know what their intentions are. We can't. Other people's intentions exist only in their hearts and minds. They are invisible to us. However real and right our assumptions about other people's intentions may seem to us, they are often incomplete or just plain wrong.

We Assume Intentions from the Impact on Us

Much of the first mistake can be traced to one basic error: we make an attribution about another person's intentions based on the impact of their actions on us. We feel hurt; therefore they intended to hurt us. We feel slighted; therefore they intended to slight us. Our thinking is so automatic that we aren't even aware that our conclusion is only an assumption. We are so taken in by our story about what they intended that we can't imagine how they could have intended anything else.

We Assume the Worst. The conclusions we draw about intentions based on the impact of others' actions on us are rarely charitable. When a friend shows up late to the movie, we don't think, "Gee, I'll bet he ran into someone in need." More likely we think, "Jerk. He doesn't care about making me miss the beginning of the movie."

When we've been hurt by someone else's behavior, we assume the worst.

Margaret fell into this pattern. She had had her hip operated on by a prominent surgeon, a man she found gruff and hard to talk to. When Margaret hobbled in for her first appointment after surgery, the receptionist told her that the doctor had unexpectedly extended his vacation. Angry, Margaret imagined her wealthy doctor cavorting in the Caribbean with his wife or girlfriend, too self-important and inconsiderate to return on schedule. The picture compounded her anger.

When Margaret finally saw the doctor a week later, she asked curtly how his vacation had been. He responded that it had been wonderful. "I'll bet," she said, wondering whether to raise her concerns. But the doctor went on: "It was a working vacation. I was helping set up a hospital in Bosnia. The conditions there are just horrendous."

Learning what the doctor was really doing didn't erase the inconvenience Margaret had endured. Yet knowing that he was not acting out of selfishness, but from an unrelated and generous motivation, left Margaret feeling substantially better about having to wait the extra week.

We attribute intentions to others all the time. With business and even personal relationships increasingly conducted via e-mail, voice mail, faxes, and conference calls, we often have to read between the lines to figure out what people really mean. When a customer writes "I don't suppose you've gotten to my order yet . . .," is he being sarcastic? Is he angry? Or is he trying to tell you that he knows you're busy? Without tone of voice to guide us, it is easy to assume the worst.

We Treat Ourselves More Charitably. What's ironic — and all too human — about our tendency to attribute bad intentions to others is how differently we treat ourselves. When your husband forgets to pick up the dry cleaning, he's irresponsible. When you forget to book the airline tickets, it's because you're overworked and stressed out. When a coworker criticizes your work in front of department

Attributions Can Become Self-Fulfilling. Our assumptions about the other person's intentions often come true, even when they aren't true to begin with. You think your boss isn't giving you enough responsibility. You assume that this is because she doesn't trust you to do the work well. You feel demotivated by this state of affairs, figuring that nothing you do will change your boss's mind. Your work suffers, and your boss, who hadn't been concerned about your work before, is now quite worried. So she gives you even less responsibility than before.

When we think others have bad intentions toward us, it affects our behavior. And, in turn, how we behave affects how they treat us. Before we know it, our assumption that they have bad intentions toward us has come true.

The Second Mistake: Good Intentions Don't Sanitize Bad Impact

As we've seen, the mistake Lori makes of assuming she knows Leo's intentions, though seemingly small, has big consequences. Now let's come back to Leo, who makes an equally costly error in the conversation. He assumes that because he had good intentions, Lori should not feel hurt. The thinking goes like this: "You said I meant to hurt you. I have now clarified that I didn't. So you should now feel fine, and if you don't, that's your problem."

We Don't Hear What They Are Really Trying to Say

The problem with focusing only on clarifying our intentions is that we end up missing significant pieces of what the other person is trying to say. When they say, "Why were you trying to hurt me?" they are really communicating two separate messages: first, "I know what you intended," and, second, "I got hurt." When we are the person accused, we focus only on the first message and ignore the second. Why? Because we feel the need to defend ourselves. Because Leo is so busy defending himself, he fails to hear that Lori is hurt. He doesn't take in what this all means to her, how hurt she is, or why these issues are so painful.

Working to understand what the other person is really saying is particularly important because when someone says "You intended to hurt me" that isn't quite what they mean. A literal focus on intentions ends up clouding the conversation. Often we say "You intended to hurt me" when what we really mean is "You don't care enough about me." This is an important distinction.

The father who is too busy at work to attend his son's basketball game doesn't intend to hurt his son. He would prefer not to hurt his son. But his desire not to hurt his son is not as strong as his desire or need to work. Most of us on the receiving end make little distinction between "He wanted to hurt me" and "He didn't want to hurt me, but he didn't make me a priority." Either way, it hurts. If the father responds to his son's complaint by saying "I didn't intend to hurt you," he's not addressing his son's real concern: "You may not have intended to hurt me, but you knew you were hurting me, and you did it anyway."

It *is* useful to attempt to clarify your intentions. The question is when. If you do it at the beginning of the conversation, you are likely doing it without fully understanding what the other person really means to express.

We Ignore the Complexity of Human Motivations

Another problem with assuming that good intentions sanitize a negative impact is that intentions are often more complex than just "good" or "bad." Are Leo's intentions purely angelic? *Is* he just trying to help Lori with her diet? Perhaps he himself is embarrassed by Lori's tendency to overeat and felt compelled to say something. Or maybe he wants her to lose weight not so much for herself, but for him. If he really cares about her, as he says he does, shouldn't he be more aware of how his words affect her?

As is so often the case, Leo's intentions are probably mixed. He

may not even be fully aware of what is actually motivating him. But the answer to the question of what is truly motivating Leo is less important than his willingness to ask the question and look for an answer. If his first response to Lori is "No, I had good intentions," then he is putting up a barrier to any learning he might get from the conversation. And he is sending a message to Lori that says, "I'm more interested in defending myself than I am in investigating the complexities of what might be going on for me in our relationship."

Interestingly, when people take on the job of thinking hard about their own intentions, it sends a profoundly positive message to the other person about the importance of the relationship. After all, you'd only do that kind of hard work for somebody who matters to you.

We Aggravate Hostility — Especially Between Groups

This dynamic of attributing intentions, defending ourselves, and ignoring the impact we've had on others is especially common in conflicts between groups, whether the groups are union members and management, neighborhood organizations and developers, administrative staff and the professionals they support, or my family and your family. The desire to sanitize impact is especially common in situations involving issues of "difference," like race, gender, or sexual orientation.

A few years ago a newspaper was experiencing racial strife among its workers. African American and Hispanic reporters complained about the absence of minority voices at the editorial level, and threatened to organize a boycott unless practices were changed. In response, the executive editors met behind closed doors to consider what to do. No minority staffers were invited to the meeting. When the minority reporters learned of the meeting, they were outraged. "They're telling us once again that they don't care what we have to say," said one reporter.

When one of the white editors heard this, she felt wrongly accused and sought to clarify the intention of the meeting: "I can see

why you felt excluded. But that wasn't our intention. It was simply a meeting of editors trying to figure out a good next step for how to *include* minority voices." The white editor felt that now that her intentions were clarified, the issue of the "meaning of the meeting" was over. After all, everything was now clear. But it's never that simple. The intentions of the white editors are important. What's also important is that whether or not the intention was to exclude, people *felt* excluded. And such feelings may take time and thought on everyone's part to work through.

Avoiding the Two Mistakes

The good news is that the two mistakes around intentions and impact are avoidable.

Avoiding the First Mistake: Disentangle Impact and Intent

How can Lori avoid the mistake of attributing intentions to Leo that he may not have? Her first step is simply to recognize that there is a difference between the impact of Leo's behavior on her and what Leo intended. She can't get anywhere without disentangling the two.

Separating impact from intentions requires us to be aware of the automatic leap from "I was hurt" to "You intended to hurt me." You can make this distinction by asking yourself three questions:

1. **Actions:** "What did the other person actually say or do?"

2. **Impact:** "What was the impact of this on me?"

3. **Assumption:** "Based on this impact, what assumption am I making about what the other person intended?"

Hold Your View as a Hypothesis. Once you have clearly answered these three questions, the next step is to make absolutely

certain that you recognize that your assumption about their intentions is just an assumption. It is a guess, a hypothesis.

Disentangle Impact and Intent

Aware of	Unaware of
My intentions	Other person's intentions
Other person's impact on me	My impact on other person

Your hypothesis is not based on nothing; you know what was said or done. But as we've seen, this is not a lot of evidence to go on. Your guess might be right and it might be wrong. In fact, your reaction might even say as much about you as it does about what they did. Perhaps you've had a past experience that gives their action special meaning to you. Many people find certain kinds of teasing hostile, for example, because of bad experiences with siblings, while others think of teasing (in moderation) as a way to connect and show affection. Given the stakes, however, you can't afford to level an accusation based on tenuous data.

Share the Impact on You; Inquire About Their Intentions. You can use your answers to the three questions listed above to begin the difficult conversation itself: say what the other person did, tell them what its impact was on you, and explain your assumption about their intentions, taking care to label it as a hypothesis that you are checking rather than asserting to be true.

Consider how this would change the beginning of the conversation between Lori and Leo. Instead of beginning with an accusation, Lori can begin by identifying what Leo said, and what the impact was on her:

LORI: You know when you said, "Why don't you lay off the ice cream"? Well, I felt hurt by that.

LEO: You did?

LORI: Yeah.

LEO: I was just trying to help you stay on your diet. Why does that make you upset?

LORI: I felt embarrassed that you said it in front of our friends. Then what I wonder is whether you said it on purpose to embarrass or hurt me. I don't know why you'd want to do that, but that's what I'm thinking when it happens.

LEO: Well, I'm certainly not doing it on purpose. I guess I didn't realize it was so upsetting. I'm confused about what it is you want me to say if I see you going off your diet . . . .

The conversation is only beginning, but it is off to a better start.

Don't Pretend You Don't Have a Hypothesis. Note that we aren't suggesting you should get rid of your assumptions about their intentions. That just isn't realistic. Nor do we suggest hiding your view. Instead, recognize your assumptions for what they are — mere guesses subject to modification or disproof. Lori doesn't say "I have no thoughts on why you said what you said," or "I know you didn't mean to hurt me." That would not be authentic. When you share your assumptions about their intentions, simply be clear that you are sharing assumptions — guesses — and that you are sharing them for the purpose of testing whether they make sense to the other person.

Some Defensiveness Is Inevitable. Of course, no matter how skillfully you handle things, you are likely to encounter some defensiveness. The matter of intentions and impacts is complex, and sometimes the distinctions are fine. So it's best to anticipate a certain amount of defensiveness, and to be prepared to clarify what you are trying to communicate, and what you are not.

The more you can relieve the other person of the need to defend themselves, the easier it becomes for them to take in what you are saying and to reflect on the complexity of their motivations. For example, you might say, "I was surprised that you made that comment. It seemed uncharacteristic of you. . . ." Assuming this is true (that it is uncharacteristic), you are giving some balance to the information you are bringing to their attention. If there was some malice mixed in with what they said, this balance makes it easier for them to own up to it.

Avoiding the Second Mistake: Listen for Feelings, and Reflect on Your Intentions

When we find ourselves in Leo's position — being accused of bad intentions — we have a strong tendency to want to defend ourselves: "That is not what I intended." We are defending our intentions and our character. However, as we've seen, starting here leads to trouble.

Listen Past the Accusation for the Feelings. Remember that the accusation about our bad intentions is always made up of two separate ideas: (1) we had bad intentions and (2) the other person was frustrated, hurt, or embarrassed. Don't pretend they aren't saying the first. You'll want to respond to it. But neither should you ignore the second. And if you *start* by listening and acknowledging the feelings, and then return to the question of intentions, it will make your conversation significantly easier and more constructive.

Be Open to Reflecting on the Complexity of Your Intentions. When it comes time to consider your intentions, try to avoid the tendency to say "My intentions were pure." We usually think that about ourselves, and sometimes it's true. But often, as we've seen, intentions are more complex.

We can imagine how the initial conversation might have gone if Leo followed this advice with Lori:

LORI: I really resented it at the party, the way you treated me in front of our friends.

LEO: The way I treated you? What do you mean?

LORI: About the ice cream. You act like you're my father or something. You have this need to control me or put me down.

LEO: Wow. It sounds like what I said really hurt.

LORI: Of course it hurt. What did you expect?

LEO: Well, at the time I was thinking that you'd said you were on a diet, and that maybe I could help you stick to it. But I can see how saying something in front of everyone would be embarrassing. I wonder why I didn't see that?

LORI: Maybe you were embarrassed to have to say something.

LEO: Yeah, maybe. I could have seen you as out of control, which is a big issue for me.

LORI: That's true. And I probably was a little out of control.

LEO: Anyway, I'm sorry. I don't like hurting you. Let's think about what I *should* do or say, if anything, in situations like that.

LORI: Good idea. . . .

. . .

Understanding how we distort others' intentions, making difficult conversations even more difficult, is crucial to untangling what happened between us. However, there's still one more piece to the "What Happened?" Conversation that can get us into trouble — the question of who is to blame.