W3 | Perceiving Others – Glossary

Achievement culture

used to spend a lot of time on my high school's FIRST Robotics team. It wasn't uncommon to find me in the shop working away once class ended until 10PM on some nights. I was Team Captain and Head Programmer after all, but the titles were second to the fact that I truly enjoyed building, designing, and creating in our lab. Like all things in life, the time I devoted to robotics incurred opportunity cost; the next best alternative was for me to go home and work on homework, assignments, and study for tests.

One night in January right around exam season, Hari, my co-captain dropped me off at home after a long night of deliberation over design and strategy. We had gone from 3 until 8, and were the last ones out of the lab again. I had been coming home late for quite a few days now, and my parents were not pleased. I knew they were unhappy about it for a while, but that night, I had an argument with them about my involvement in robotics, and extracurriculars in general. My parents and I eventually came to an understanding, but not quite an agreement.

I believed that time spent developing my technical, problem-solving and interpersonal skills were more important than experiencing the law of diminishing returns by putting in a lot of effort to raise my grades marginally. This did not align with my parents' achievement culture values, where they valued awards, grades, and the magic word - deliverables. Our robotics team did not have big corporate sponsors and extensive mentor support, so it was difficult to outperform the larger teams out there. As a result, we didn't always get the flashy awards or honours. Because of this, my parents believed my report card to be a better investment of my time.

After our understanding, I kept a good-faith effort in maintaining my grades to satisfy the achievement culture enforced by my parents, while staying true to my belief of success and achievement less material in nature.

Power distance

Throughout middle and high school, I was involved in cadets. Among the Army, Air, and Sea Cadet programs, I was part of the first; our corps identified as the 337 Queen's York Rangers Royal Canadian Army Cadets. In my three years, I quickly moved up the ranks from recruit to trooper to corporal to master corporal to sergeant. I wore my maple leaf and three chevrons with pride.

I would say that the military environment is one with a high power distance whether you're in the Army, Air Force, Navy, Reserves, or the Cadet program, but that would be a generalization. Personally, I can speak to only my cadet corps based on my experiences.

Back when I was a recruit, I was lined up for the water fountain in between instructional lessons. Out of respect for one another, there still were sergeants and warrant officers waiting in line among recruits. One corporal, however, cut straight to the front and pulled rank on a poor kid. Being a corporal meant you had two more chevrons than a recruit, so he took his drink first. Nobody questioned his behaviour because of the power distance established in the environment due to rank. Remove the rank and uniform, and I reckon the general public would have reacted very differently in this situation.

I do not believe, however, that this power distance is unjustified, since for somebody to rise in the ranks, they had to earn their promotion through exceptional ability or seniority. So, those with higher rank receive a greater deal of respect and have greater power over those below them.

Negotiation

I really like cars. In fact, I like the car scene at Waterloo at lot more than Toronto. Sure, you get to see expensive exotic supercars more often in Toronto, great for carspotting, but there are more people here who love their car, take care of their car, and mod/build their cars. I have a huge appreciation for car modders and builders, because of the amount of care they give their vehicle, and the astounding amount of expertise and skill it takes to work on a car. Two days ago in the plaza, I spotted a few guys talking about their Subaru WRX STis, a model popular among builders.

Until recently, my love for cars has been a concern for my mom. Her perception of the average car enthusiast is one involving street racing, burnouts, and launches - dangerous stuff. When she confronted me about it, I negotiated with her and tried to assure her that those weren't necessarily things I liked and/or would do in the future.

I explained that it was easy to notice the car enthusiasts driving the aggressive-looking Lamborghinis, Porsches, McLarens, Ferraris, etc (I could go on forever). Car builders however are subtler in their presence. You really have to look for the aftermarket spoilers, rims, bodykits, and usually a more defined exhaust note. I found myself to appreciate the latter, and promised that I wouldn't be doing crazy things like swapping engines or slapping on turbochargers (dubbed go-fast parts) so that I could go faster. I was more of an aesthetic guy.

I did my best to change her negative perception of myself and the car community, but like most mothers, I know she's still skeptical and will always keep an eye out for me.