

“Seeing Is Being”
The Power of Intentional Observation
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In the 2009 film “Avatar”, the mythical characters greet one another by saying: “I see you.” This means: I see your essential self. I see your body, soul, and spirit. By acknowledging this truth, an essential human connection is made. The theme is so critical in the film, that the award winning theme song is titled “I See You.”

As leadership expert Lolly Daskal, founder of “Lead from Within” notes: “Among the tribes in Northern Natal in South Africa, the tribes greet each other with “Sawu bona” which in the English language is equivalent to saying “hello” The phrase “Sawu bona” literally is defined as “**I see you.**” If you are a member of the tribe you would reply, “Sikhona” Which in English language is equivalent to saying “**I am here**” The order of the greeting of this exchange is important. And what it is saying...in literal translation. **UNTIL YOU SEE ME~ I do not exist.** Which means: **when you see me you bring me into existence.**”

<https://www.lollydaskal.com/leadership/i-see-you/>

For anyone who works in teaching and social service settings, “seeing” the individual with intention and empathy is essential. That is often easier said than done. In many training programs, the emphasis is on skilled “doing” and not on “skilled seeing”. Let’s change that.

Why is Observation So Important?

In an interesting paper on the importance of keen observation skills, the author notes:

“For most of history, we humans have been very good observers because we had to. We utilized all of our senses: touch, smell, taste, hearing, and sight to detect and to discern. The sudden vocalization of animals or the scampering of birds alerted the knowing that someone was approaching. Even the sweat of a sojourner let our ancestors know who was in the area and what they had eaten. At a distance, by examining posture, gait, arm swing, clothing, and accoutrements (weapons, water vessels, etc.) our ancestors could discern

friend from foe.”

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/spycatcher/201201/becoming-great-observer>

As our cultures evolved, many of the once finely honed skills of observation have waned and withered. For those who work with seniors, whose own powers of observation may have shifted or downshifted with time and illness and those who work with the very young or with individuals who are under stress and duress, it is important to be uber-aware and carefully cognizant. One must not only notice, but take the time to draw inferences and meaning from what one has observed.

So, how observant are you? I suspect that we all think we are better than we actually are. I show this slide to my teacher candidates at the university. It always shocks.

- When researchers removed a famous painting from the Museum of Modern Art in NYC and quizzed employees who had seen the work every day, each remembered only a few aspects of the painting. Curators remembered themes of the painting, art preservers recalled mainly its size and how tough it was to clean, security guards remembered that it had a bright color. Not one could thoroughly describe it.

Memory depends on who you are...



Memory depends on observation. Observation is the key to building better programs and relationships in every setting. Let's do a quick 7 item assessment of your professional observational mindset.

Observation Assessment

1. I can tell you the eye color of the last three individuals that I worked with in a session or class.
YES NO

2. I can describe the mood/dispositions of the last three individuals that I worked with in a session or class.
YES NO

3. I can accurately describe the décor in the entranceway of our site.
YES NO

4. I can identify the favorite snack or beverage of at least 5 of my students or clients.
YES NO

5. I can describe a favorite outfit of at least three of my students or clients.
YES NO

6. I can greet most parents or caregivers by name when they visit.
YES NO

7. I can identify the neighborhoods of most students.
YES NO

Answer Key

If you answered YES to at least 5 of the 7 items you have strong and keen observation skills. Your work as an educator is enhanced by these skills. If you did not answer YES to at least 5, please read on for important, professional information.

OBSERVATION Strategies: OBSERVE

1. **O....Obtain information with the 5 senses.** Use all of your senses as you interact. Note the temperature in the room. Assess the light. Touch the surfaces. This will activate the limbic system in your brain

and trigger *episodic memories* that are embedded deeply and available for later use.

2. **B...Be Active.** Proximity is power. Make a point to move around and have “eyes on” the students during play time, outdoor time, transitions, and snacks. You are always hunting and gathering information for later application.
3. **S...Say it Aloud.** “Talk to yourself”. Yes. I mean it. Whisper to yourself things like: “Jayden looks especially tired and sad today. Let me spend some time getting at the cause.” Your brain will remember the sound of your voice later on.
4. **E....Employ Technology.** Use your phone to capture images of things you want to address later. For example, you might note that the bulletin board looks tired and needs an update. Snap a picture.
5. **R....Retinal Reinforcement.** Make eye contact. Mirror Neurons in every human eye are wired to transfer EQ or emotional intelligence. This is a valuable commodity.
6. **V...Verify with Questions.** Ask the right questions. Be specific. Start with information to set the stage. Don’t ask...”How are you feeling?” Instead...verify your hunches. “I noticed you didn’t finish lunch today. Are you feeling a bit off ?”
7. **E...Emphasize Emotions.** Without becoming too touchy-feely, give students the opportunity to share their current emotional temperatures. Use strategies such as a bean bag tossed around to share feelings or a beach ball with prompts on it that say things like....
 - ***Today I feel....**
 - * **My energy level is...**
 - * **I would like the chance to talk about...**

Closing Thoughts

Being “seen” is essential for all of use, but especially for those who may feel lonely, marginalized, and vulnerable. As a member of their tribe, and perhaps one who “sees” them literally and intuitively more than most, it is essential that your vision be clear and insightful. How will you move forward as an observer who uses all the senses to make a difference in the lives of those around you? We all want to be seen.....deeply and authentically. Make that a priority and every lesson or session will be enhanced.

