Who Built the Person Who Answers to Your Name?

Operationalize Your Life: Companion Articles · Human Construction

How Learned Responses Shape the Way We Handle Conflict

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Someone calls your name, and you turn. But what does that person expect when you answer? Patience? Encouragement? An argument? A warning to be careful about what comes next? Our names identify us, but our conduct teaches people what to expect from our presence. Understanding that conduct requires us to examine where we learned it.

For much of my early life, I wanted to stop feeling powerless. I experienced abuse, bullying, and a lack of guidance in understanding my temperament. I became determined that nobody would push me around. Martial arts offered a way to defend myself and overcome my fears. It became a lifeline. Yet I also began modeling the bullying behavior of the instructor whose skills I admired.

My ability to fight brought recognition. People became more reluctant to challenge me, and for a time, fear and respect seemed to go together. I enjoyed feeling that I was finally somebody. What I did not understand clearly was that my reputation also deepened my isolation. I wanted validation and admiration, but some of the conduct I used to obtain them made other people keep their distance.

That experience belongs to a question I now ask through CON360MASTERY™: Who helped construct the responses you continue practicing?

THE RULE YOU MAY NEVER HAVE EXAMINED

I use Human Construction to describe how our expectations and responses take shape through experience, instruction, surroundings, and repetition. Some lessons are directly taught. Others are conclusions we draw from what repeatedly happens around us.

A person might learn that disagreement leads to punishment, that mistakes invite humiliation, or that being useful is the surest way to receive attention. Another may learn to ask questions, acknowledge errors, and expect that a difficult conversation can end respectfully. These are possibilities to examine in individual lives. Similar experiences do not produce identical people.

In my own life, a rule developed around perceived disrespect: I would not let anyone push me around. That rule followed me into adulthood. I became highly reactive, could be verbally aggressive and threatening, and walked away from many jobs. I seldom examined the repeated pattern. Later, difficulty keeping a job became another source of damage to my self-esteem.

I did not understand those connections while living through them. I lacked help in understanding what motivated my responses. Looking back allows me to examine both the conditions that influenced me and the consequences of what I did.

WHAT DOES THE PRESENT ENCOUNTER ACTUALLY REQUIRE?

An expectation learned in one setting can enter another where the circumstances are different. A correction at work may feel like an attack on personal worth. A question from a spouse may sound like an attempt to control. A refusal may seem to confirm that we do not matter.

Sometimes people do behave unfairly or disrespectfully. Examining our interpretation does not require dismissing that possibility. It asks us to understand the encounter accurately enough to choose a response that fits.

Consider the difference between "Nobody is going to talk to me that way" and "I need to understand what was said, what I believe it means, and what response will help." The second approach creates room for investigation. It leaves space for a clarifying question, an appropriate boundary, or acknowledgment of a mistake.

That room mattered in my life because I often reacted before making those distinctions.

A DIFFERENT EXAMPLE CAN ENTER THE STORY

My high school football coach, David Dupree, gave me another example of manhood. He was powerful and compassionate. He recognized leadership in me and appointed me a team captain. When I ran away from home, he searched the community for me. I remember his reassurance: "Rock, hang in there. You are going to get through this."

His concern became something I could experience through his actions. I wanted to become the kind of dependable man he represented. Our time together was limited, and admiring him did not immediately change my practiced responses. Still, his example mattered.

When examining your own construction, remember the people whose conduct gave you something useful to carry forward. Someone may have demonstrated patience, courage, honesty, or care. Their influence belongs in your account alongside the experiences that caused pain.

BEGIN WITH ONE RESPONSE

You can start this examination without resolving your entire history. Choose one ordinary encounter in which your response left you dissatisfied. Describe what happened, what you believed it meant, what you did, and what followed.

Then ask yourself: What rule did I seem to be following?

Perhaps you acted as though being corrected meant being rejected. Perhaps you believed saying no would make you selfish. Perhaps you assumed that remaining quiet would keep you safe, even though an important concern went unspoken.

Keep your description specific. “I am impossible to deal with” gives you little direction. “I interrupt when I believe someone is talking down to me” identifies something you can notice. From there, you can begin considering a practical alternative: letting the person finish, asking what they mean, or stating a concern without a threat.

Understanding your history does not require excusing harm you caused. Nor does it require accepting mistreatment from others. It helps you identify the work more accurately.

WHAT’S THE BIG IDEA?

Your responses have a history. Some were encouraged, some were modeled, and some became familiar through your own repetition. Begin by examining one response closely enough to recognize what activates it and what it produces. That gives you a practical place to consider what you want to carry forward.

What will the next person who encounters you experience differently?

This companion article is inspired by the forthcoming book Operationalize Your Life: Stop Rehearsing Your Past and Start Practicing Your Future. The book explores the fuller personal journey and teachings through Human Construction, Human Obstruction, Human Deconstruction, Human Reconstruction, Human Transformation, and Human Becoming.

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