



# WHERE'S YOUR TWISTED NEEDLE?

When I coach people, I sometimes use a little metaphor. Here it goes:

We all have a certain impact in our relationships, driven by the behaviours we choose – consciously or not. The idea is to compare this to piloting a plane. Not just any plane - one of these old jetliners, before the days of computerized flying, with a cockpit full of dozens and dozens of dials. For each of these gauges, we try to stay in the optimal zone: not too much, not too little, as with the green zone in the picture above. They represent the vast number of dimensions that determine our impact.

The trick is – for many of us, as in that picture, one of our needles is twisted. We believe we have a certain impact, but the world around us sees something quite different.

That can be on any of many different dimensions. Some of us unconsciously dial themselves down, and the world sees someone shy, unassertive, maybe conflict-avoidant. Some others are constantly looking to help out everyone around them, to the point of overburdening themselves, appearing frenetic and out of balance. Others yet unwillingly come across as rather arrogant or aggressive. The list of examples could go on and on, so typical yet so infinitely unique. Needless to say, none of that is really going in the direction of “optimum impact”.

So what can you do identify your own “twisted needle”? Usually, at least in rational terms, that’s the easy part. You’ll find the theme in the feedback you’ve been getting for a long time – and if you haven’t, it’s high time you ask for it. People keep telling it to you: “if only you were more...” “I wish you were a bit less...” In all likelihood, it’s all there, hiding in plain sight.

If it’s *that* obvious, how come you haven’t been able to figure out how to address it? In my experience, it is often about a hidden fear – or, as Daniel Ofman would put it, an “allergy”. When I coach people around the reasons why they can’t seem to get themselves to be more “X” (more assertive, or more open, or more demanding, or...), our joint exploration may eventually hit an emotional core. There is a sudden *cri du cœur*. “*I don’t want to be one of these guys!!*” Oh, that’s interesting. Which guys? What would you hate to be called? “*I’d never want anyone to see me as one of these people, so full of themselves, never paying attention to others*”. “*I’d hate to be called out as incompetent, out of my depth!*” “*This is a tough place. I can’t afford to look weak.*” “*Have you seen them? Always playing politics, never doing a real thing, and getting away with it?!*”

I smile inside when we are getting there. *Now we’re talking!* My little theory is, we can’t get ourselves to be more “X” because our worldview, our set of beliefs and values, is bent in a certain direction. We loath some negative opposite – when we pursue our exploration, the words can become harsh: “*Bullies!*” “*Selfish!*” “*Phoney!*” “*Losers!*” Inside this allergy, there is sometimes an element of anger towards certain behaviours, and most often a fear to do anything that could remotely resemble them.

It's these worldviews, and the associated emotions, that "twist our needle". We are so concerned about appearing "too much X" that we get pulled in the opposite direction. The more unconscious our fear is, the more powerful this magnetic field will be.

Around that point in the conversation, I share the idea of the "twisted needle". *"We've found your faulty dial, the one on which your needle gives you incorrect feedback. You're so repulsed at the thought of being called 'superficial' that you work 10 times harder. You go too far, you're exhausting yourself and your teams, and actually you know it, but you don't see any alternative – except becoming 'phoney', so you feel stuck."*

There is plenty to reflect on here, and good models to help <sup>(1)</sup>. It's great to explore the positives of the allergy, the gifts and the beauty of being more "X" – for example, the value that good "politicians" bring when it comes to getting win-win alignment around new ideas. But usually, I like to prompt my coachees into action. How about making it a game, experimenting with new behaviours?

Usually my coachees are so deeply invested in one side of the equation that I'm not concerned about nudging them in the other direction. *"When you hesitate, when you wonder if it's time to say stop – remember that your needle doesn't give the right information. Most people would have banged on the table a while ago. Give yourself permission to try it. Don't worry – we've been in a coaching conversation for many weeks now, and there's one thing I know for sure about you: however hard you try, you will NEVER become the Dictator you loathe!! And if you don't believe me, ask some trusted friends. Why don't you just try it a few times, and see what happens?"*

Every now and then, I bet with my coachees: not only will people find your new behaviour perfectly acceptable and 'normal', but it might well be that some will get back to you and whisper with a smile: *"Finally!"*

Keep experimenting. Be curious and persistent. Notice verbal and non-verbal reactions from others. Start with small but important steps, stay in touch with your own feelings, then raise your own bar as you grow more comfortable with these new behaviours. And most importantly – enjoy the journey!

Olivier Schobbens  
+32 4 75 69 48 52  
[olivier.schobbens@talent-alliance.com](mailto:olivier.schobbens@talent-alliance.com)



PS: Remember that we only see things through the lenses of our own worldviews, beliefs and moods. In my experience, it's best to explore your own "twisted needle" with the help of a trusted advisor, able to see things differently and prepared to give you frank feedback.

(1) Among the approaches that come to mind, the first one is Daniel Ofman's Core Quadrants (insufficiently known outside of the Netherlands and Belgium I feel). Barry Johnson's Polarity Maps are also interesting, as are the dialectics embedded in tools such as the Leadership Circle. Yet, I've found that many of my coachees enjoy getting started with the intuitive simplicity of the Twisted Needle. As one of them puts it, *"the unconscious understands simple things!"* ;-)