

The Hopping Habit: Taming Our Impulse to Jump to Conclusions

“Aren’t you done yet?” asks Jeff as he comes to a stop in the hall where my co-worker Beth and I are standing. As Jeff puts his hands on his hips, Beth turns away and storms off in a huff. “What’s with her?” Jeff asks. “Well, I don’t know,” I say slowly, feeling brave and a little too proud of having held my ground. “Maybe she’s hurt by your insult.” “What insult? Jeff asks sincerely. “Why your insinuation that Beth and I are slow. Awfully critical,” I snap back. “No! No!” Jeff sputters with real worry on his face, his shoulders slumping. “I came over to offer to help! We have fewer customers over there. Really, I just came to give you a hand.”

So there it was. Beth and I were frogs. In less than two seconds, we had jumped to the conclusion that Jeff was a jerk, and that was totally unfair. After all, we hardly knew Jeff. All of us had started working together just that morning. Amazing how fast we can misinterpret people. In the coming days, Beth and I learned how very wrong we were. Jeff was a great co-worker who we soon came to trust and enjoy working with.

How We Hop

If you put your antenna up, you may notice your frog-like habits. Did you instantly start interpreting the story as one of an impatient boss or a know-it-all colleague? It’s a true story of wrong conclusions drawn from small samples of a person’s sarcastic style. We humans are very sensitive to communication style differences. If someone interrupts us mid sentence, she is rude, right? Or is she just in a serious hurry? ... Or from New York City?

Our human minds interpret at the speed of light. With 100 billion neurons, our brains can process data inputs faster than any super computer. However, our processing is often inaccurate. We tend to:

- Stereotype (apologies due to New Yorkers!), and over generalize.
- Give advice in seconds because we *just know* what they should do.
- Draw conclusions from mere hints of information and finish other people’s sentences.
- Judge others instantly in quasi-moral terms.

If someone fails to say "Hi" to us in the morning... it’s because we had that argument yesterday ...or she doesn’t like us ...or some other deliberate snub. We tend not to think that maybe she just didn’t see us. When we hear someone say something, or see someone do something, we think we know why. We instantly create a story. From the impact we feel we leap to a tale of intent. And when the impact is “Ouch!” we interpret the intent as negative. “She *meant* to hurt me.” The term for this frog-like habit is the *Fundamental Attribution Bias*. Overcoming this habit is why genuine understanding requires hard work. It’s one reason why forming new relationships and building trust is so difficult, and why we must be consistent in our communication in order to be credible.

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Slow Down Your Hopping

Our Hopping Habit is not all bad. It's related to intuition and insight. Like most powerful tools however, our ability to instantly interpret should be used wisely. Begin by noticing times when you have jumped to conclusions, like Beth and I, and got it all wrong. See if you can find patterns in your hopping habits. Do you too-quickly give advice, for example? Do you too-easily take offense? Try to become conscious of hopping in the moment, and be willing to hop back. Be open to new interpretations.

Easier said than done, of course, but you *can* develop new mental habits. Like Stephen Covey says in the *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, the most important habit is to “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” This habit gets relationships off to a better start, builds trust and enables conflict to be truly resolved. So practice replacing instant judgment, stony silence or defensiveness with a question. “What are you meaning? Will you tell me more?” When asked with genuine curiosity and respect, a lot of conflict in our frog ponds will end in win-win solutions and a whole lot of problems will be avoided in the first place!

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Laura V. Page has been a management consultant for over 18 years, focusing on communications training, conflict resolution, team building and leadership development. Laura can be reached at lvp@lauravpage.com