HOW TO UNDERSTAND AFFECTIVE PRESENCE:
ONE OF THE KEYS TO THE SECRET KNOWLEDGE OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

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Have you ever known someone who could walk into a room and suddenly brighten the room by their presence? Have you ever noticed a person who could enter an event and soon others would be uncomfortable? One type of person energizes and excites others, whereas the other suppresses or stresses others. When interacting with others, fictional Bill tends to elicit enthusiasm in others, while hypothetical Bob is prone to make others feel anxious or tense. According to Hector Madrid, Ph.D. (2020), if these effects are consistent over time and independent of the specific situation, they are known as *affective presence*.

The intangible but powerful quality known as affective presence is defined as the consistent and stable feelings that a person tends to provoke with their interaction partners, and it is a psychological process related to emotional contagion (Eisenkraft & Elfenbein, 2010; Madrid et al., 2018; Madrid, 2020). *Emotional contagion* refers to the spontaneous spread of emotions. Researchers Noah Eisenkraft, Ph.D. and Hillary Anger Elfenbein, Ph.D. describe the importance of affective presence, particularly *positive affective presence*, as one of the primary determinants of what makes people feel comfortable around another person. People who consistently make others feel good are more central to their social networks, are more likely to have their classmates consider them to be friends, and they receive more romantic interest from others in speed-dating. In the workplace, leaders who make other people feel good by their very presence have teams that are better at sharing information, which leads to more creativity and innovation. Subordinates are more likely to voice their ideas to a leader with positive affective presence (Eisenkraft & Elfenbein, 2010).

For conceptual purposes, Figure 1 illustrates the interaction between *strength* (strong or subtle) and *polarity* (positive or negative) of affective presence. Positive affective presence can be active (strong) or passive (subtle). Negative affective presence can be active (strong) or passive (subtle).

Impact Message

The contemporary concept of *affective presence* is similar to Donald Kiesler's (1979, 1988) concept of the *impact message*. Kiesler's (1973) original concept of *impact message* referred to the covert behaviors, affective or cognitive in nature, elicited upon receipt of another person's interpersonal messages. This concept was foreshadowed by anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1958), who proposed that all messages have a *content* and a *relational* (e.g., digital and analog) interpretation. It is the relational component that has impact.

At the time I knew him, Dr. Kiesler (1933-2007) was a Professor of Psychology and Director of the Clinical Psychology Doctoral Program at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia. Kiesler's contributions to psychotherapy research left an important legacy that continues to guide researchers (Wagner & Safran, 2010). Many times in my doctoral training, I heard "the Don" say things like "A person cannot not communicate" and "Saying nothing is saying something." The term *impact* in this context is represented in in Quadrant III (Encoder-Decoder) in Kiesler's (1979) model of communication. In Kiesler's model, the *encoder* is the sender/speaker, while the *decoder* is the receiver/listener (Anchin & Keisler, 1982). An encoder's impact on the decoder can be positive, negative, or somewhere in between.

Influencing Others

Language can be defined as a system of symbols arranged in a rule-governed manner for the purpose of communicating with others. Communication consists of verbal or nonverbal behavior—whether intentional or unintentional—that influences the attitudes, behaviors, or thoughts of another individual or a group of individuals. Some critics argue that to intentionally influence others is a form of *manipulation*, which these critics view as intrinsically unethical. However, manipulation can be defined in either a positive manner or negative manner. Positive manipulation refers to handling or controlling a tool, mechanism, or procedure—typically in a skillful manner. Negative manipulation refers to controlling or influencing a person or situation cleverly, deceptively, or unscrupulously. For the present discussion, manipulation simply refers to affecting, impacting, or influencing a person, group, or interpersonal situation in a skillful manner. It is not the skill but rather it is the intention (e.g., benevolence or maleficence) and the respect for autonomy (e.g., democratic/egalitarian or authoritarian/dictatorial) that determines the ethicality of influencing others. Ethical influence is based on benevolence and respect for the other person's autonomy and right of self-determination.

When affecting, influencing, or modifying the actions or behavior of others, there are always two important questions:
1. Ethicality: Is the method ethical?
2. Efficacy: Is the method effective?

Awareness and Intentions

The difference between a speaker's *intent* and the receiver's experienced *impact* can be significant. If we accept that we affect, influence, or impact others in either a positive or negative manner, then we can do so either intentionally (consciously) or unintentionally (unconsciously). There are those who do not like the idea of the *unconscious*, as if it

were some dark, murky entity rather than a theoretical construct. For our purposes here, it is simply a term that refers to actions and motivations that may be outside of our awareness. The impact of our actions can affect others intentionally or unintentionally as well as benevolently or malevolently. If we are aware of these options, then we have choices.

When we interact with a person, we can leave them a little better or a little worse than before we encountered them. It is the basis of adage that we can leave a person a little better than they were before they crossed out path that day.

Figure 2 illustrates how the two dimensions of *awareness* (consciously or unconsciously) and *intentions* (benevolently or malevolently) interact to reflect four ways to affect, influence, or otherwise "manipulate" other people or groups. The quadrant of Conscious Positive Benevolence helps illustrate the psychological principle of enabling positivity: [1]

> *Enabling positivity* refers to engaging in behaviors that encourage another person's positive behavior. People who enable positive behaviors lift and encourage others—leaving people, places, and things better than they found them (Doverspike, 2018, p. 4).

Conceptual Models

To paraphrase the British statistician George P. Box, Ph.D. "Essentially, all models are wrong, but some are useful. [2] The point here is that we should focus more on whether something can be applied in a useful manner rather than debating endlessly whether the model is correct in every single case in the known universe.

Interaction Between Strength and Polarity of Affective Response

	Affective Polarity	
	Positive (R+)	Negative (P+)
Active (Strong)	**Strong Positive Affective Presence** This type of person actively makes other people feel good, even if he or she is personally feeling anxious or sad. This type of person can walk into a room and others feel uplifted and want to be in the presence of this person. To use a metaphor, they "radiate an aura and charisma" in the room. They tend to bring out the best in other people. They leave others a lot better than they found them. They bless people, places, and events by their entrance into the room. Response by Others: Active attraction (moving toward promptly)	**Strong Negative Affective Presence** This type of person actively makes other people feel bad, even if he or she is personally feeling good. This type of person can walk into a room and others clench their teeth clench, roll their eyes, or try to avoid them. To use a metaphor, they tend to "suck the life out of a room." They tend to bring out the worst in people. They leave others a lot worse than they found them. They bless people, places, and events by their exit from the room. Response by Others: Active avoidance (moving away promptly)
Passive (Subtle)	**Subtle Positive Affective Presence** This type of person is more passive in making other people feel safe and relaxed, even if he or she is personally feeling anxious or sad. This type of person might be subtle entering a room, but others feel calm and safe around them. To use a metaphor, they tend to "leave a subtle pleasant scent" in the room. They tend to have an affirming or stabilizing influence. They leave others a little better than they found them. They bless people, places, and events by their entrance into the room. Response by Others: Passive attraction (moving toward slowly)	**Subtle Negative Affective Presence** This type of person is more passive in making other people feel tense or on edge, even if he or she is feeling good. This type of person might be stealth when entering a room, but others will feel uneasy or uncomfortable around them. To use a metaphor, they tend to "leave a foul odor" in the room. They tend to have a provocative or destabilizing influence. They leave others a little worse than they found them. They bless people, places, and events by their exit from the room. Response by Others: Passive avoidance (moving away slowly)

The row label **Strength** appears in the leftmost column spanning both rows.

Figure 1. This table illustrates the interaction between polarity (positive, negative) and strength (strong, subtle) of affective presence.

Interaction Between Awareness and Intentions of Actions

		Intentions / Motivations	
		Positive Benevolence	**Negative Malevolence**
Awareness	**Conscious**	"Conscious benevolence" Consciously praising others Consciously encouraging others Intentionally lifting up others Intentionally accepting others Examples: benevolent leaders (e.g., shepherds), active encouragers, cheerleaders, bridge builders **Consequences:** Increases target behavior	"Conscious malevolence" Consciously criticizing others Consciously discouraging others Intentionally putting down others Intentionally judging others harshly Examples: malevolent leaders (e.g., dictators), sociopaths, blamers, borderlines, narcissists, bridge burners **Consequences:** Decreases target behavior
	Unconscious	"Unconscious benevolence" Unconsciously praising others Unconsciously encouraging others Unintentionally lifting up others Unintentionally accepting others Examples: benevolent followers (e.g., sheep), passive encouragers, passive promotors, supporters, bridge maintainers **Consequences:** Increases target behavior	"Unconscious malevolence" Unconsciously criticizing others Unconsciously discouraging others Unintentionally putting down others Unintentionally judging others harshly Examples: malevolent followers (e.g., disruptors), critics, detractors, passive discouragers, passive provokers, bridge neglecters **Consequences:** Decreases target behavior

Figure 2. This table illustrates how the two dimensions of *awareness* and *intentions* interact to reflect four ways to affect, influence, or otherwise "manipulate" people (i.e., others or ourselves).

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NOTES

1. This concept (i.e., leaving people, places, and things better than we find them) is not original to me. Long before I became a so-called ethics professor, I learned ethics from hunters. During my days doing field trials and hunt tests with my retriever, I learned motto "Always leave the land better than we found it." The idea of "enabling positivity" may be closer to an original thought, even though many others have probably had it also. Although there is a tendency for therapists to use the word "enabling" in a pejorative manner (e.g., enabling addiction, enabling pathology), I think in more dimensional terms. In other words, there is *negative enabling* (as most therapists use the term with reference to contributing to maladaptive or pathological behavior) and *positive enabling* (which is what I describe in terms of "enabling positivity" such as causing, promoting, or contributing to adaptive, positive behaviors).

2. Although the concept predates his writings, the aphorism is usually attributed to the British statistician George Edward Pelham Box, Ph.D. (1919–2013). The adage first appeared in his 1976 article published in the Journal of the American Statistical Association. In his 1979 paper titled "Robustness in the strategy of scientific model building," the adage is used as a section heading on page 202. One of the greatest statistical minds of the 20th century, George Box earned a doctorate in Mathematics at the University of London in 1953. He was a Fellow of the Royal Society (FRS) and a statistician who worked in the areas of quality control, time-series analysis, design of experiments, and Bayesian inference.

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