

Above and Below The Line

Imagine you are in the car, driving along happily, when from out of nowhere someone cuts dangerously in front of you. You are forced to brake quickly to avoid an accident. How would you react? Like most people you would probably react in one of the traditional ways: a heavy hand on the horn, a tirade of abuse, the flashing of headlights, or all three of the above.

This typical reaction to a typical situation is a classic example of what we call an automatic response. It's a 'default' behaviour: we don't consciously think about honking, swearing or flashing headlights – we just do it.

Now think about how, at some time in the past, you've approached a conversation about your performance with a manager you didn't get along with. Did you go in with an open mind, or were you on the defensive from the word 'go'? Did you find yourself fairly quickly defending yourself, regardless of what the manager said? Most of us have been in this situation at some stage.

What is happening in this situation is very similar to what is happening in the road-rage scenario. The difference in the workplace is that instead of horn-honking, the automatic response to being challenged or criticised is defensiveness, denial, blame or justification.

In both these cases – the car and the workplace – there's a good chance that, on later reflection, you recognise that your behaviour was ultimately unnecessary and unhelpful. But you also wonder whether it is really possible to avoid these situations. After all, the responses are automatic, aren't they?

The truth is that it *is* possible to change your responses to both these situations, but doing so can require a substantial amount of work.

The first step is to understand what is going on here.

In our work we draw a line – the 'line of choice' – between the default, automatic responses to challenging situations and the more emotionally healthy option of a thoughtful and constructive response to them. We say that automatic responses are 'below the line' while constructive responses are 'above the line'.

Notice that we use the word 'choice' here. For ultimately there is a personal choice to be made between operating above or below the line, even though it may not feel like it as our hand hits the horn or the excuses start flowing.

The tricky part is that making that choice takes some training and practice, especially when you consider that making that choice has to be done very quickly. American psychotherapist and author Tara Bennett-Goleman calls it the 'magic quarter second': the time between when our brain absorbs a situation and our body reacts to it.

Remarkably, despite such a momentary timeframe, there are ways we can train ourselves to operate 'above the line' no matter what the other driver (or the manager, for that matter) causes us to do or say. In part two of this blog topic we'll look at how that can be done.

Let's explore some ways on how you can improve your ability to operate 'above the line'.

The two steps suggested below both require a degree of self-reflection, however they offer alternatives to 'default' responses that might currently exist.

The first step is to 'calibrate' your understanding of above and below the line reactions by drawing on your own experiences.

Start by remembering a situation in which you've been working with a person or a group and everything just seemed to 'click'. Think about what was going on in that situation, about how people were behaving. Was there an overriding sense of respect for each other? Was everyone actively listening to each other? Did each person take responsibility for their own input, and for their own role? Did people tend to think before they responded? Were you doing all these things yourself?

These are the typical behaviours we see when people are operating 'above the line'. If you can recall a good example of such a situation you'll know exactly what I mean.

Recall a situation in which you've worked with another person or group but things were not working nearly so well. A situation in which the default positions of everyone involved – perhaps including yourself – were defensiveness, blame, denial and/or justification. Think about how people were responding to each other. Did it seem automatic? Were people quick to judge, snapping at each other, acting without thought?

I probably hardly need to explain what's going on here: that these are typical 'below the line' behaviours.

Now, if you were able to come up with good examples of these two relative extremes of behaviours above and below the 'line of choice', you will be able to start to analyse your responses to a broader range of situations. Have a go at it: look back on challenging situations you've faced in the last week or two – it doesn't matter how small or significant – and analyse your responses against the above 'calibration'.

The second step in training yourself to operate 'above the line' more often is basically an extension of the first. Once you are adept at recognising above and below the line behaviours in yourself with the advantage of hindsight, you will be able to start doing the same thing with more immediacy.

Your aim here is to become more aware of your emotions as things are unfolding around you, rather than after the event. In other words, your aim is to be increasingly 'present', or 'in the moment'.

With practice, you'll find that you can do this. As you do so you'll also find that you can 'catch' yourself in the 'magic quarter second' I referred to last time. With increasing frequency, you'll be able to think before you act – to make a choice before you respond rather than responding automatically.

The acid test? When someone cuts you off in heavy traffic and instead of hitting the horn you are able to silently let the situation slide with no more than a wry grin. Once you can do this, you are on your way to increased emotional health and better working relationships.

Taking Personal Responsibility

Above/Below The Line

Personal Responsibility



Line of
Choice

Blame
Deny
Justify
Defend