

BIO:

For more than twenty years, Don Gray has worked in applied cybernetics, starting in machine and process automation and migrating to organizational systems and changes. His major areas of interest are cognition, modeling, and understanding system change. He is a Principal at *nth Order Systems* where he works on integrating people, projects, and processes. He is also an AYE Host (www.AYEconference.com).

Don has published several articles, including "Managing in Mayberry," "Solving Other People's Problems," and "Doing the Measurement Mambo." Don says that if he were to write a book, the title would be something like *The View from an Alternate Reality*.

For fun and "stretching," Don is immersed in whitewater kayaking. He is an American Canoe Association Certified Whitewater Kayak Instructor and Advanced Swiftwater Rescue Instructor (<http://www.acanet.org/acanet.htm>). And now he is the proud grandparent of Jessica Kathryn King!

INTRO:

Maybe you're the kind of person who attacks a problem as soon as it crops up. Many times, it's good to act fast. But for a different point of view, read this week's column by Don Gray, who advises us to "take ten" and evaluate a situation before making a response.

Don't Just Do Something, Stand There!

by Don Gray

I remember when I first started solving problems for a living. I would leap down the stairs three at a time, race to the computer room, and stare at the line printer (yes, it was that long ago) trying to determine what had happened, and what to do about it. I couldn't possibly slow down. I had to "Just Do It!" They were depending on me. Of course, by the time I was notified, the problem had already happened, and there wasn't anything I could do to turn back the hands of time. So eventually, I went down the stairs one at a time, walked to the computer, and was calm and composed when I started investigating the problem.

Now that I spend time working with people, the habit of "Don't Just Do Something, Stand There" serves me well. But for me, "standing there" is an active event. I use this time to determine what is happening, how it is happening, and the best course of action before diving in. To help me with this effort, I use the following techniques:

Gather Some Information

The first activity is gathering information. Asking open-ended questions keeps me involved in what's happening while I'm standing there. Three of my favorite questions are:

1. How did you (we) come to be here?
2. How do you feel about it?
3. What would you like to have happen?

These questions can be answered on many levels. You might hear the history of actions. Maybe you'll hear about the decisions and personalities involved. Another possible response is a story of emotional highs and lows. The response you get will tell you about the corporate culture. Superficial responses indicate a closed culture that doesn't tolerate free thinking very well. An

open, honest, well-balanced response indicates a safe culture where individuals are encouraged to think and speak freely.

As I gather information, I try to use as many of my senses as possible. As I listen, I watch and see if the body language, facial expressions, and setting agree with the words. Is the information coherent? Do I have enough information, or do I need more? Common problems with information gathering involve getting too little information or getting too much.

Decide What the Information Means

The next activity as I stand there is to figure out what the information I've gathered means. It's probable that the message I've received is not exactly the message that was sent. This is because, as Bandler and Grinder said in *The Structure of Magic*, "there is an irreducible difference between the world and our experience of it. We as human beings do not operate directly on the world. Each of us creates a representation of the world in which we live, that is, we create a map or model which we use to generate our behavior." In other words, *there is always some interpretation going on*.

To help improve the odds of getting the right message, I like to use Jerry Weinberg's Rule of Three. The Rule of Three states: "If I can't think of at least three different interpretations of what I received, I haven't thought enough about what it might mean." Then of the three, I can select the interpretation that seems to best fit the situation at hand.

For example, in reviewing project progress, I sometimes hear, "I thought you were going to do that." Three possible interpretations (among many others) might be:

1. It wasn't clear who was going to do this task.
2. You're right, I'm wrong, and I'll get right on it!
3. I am a bad person because I didn't do what you thought I was going to do.

Evaluate the Significance of the Interpretation

This raises the significance question. How do I feel about the interpretation I select? Even though the interaction I'm working on is external, how I approach the matter is influenced by my feelings and world model. Additionally, the significance I associate with the selected interpretation may not have any relationship to the significance assigned by others.

When determining the significance of my interpretation, a wonderful check is "What have I seen or heard that makes me feel this is the best interpretation?" This data question serves as a check on my processing, and allows another view of what I feel is happening.

Now Do Something

After getting information, selecting a meaning for it, and determining its significance, I'm ready to make a response. I've found that following these steps keeps me from jumping the gun and doing things before I've fully processed the situation.

How long should this "standing there" take? The quick answer is "It all depends." In actual practice, it doesn't take long. And the time spent is redeemed by the increased effectiveness of my work. My mother was right. She always told me, "Before you do something in haste, you should count to ten." Now you know what I do while I'm counting!