

Catalyst[©]

Catalyst is published every two months, for alumni of our seminars and workshops to remain connected, and for coaching clients, prospective clients, and other interested parties to learn about who we are and what we do. Also available electronically in *Writings* at www.DancingStar.com

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Diversity and Highly Sensitive People

This is the second in a four-part series on issues related to diversity.

What comes to mind when you see the phrase “Highly Sensitive People”? Whining weenies? They just need some discipline to shape them up? Obsessed with (yuck) that personal development stuff?

Or do you recognize them as an asset to be cherished? As some of history’s greatest artists, thinkers, visionaries, change makers? As the wise men and women who help a community find true cohesiveness?

Highly sensitive people (HSPs) are intense. They feel things deeply, and are drawn to exploring subjects – emotional, intellectual, psychological – in great depth. For people who are not so sensitive, or not sensitive in the same way, HSPs can feel like a pain in the butt.

So why should you, as a business leader, want to know about them?

In her book, **The Highly Sensitive Person**, Dr. Elaine Aron says that some 15 to 20% of the population are physiologically predisposed to extreme sensitivity. How many people does that represent in your organization? In your client base?

Highly sensitive people pick up on subtleties and nuances others miss. They sense when someone (a customer? a vital associate?) feels left out, stepped on, marginalized.

Highly sensitive people are like canaries in a mineshaft which sense

problems and danger before others. In today’s business environment, that can be a powerful competitive advantage.

Aron describes HSPs as “priestly advisors” having the wisdom needed to balance the aggressive energy of the warrior kings. Can you see where their strengths could be used in your organization?

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Aron and others who have studied this trait say that an HSP’s inherent strengths include loyalty, vigilance about quality, attention to detail, intuitive vision, giftedness, thoughtfulness to the needs of clients or customers, a mediating influence on the social climate in the workplace.

They are sensitive to all forms of sensory input. So whether it’s noxious fumes or bad lighting, an HSP’s sensitivity can prevent small issues from turning into big problems.

HSPs are, in a sense, another diversity population – a slice of your stakeholders who express themselves and their talents differently than what might be the “norm” in your company’s culture. To understand them is to be able to manage, utilize, include their strengths most effectively.

For instance, the highly sensitive person tends to absorb and process more information than others. This is both one of their great strengths and a potential weakness.

Absorbing and processing a lot of information at deep levels is vital, for instance, in strategic discussions and future planning.

However, HSPs also need to off-load periodically before taking on more. Otherwise they become overwhelmed, unable to perform effectively. This can give them a bad name, if not managed wisely.

And, to set the record straight, while it’s true that heightened sensitivity can co-exist with neurosis and/or dysfunction, they are separate traits. E.g. not all highly sensitive people are troubled or neurotic.

Highly sensitive people are at their best when they and the people around them appreciate the value of their innate intuitive capacities.

They are most effective when able to set boundaries before they hit overwhelm, and will benefit from having a buffer for all the stimuli and input coming at them.

These days we need to marshal all our resources to perform our best. That’s why we spend money on “soft” issues like diversity. Can you afford to ignore the contributions of perhaps 15 to 20% of your workforce, or the needs of that large a segment of your market, community, stakeholders? – *Deborah Huisken*

WHAT ARE YOU UP TO?

If you or people you know are committed to having an impact in the world, and can use some help to bring your unique talents to bear while staying on target amid myriad demands, contact Dancing Star Productions, phone: +1 413.367.9416. To be added to our newsletter mailing list, email: info@DancingStar.com, or visit us on the web at www.DancingStar.com.

The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift. - Albert Einstein



Catalyst – A Dancing Star Production
One must embrace the chaos within to give birth to a dancing star – adapted from Nietzsche

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Submissions

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Advertising

Rates and deadlines available on request.

RESOURCE CORNER

If you wonder if you or someone you know is highly sensitive, there is a self-test in Elaine Aron's book **The Highly Sensitive Person**, and at her website, www.hsperson.com.

Arbinger Institute's book **Leadership and Self-Deception** offers a practical approach for seeing others as people instead of as objects in our way, vehicles to be used to get us somewhere, or irrelevant.

Both books can be ordered at www.DancingStar.com by going to our Booklist.

Deb's Corner



When I first heard the term Highly Sensitive People, I groaned inwardly, "oh, puh-lease". Sounded wimpy to me.

Then I found myself at the bottom of a selection list with a group of colleagues in a recent training program. I got curious about what we all had in common. "High sensitivity" was suggested – I investigated. As I read the descriptions, I recognized myself in them (damn!).

I've lost count of how many times someone in my life has said to me *You're too intense. You worry too much. You're so sensitive. Lighten up.* So I decided to find out more, which took me to Austin, Texas and a workshop on highly sensitive people given by author Elaine Aron.

I found myself with mothers, a lawyer, a business consultant, an architectural designer, a nurse, and more. We had much in common.

For years, I took those observations about my sensitivity personally, and negatively. I sensed frustration in the observers, and felt I was bad or wrong for being that way. I tried to be different, wore my business suit or defensiveness like a shield, tried to fit with people around me.

For a long time I didn't realize I was doing it, and of course, it never worked. I also thought I was the only one. As I sat in that workshop, I realized I am far from the only one.

As a child, there was no one to help me value my sensitivity. Not my father, a World War II veteran of

Guadal Canal who when I knew him wanted to work during the week, golf or work on his yard on the weekends, and be with my mother – a quiet life.

Feeling and thinking about things deeply, as he did writing poetry as a young man, were not places he went willingly as an adult. Not understanding or valuing his own sensitivity was a great loss to all of us, and an unintentional lesson he taught me that it's taken many years to unlearn.

Researchers into this trait say that caregivers play a vital role in helping young HSPs come to terms with their characteristics, and can position them for a more successful future.

As I've spoken about high sensitivity to colleagues and friends, I've heard comments like *oh, it's good to hear that. I've been wondering how to deal with my son, or what a relief to understand that what's different about me is not some deep psychological problem but just the way I'm wired. It's lifted a burden.*

It's easy to get irritated with people who are "super sensitive" and act like victims – I do it myself. What I'm learning is that we humans don't always understand what drives us, whether out of protective denial or of ignorance. If we take it for granted that everyone has something to contribute, then the opportunity lies in finding new ways for each of us to do so.

Shifting our attention and energy to that more productive place opens unexpected opportunities.

Try it?

LETTERS

I just read your most recent newsletter and realized about half way through that the article not only invited me to see the issue and the challenges of diversity differently, but that what I had read to that point had already moved me to a different place, from which I was reading the rest.

Your closing wish for readers to be able to meet others with a more open hearts is a powerful one...I might even take it to yet another place...where we might meet a piece of ourselves in "others". Thus, the challenge would be to assume that this person is a member of our tribe and seek to identify the essence of that connectedness. – *Leslie Seabury, Coach*

I like how you've addressed this...I'd love to see diversity refer to diversity of ideas, and for us to be less race conscious. And to stop rewarding victims and those who are super-sensitive...great newsletter...I'm looking forward to the next installment. – *Name withheld on request*