

*Relationships are the foundation of all aspects of an organization's success—efficiency, effectiveness, employee engagement, customer satisfaction, and more. Don't let them go south.*

# Your GPS for Relationships

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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.

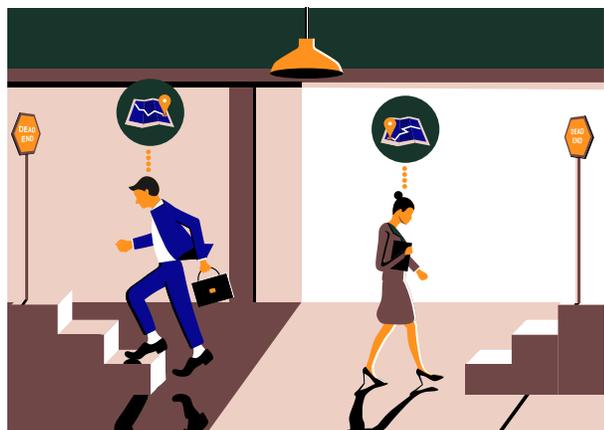


illustration: Ariel Sun

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. Your beliefs about how people behave are elements of the terrain you must navigate to achieve your goals. As with a GPS, when our mental maps are flawed we can end up in swamps. More than once I have found myself making a mess of a conversation because my map of what someone was saying was very different from what they actually meant. 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.

Human intentions, desires, and relationships are highly dynamic, as are our ideas, emotions, and physical sensations. Consequently, our maps are undergoing constant revision through a complex process that blends all of this into a vision of reality. Forces inside of you—e.g., anger, resentment, stress, excitement, or desire—can reshape your maps, sometimes unconsciously. If your inner state goes from angry to curious, your map of a relationship may change, perhaps from describing an antagonistic relationship to describing a collaborative one.

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

That new map will reveal new ways of responding to and interacting in the relationship. It will reveal places you can go that did not exist on the former map. You will always be guided by a map. The question is whether it will be one that leads you to your goals or into a swamp.

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 challenging, 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.

A few years ago, I worked as a consultant and coach with Anne and Leo, two leaders in a global manufacturing company. Anne was assigned to lead the implementation of a major new system that would provide a single platform of data and software for all of the marketing departments throughout the company.

The head of the Marketing Department in the Latin America Division had recently been replaced. Leo, the new head, had been leading the department for about three months. Anne knew that a large technology project for Leo's department had ended in failure shortly before he took over. The failure produced significant financial costs for the department and nothing to show for it. The IT leader in charge managed the project poorly, and had been let go.

When Anne was assigned to lead the new project she quickly reached out to the heads of marketing departments in all of the company's divisions, including Leo. She left him a voice mail, asking to set up a conference call to discuss the new system. Anne is quite direct in her communication style. Her message was short and to the point, saying she was leading the project and she'd like to discuss the project deliverables. After waiting a week and not hearing back, Anne sent him an email asking if he'd received her voice mail. Leo replied with a short message saying he had not had time to review the project.

Things went downhill from there. Anne found Leo extremely difficult to work with. She knew that IT projects were most successful when she and her team were involved early in the requirements phase, helping business people understand what technology can do for them. But Leo seemed to block every effort Anne made to get involved. Anne does not like to waste time and she hates inefficiency; she let Leo know she was frustrated.

When Leo came into his new role, the Marketing Department was in disarray. The failed IT project was one of many breakdowns the department had experienced over the course of several years under its former leader. The Latin America Division of the company had been losing money, and the Marketing Department's poor leadership and management were seen as a primary source of the problem. Leo quickly realized he would have to replace most of his leadership team. To top it all off he had never worked in Latin America and was struggling with understanding the culture.

When Anne reached out to him, Leo was not aware that there was a new technology project planned. He had heard stories of the previously failed attempt to implement a new system. He wrongly assumed that Anne had led that project, and was attempting to revive it. His map of Anne and their relationship was that she was part of the failed past, from which he was trying to help the department recover. Leo saw Anne as a barrier to success and avoided interacting with her. The software project she was working on was not even on his map of where he wanted to go.

After several months of fruitless back and forth, Anne’s map of Leo portrayed him as obstinate, uncooperative, and ineffective. Her map of where she wanted to get to had huge missing pieces. She wanted a successful implementation of the software, but the specifics of what success looked like were not filled in, since they were dependent on Leo partnering with her to define them. Her map of the relationship indicated hostile territory. She believed that in this terrain her ability to succeed was threatened, and with it, her professional identity. She was becoming convinced that, with Leo, there was no path from where she was to where she wanted to go. Their flawed maps were leading them into chaos.

I knew Anne and Leo to be good, hard-working individuals and effective leaders. They both cared deeply about the company and wanted to forge high-functioning, effective relationships with everyone with whom they interacted. And yet when Anne’s boss asked me to coach them in their relationship, each believed it would be impossible to work with the other. Listening to their opinions of one another, I felt as though they were describing individuals I had never met.

Intentionally reworking the map of your relationship with another person is a powerful way to quickly change the dynamics of your interactions. But doing so requires you to be aware of your own current map, and of how you have formed that map. And it requires a willingness to take in new information to update your map.

I started my work with Anne and Leo by having individual conversations with each of them, in which they described their interactions with one another. That helped me see the current map each of them held. We then explored the possibility that their maps might be inaccurate. They were skeptical, but open. By examining and questioning their assumptions about one another, we began to craft new maps of a different relationship.



Illustration: Ariel Sun

These conversations caused each of them to begin putting aside the beliefs and emotions that had grown over the past few months. While trust was not yet part of the landscape, the possibility of trust was beginning to emerge. Our next step was to bring them together. Both were hesitant and somewhat fearful, but willing to try. Anne in particular believed that Leo would not be honest about his true feelings; she had developed a belief that he was always looking to increase his own power, and didn’t care much about the quality of relationships.

Given that they were in offices thousands of miles apart and couldn’t meet face to face, we set up the meeting as a video conference and asked them to come prepared to talk about what they wanted rather than what had happened. I asked Leo to go first. Anne was surprised to hear him apologize for having misunderstood her role and express a sincere desire to develop an effective relationship with her. He wasn’t the power monger she had imagined. As she listened and asked questions, her map of Leo began to morph. When it was her turn to speak she trusted Leo more than she had at the start of the conversation, and spoke more openly than she had originally intended. She described the relationship she wanted with Leo—one of trust, alignment and collaboration. By the time the conversation ended, both of their maps had begun to change, having fewer barriers and more opportunities. Equally important, their maps were beginning to correspond, describing the terrain in similar ways.



Human beings have the remarkable ability to invent—and modify—many aspects of their internal maps. It is not always easy. It sometimes requires deep self-examination that can be uncomfortable. It requires that you become aware not just of what you think, but also how you feel, physically and emotionally, and take accountability for how your feelings affect your awareness and judgment. This takes humility, introspection, creativity, and compassion—key leadership traits that everyone agrees are desirable, yet difficult to cultivate, especially in the fast-paced, high-stress world in which many of us live.

It sometimes takes months or even years to deeply rework a relationship. Fortunately, Anne and Leo were both practiced in self-examination, and their egos were strong enough that they could admit mistakes and modify their maps. When I spoke with them recently and asked them how they had effected the change, they described three practices that made the new maps possible. These sound simple but it takes practice and self-discipline to become skilled with them.

- ▶ **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. I taught each of them this practice in our one-on-one conversations. I explore effective breathing in an upcoming blog post.
- ▶ **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?

Our beliefs and emotions create the maps of our inner GPS. Flawed maps can create chaos. While our maps will never be perfect, they can made more and more effective. If you enter into a conversation from a position of defensiveness and hostility, the chances of arriving at the outcome you want is small. If you enter from a place of authentic commitment to a value you care about, with compassion and curiosity towards the people with whom you are working, your chances are exponentially greater.



illustration: Ariel Sun

Thriving in life and work means cultivating the humility, awareness, courage, and creativity to constantly examine your maps. Effective leaders, as well as collaborators, hold themselves accountable for the quality and effectiveness of their maps. 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.

