

Business community attracted to Gottman's research on relationships

Written by Administrator

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Can hard data help us to learn soft skills? Can we apply our knowledge about family dynamics to organizations? Looking for answers to these questions, Harvard Business Review senior editor Diane Coutu interviewed Psychologist John Gottman, renowned relationship expert.

Dr. Gottman has studied marriage and divorce since 1969. Observing both high and low points of a couple's life and by mathematically analyzing the data, Gottman has generated hard scientific evidence on what makes a relationship work and what does not.

To give you a taste of his research approach, here is one example. Couples were asked to complete a "paper tower task". They were given a newspaper, scissors, Scotch tape, and string. One man said to his wife, "So, how are we going to do this?" The woman replied, "You know, we can fold the paper, we can turn the paper, we can make structures out of the paper". He said, "Really? Great." It took them few seconds to build a tower. The wife in a second couple started by saying, "So how are we going to do this?" Her husband said, "Just a minute, can you be quiet while I figure out the design?"

Can you predict who is heading for divorce? Dr. Gottman can.

There is more to it and as simple as it may look, these dialogs alone do not give us a whole picture. Gottman and his research team paid close attention to the facial expressions, heart rates, and stress hormones. And with follow-up interviews more data was added (e.g. like fidgeting during the conversation and palm sweating). All this background knowledge leads to a stunning (more than 90%) accuracy rate in predicting divorce [compared to a 53.8% as an average prediction rate among people "who know a good deal about marriage", as referred to in "Blink" by Malcolm Gladwell.

Analysing Gottman's breakthrough in our understanding of relationship dynamic, Gladwell comments that using this knowledge "the truth of a marriage can be understood in a much shorter time anyone ever imagined"].

Talking about his biggest discovery, Gottman uses a metaphor of a saltshaker filled with "yeses" to describe a good relationship. In a troubled partnership, the saltshaker is filled with all the ways you can say no. Sounds simple, doesn't it? It does not mean, however, that a conflict-free relationship is a happy one. Gottman found that we need to embrace our differences in order to work through our life with them.

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Good relationships are not just about knowing when to fight and how to patch things up. We also need humour, affection, playing, silliness, exploration, adventure, lust, touching – all those positive emotional connections. In couples who divorce or who live together unhappily, such moments are rare. Most affairs are not about sex at all. They're about finding somebody who finds you interesting, attractive, fascinating.

What are the ways to achieve connections at work? Gottman talks about marriage – the most intense relationship of all. What about intimate relationships at work? Is there a difference between emotional and physical affairs? Is there such a thing as an ideal relationship? What do people fight about? Can these findings help us to develop hiring techniques?

The original interview was published in the Harvard Business Review.

[Check out our events for info about the upcoming Gottman's workshop in Surrey BC.](#)