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# Your GPS for Relationships

## *(Brief Version)*

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In 2011 three women driving a rented SUV were heading back to their hotel from a conference not far from Seattle. It was around midnight, and they were using the car's GPS to navigate. It guided them down a dark road into what appeared to be a puddle but turned out to be a swamp. Trusting their GPS, they kept going, losing control of the vehicle before abandoning it and wading to shore. They escaped, safe but wet. By the time the vehicle stopped, it was completely submerged<sup>1</sup>. Confidence in a flawed map had resulted in chaos.

GPS maps have three critical data sets: where you are, where you want to go, and the terrain between them. Like GPSs, people have maps too—maps we hold in our minds. While largely unconscious, these maps also have information about where we are, where we want to go, and the terrain in between. As with a GPS, when our mental maps are flawed we can end up in swamps. But unlike those of a GPS, the maps in our minds are constantly changing. Our maps are not just maps of the physical world. They are also maps of our relationships with other people and the goals we want to reach.

Our maps are deeply influenced by what we believe and how we feel about our relationships and goals. Forces inside of you—e.g., anger, resentment, fear, and desire—can reshape your maps, sometimes unconsciously. More than once I have found myself making a mess of a conversation because my map of what someone

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<sup>1</sup> staff, Seattle Times. "Women Trust GPS, Drive SUV into Mercer Slough." The Seattle Times, June 15, 2011.

was saying was very different from what they actually meant.

The challenge for all of us—leaders as well as collaborators—is to take accountability for the maps in our minds, make sure they align as accurately as possible with the current reality, and use them to navigate to success. This can be quite difficult, because our beliefs and emotions often over-ride the data we’re receiving. Reworking maps means working honestly and humbly with our emotions and beliefs.

In my work with executives, managers, teams, and individual contributors, I’ve found three practices that enable people to accurately observe their maps, alter them, and discover new and more effective ways to navigate from where they are to where they want to be.

- ▶ **Breathing:** Everything you think, feel and do is rooted first in your physical self. Breathing properly has a powerful regulatory effect on your physical, emotional and mental states. It is often the fastest and most effective way to regulate your emotions, calm your thoughts, and adjust your maps. While it sounds simple, learning to breathe properly is the foundation of managing your emotions.
- ▶ **Self-reflection:** Examine your current map and ask yourself the following questions. Reflecting on these questions requires a clear mind, and thus the necessity for proper breathing.
  - What assumptions am I making about the person with whom I am interacting? Especially, what assumptions am I making about their intention?
  - What questions could I ask that would either validate or change my assumptions?
  - What is my emotional state, and how is that influencing my map? Can I change my emotional state to arrive at a more effective map?
  - Is my map likely to lead me to a desirable outcome, or into a swamp?
- ▶ **Self-inventory:** Consider how your physical, verbal, and emotional behavior may be influencing the other person’s map of you and the relationship.

Do your words and actions lead them to accurately understand your concerns and ideas, or trigger them to become reactive and defensive?

Changing the maps in your mind is a powerful tool for navigating your life. If your emotional state goes from angry to curious, your map of a relationship may change, perhaps from describing an antagonistic relationship to describing a collaborative one. That new map will reveal new ways of responding and interacting that did not exist on the former map. And when your map changes, it is likely to change the map in the person with whom you are interacting as well.

These can be difficult practices. We all have an impulse to insist that our maps are the “right” maps. But that insistence often creates chaos. With steady practice you can learn to see and refine your maps to more accurately reflect the world, and to navigate the world more effectively. That is a lifelong journey that makes life fun and interesting as well as challenging. Traveling this road is as simple and profound as learning to keep your inner state from distorting your personal and professional maps. When that happens, you are the master of that state.