

YELLOW LIGHT WISDOM: The Signal of Self-Awareness

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We've all been caught in that nanosecond of suspended indecision when the light turns yellow: should we step on it and beat the red light, or slow down and stop? In the tiniest fraction of time, we process enormous amounts of visual, historical and emotional data to reach a decision. Do we take a risk or play it safe?

These suspended nanoseconds also occur with relentless frequency in virtually all our interpersonal communications. HOW we decide what to do in the space of this interval is what gets most of us into – and out of – trouble. Do we let the “unmanaged and limited nature of our personality”¹ --- the reactive and habitual parts of us – make the call (pedal to the metal), or do we heed the more conscious and reflective internal guide (apply the brakes)?

Noticing
doesn't
have an
opinion;
it's a stance
of curiosity.

Most of us are pretty unconscious about how we make such decisions; we just do it, that's all. Therein lies the rub: if we aren't even curious about what goes into that split-second decision-making formula, we're on autopilot and invariably prone to impulse (and accidents). The autopilot is driving the bus, not us.

Becoming intensely curious, **noticing** what's going on at the subconscious level, is the first and most essential skill in self-awareness.² We're aiming to see ourselves accurately as we typically behave “in the moment” -- that infinitesimal moment of suspended action. Without this ability to observe, we can't anticipate or plan our next move. We're operating at the whim of our habits and immediate emotions. (Senator Joe Wilson's “You lie!” outburst during President Obama's Presidential address to Congress comes to mind...) When we are able to see and **anticipate** our patterns of thought and behavior, particularly under stress, the door is opened to making conscious -- and usually better – choices. We're back in the driver's seat.

¹ "It is the unmanaged and limited nature of our personality that causes us stress, conflict and suffering in work and relationships. Thus, managing personal reactivity is fundamental to giving our work and personal lives meaning and fulfillment." David Daniels, M.D. Stanford University Medical School, Author, An Essential Enneagram.

² “Self-awareness is not an attention that gets carried away by emotions, over-reacting and amplifying what is perceived. Rather, it is a neutral mode that maintains self-reflectiveness even amidst turbulent emotions.” -----Daniel Goleman, Emotional Intelligence, 1995



“Responsibility”:
The Ability to
CHOOSE a
Response

Response-Ability Vs. Reactivity

Start honing the practice of self-awareness by looking at your own reactionary tendencies in specific situations, beginning with those that don't involve other people. Being **Response-Able** rather than **reactive** compels us to slow down, look and listen. When we catch and observe ourselves just about to run the red light (do something risky, act on an impulse), we'll usually find an **emotion** driving the urge. Sometimes it's **fear, impatience, or anxiety** (“I can't be late!”). Sometimes it's **excitement, anger, bravado, or sense of duty** (“I've got to get there first!” “I will NOT tolerate xyz!” “If I don't get there in time,....”) The point is that an emotion is driving your choice to gun it or not, take action or heed caution... NOT the thought alone.

In any relationship between two people, slowing and stopping at the yellow light means becoming a curious and non-judgmental observer of interactions, **as they are occurring**. Suppose your boss is talking to you with a frown and in a louder-than-usual voice. Even the most self-aware people will likely, at first, wonder “Why's he yelling at ME??” We immediately, automatically and unconsciously, revert to default habits of reacting in one or all of at least 6 ways, by

1. assigning him a motive (“He must think I'm....”)³
2. denying or minimizing what we see/hear/feel (“He's just having a bad day.”)
3. defending ourselves (“Not MY problem: HIS boss changed the deadline.”)
4. assuming blame (“I must have screwed up again.”)
5. assigning blame (“HE's put himself in this position!”)
6. retreating (Becoming invisible...“I'm outta here.”)

It's important to note that ALL of these reactions are driven by emotions that reside within US; they are not driven by anything the boss has actually said or done! Read that sentence again. The only thing we know for sure is that he appears to be frowning and speaking loudly. We summarize the incoming verbal and non-verbal data and assign a meaning and react. So our reactions are actually based on FEELINGS, not facts: we may feel threatened, hurt, angry, accused, defenseless, afraid, etc....These EMOTIONS are what then lead to our (sometimes regrettable) BEHAVIOR – to deny, defend, blame...etc.

The most Response-Able of us [in our best moments...] are self-aware and won't jump to action. We might sense some discomfort, but we'll PAUSE to notice and observe that discomfort -- with curiosity, not judgment – to explore exactly what we see and feel in that moment.

Noticing doesn't have an opinion; it's a stance of neutral curiosity and inquiry. Noticing doesn't ask “why?” It asks “what?”

³ Referred to by psychologists as “Fundamental Attribution Error: assuming that others do contrary things because it's in their makeup or the actually enjoy doing them.” – Kerry Patterson, et al, *Crucial Confrontations*, 2005,

...choosing NOT to react immediately IS a response.

- ❖ **What's** happening right now?
- ❖ **What** am I feeling right this minute?
- ❖ **What** are my assumptions?
- ❖ **What** don't I know?
- ❖ **What's** my motive in responding?
- ❖ **What's** his frown all about?

Asking these questions of ourselves is stopping at the yellow light. "John seems upset and it feels like it's about me and I'm feeling worried...but I don't really know what's bothering him." Observing, and then choosing NOT to react immediately IS a response. Usually a good one.

Then, after a bit and the metaphorical light turns green, we might proceed with caution and **Say What We See** and **Ask a Question**: "John...you seem upset. Are you angry with me about something?" (Then be pleasantly surprised to learn that no, he's not angry with you. He had an argument with his wife this morning AND the IRS is auditing him...)



Warning Signs

Watch for the most prevalent clue that Reactivity, instead of Response-Ability, is driving the bus. The clue will often come in the form of a familiar but often very subtle **physical** sensation of urgency or discomfort. You might feel a warm flush or tingling, a quickening of your heart rate, a tightening in your belly, or a catch in your throat, your eyes blinking or moistening, holding your breath, or wiggling your foot... ***These physiological sensations are the evidence of emotions.*** It's the emotion that then triggers an unconscious alarm clock-like message in our brains:

"EMERGENCY! DO SOMETHING! FIX THIS! ESCAPE! RUN! FIGHT! DEFEND! REJECT!"

The trick to increasing self-awareness and emotional intelligence is to interrupt this pattern. We have to retrain ourselves to:
1.) recognize feelings and thoughts as they occur, &
2.) interrupt the urge to react



STOPPING AT THE YELLOW LIGHT MEANS:

You, not your emotions, need to be in charge.

ENGAGING in curiosity; avoiding assigning motives, assumptions, blame, accusations

LOOKING for the hidden emotion in you and how it triggers your thoughts/actions

LISTENING for the hidden emotion in others and how it triggers your thoughts/actions

OWNING your part in communication by becoming more response-able

WAITING before you speak, or choosing to say nothing at all under stress

In general, saying and doing NOTHING whatsoever (except to observe) in that split second interval between taking the cautious or risky route is sound practice and responsible action.⁴ While waiting at the yellow light, notice the feelings of impatience, anger and irritation that suddenly hijack your thoughts and attention. Then, **interrupt this pattern** -- and here's the hard part -- by *deciding and choosing to override them*. Re-focus, deliberately.⁵ This is being Response-Able. This is what self-awareness and self-management looks like. These are the cornerstones of 'yellow light wisdom' and the markers of high emotional intelligence.

**"Whenever I wish to move
or to speak,
first I shall examine my
state of mind,
And firmly act in a suitable
way.
Whenever my mind
becomes attached or angry,
I shall not react, nor shall I
speak;
I shall remain mum and
unmoved like a tree."
Shenteyida,
6th Century Tibetan Monk**

Simple Hijack-Stoppers

1. Breathe deeply and slowly...inhale and exhale for 3 – 6 breaths (noisily, if you're alone).
2. Alter your posture; straighten your spine; stretch
3. Think of 3 things you are exceptionally grateful for, today
4. Study the angle of the sun and shadows, or slant of the rain, nuances of the face in front of you.
5. Count backwards from 100.
6. See the word "WAIT" on the forehead of the person in front of you.
7. Send someone dear to you a telepathic kiss.
8. Design a clever bumper sticker that captures what's going on.
9. Make up a sit-com story about the people in the car front of you
10. Recite The Serenity Prayer ⁶

⁴ There are times, of course, when it's imperative NOT to dawdle at the yellow light. First responders (professional emergency workers) are running red lights all the time. But they are *especially* response-able and skilled in neutral and careful observational assessment and appropriate response. They have to be; it's a form of self-mastery that their own and others' lives depend on.

⁵ Investigate and practice "tapping" and other emotional freedom techniques (EFT...see emofree.com -- but not while you're driving ☺)

⁶ "Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."