Real-time Perspectives Blog

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When “Context-Setting” Gets in the Way

In my role as an executive coach, I’ve seen how important it is for people to provide a context for their behaviors. I can understand the pull to react that way. Recently, however, I found myself in a situation where my efforts to explain the context of what I said left someone else feeling “shut down.”

**I have come to see that there is a fine line between establishing the context for the purpose of explaining behavior vs. doing so because the intention is to provide a valid excuse for that behavior**. I’ve also realized that the former is more likely to be my “go to” when I feel as if my values, the foundation of my identity, are called into question. It triggers an identity quake, knocking me off balance because it’s a shock to my idealized perception of my “self.”

A few days after the situation which provoked my reflecting on the role of context in challenging interactions, I observed an interchange in which someone else felt context was important to address. But to some who witnessed this interaction, their remarks may have come across as defensive, i.e., excuse-making. My conclusion is that while context has its place, it’s not where I want to start when getting to the depth of mutual understanding. **I’d rather get better at being fully present, without an agenda, so that the other person feels, *and is*, heard**. Explaining my context can wait. Even more compelling: by waiting and listening even more deeply, perhaps how I originally saw that context will have shifted.