



The Left-Hand Column

You can tell that you're doing the right thing if it feels effortless.

What is a "left-hand column"?

Chris Argyris referred to a "left-hand column" as a second conversation that goes on when we're in dialogue with another person—a conversation that goes on in our heads.

When you pay close attention, you'll notice that when you're speaking you're running another conversation in your head—both whilst you're speaking and whilst the other party is speaking. This conversation flows alongside the verbalised conversation.

Reference: Overcoming Organization Defences (Prentice-Hall, 1990) by Chris Argyris.

Why is it useful to have an awareness of the left-hand column?

When you're more aware of the conversation that's going on in your left hand column, you get good insights into your own thinking—and where it contributes to you not getting what you want.

Also, vague statements, or statements that don't accurately portray your thinking, make conversations far less effective and far less efficient.

We're more real when we tell the truth about what we think and how we feel—and trust levels are heightened.

When we speak openly and candidly we form better relationships with others.

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Left-Hand Column Exercise

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- Step 1** Choose a difficult recurring problem—one of those tough, interpersonal ones that keeps on coming up in your life. For example when:
- You believe you're being treated harshly or unfairly
 - You believe your point of view is being ignored or discounted
 - You believe a crucial problem is not receiving due consideration.
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- Step 2** Think of a recent specific interpersonal interaction when that problem arose. Recall:
- Where you were
 - How you were feeling
 - What was your body language at the time
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- Step 3** Use the "Left-Hand Column Exercise" pages overleaf.
In the right hand column write down what was actually said or done, the words that were spoken by you and by the other person.
Leave the left-hand column blank until after you've finished filling in the right-hand column.
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- Step 4** Write in the left-hand column, alongside each specific comment, **what you were thinking and feeling** when each of the comments were made.
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Left-Hand Column Exercise, continued

Step 5 Use your left-hand column as a resource to help you examine your thinking in your scenario. Ask the following types of questions about your thinking:

- What were your intended outcomes, and did you achieve them?
 - How might my comments have contributed to any difficulty that I experienced during the conversation?
 - What prevented me from disclosing, at the time, what was in my left-hand column?
 - What assumptions was I making about the other person or people?
 - What were the costs of operating this way?
What were the payoffs?
 - What can I do differently next time?
 - How can I use my left-hand column as a resource to improve our communications?
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Your Left-Hand Column

Emotions pass like clouds across the sky. They're to be noticed, accepted, acknowledged, and allowed to flow on.

What I'm Thinking...

(or "What I Thought")

What Is Being Said...

(or "What Was Said")

e.g. Me—Yikes, we're in serious trouble with this project—all because they pay no attention to the time lines we committed to.

e.g. Me—I'm beginning to get a bit concerned about this project slipping behind.

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Your Left-Hand Column (continued)

What I'm Thinking...
(or "What I *Thought*")

What Is Being Said...
(or "What *Was* Said")

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Other Notes on Your Left-Hand Column

Bring yourself fully into bloom. Don't just weed your garden.

Disclosing Your Left-Hand Column in a Non-Blaming Way

Blaming

You annoy me when you say that...

You're ignoring me...

We're not going anywhere with this meeting...

You've resented me saying this in the past...

Not Blaming

I feel annoyed when I hear you say that...

I don't think I'm being heard. What's going on in your mind?

I'd like us to make faster progress than we're currently making...

I don't think that my comments have been welcomed in the past...

Disclose Your Left-Hand Column Real-Time

Do it in real-time, that is share what's in your left-hand column when it's happening.

Also, ask the other party to disclose what's in their left-hand column by inviting them to tell you how they're feeling.

And remember, practice makes perfect. (Chris Argyris once said "It takes about as much practice as learning to play tennis.")

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