

Your first position

Recognizing and Managing Default Responses

By John Lonergan*

My initial experience of what I call “first position” involved a bookshop owner in Melbourne Australia. I shopped there regularly, usually to buy books recommended by a friend or colleague. Every time – really, every time – I asked about a particular book, his response was identical. He would frown, contort his face into a kind of diagonal shape, and announce, “I don’t think we have that” as he turned to check his computer.

Now, sometimes he was right, and sometimes he wasn’t. But his initial reaction – his first position – was always the same.

In my work with groups, I began to notice that my bookshop owner did not have a monopoly on first position. I noticed that many people had a consistent initial response. On the occasions when I explored it with an individual, it was always a revelation to them. Their consistent, predictable and often dysfunctional first position was entirely unconscious.

I wondered if there were groupings or categories of first position. My observations and analysis continue; for now, here are some of the categories of first position I have seen in groups:

- The Silo-ist, whose first position focuses on how what has been said will affect them. Examples include, “you mean across the whole company, or just your division?” or “that certainly won’t work in Finance.”
- The Devil’s Advocate, seeking to find the hole or crack in what has been said – “surely that would crash the system,” or “we just don’t have the distribution to make that happen.”
- The Scrooge, using cost as the hammer to thump every idea – “that’s not even budgeted for,” or “we just cut front desk staff, and now you’re saying we need more admin!!!”
- The Sniper, who finds a way to oppose everything said by a particular person in the group who they don’t like/respect. (Note: I was once a sniper; when the person I was targeting approached me, I denied it emphatically. Then, as we talked about it, I realized that it had in fact been happening. A 30 minute conversation fixed the problem).
- The “High Moral Grounder,” who invokes organization values as a weapon – “our customers won’t like this at all,” or “how does this fit with our values statement?”
- The Self-doubter, who is never quite sure that they “get it” – “err.....sorry, can you explain that again?”

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It is important to note that each of the above responses, other than the sniper, will be valid and necessary in many or perhaps all serious group discussions. However, if an individual adopts one of them as their first position, it is likely to detract from the quality of the group dynamic.

It is important also to say that not everyone has a first position. Many people demonstrate wide and appropriate range of responses, and that's a wonderful thing.

In writing this brief and work-in-progress paper, my objective is focus on you – the reader – as an individual. Do you have a first position? If you are not sure, who could you ask for feedback? How can you find ways to “catch yourself” falling into a first position?

Just being aware of the phenomenon has helped me. I hope it helps you.

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