

"Tales of the Unexpected"

or

Responding Resourcefully to Surprises

JSA Master Practitioner 1999-2000
Advanced Modelling Project

by

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Abstract

One can, if one chooses, prepare for the unexpected. There are supportive actions we can take, such as wearing a safety helmet, that can have a dramatic effect should we be caught by surprise. Just because we are prepared does not mean we expect the unexpected, does it? If we really expected it, it wouldn't be unexpected, right?

So, preparation is obviously a good thing, but what about surprises that we weren't quite as prepared for? Perhaps it might be useful to keep something up our sleeve, to give us a choice of the best thing to do in each situation?

That is in essence what this project is about. Although I have chosen a musical subject (sight reading for piano), no specialist knowledge is assumed, and the material can be applied to many different areas of life.

At this point, you may want to skip to the Practical Application section on page 4 to find an alternative way of responding to surprises. For the technically minded, you may read the following text more thoroughly (N.B. technical knowledge of NLP is assumed).

Methodology

Firstly, I went about selecting a topic to model. A current issue that I was experiencing that I felt quite compelled to progress was in the area of learning to play the piano. Specifically, I wanted to improve upon my sight reading skills. Having chosen the area I was interested in, and selected the person whom I wanted to model, I arranged a initial meeting (with the provision of a second) and borrowed a camcorder to record the interview(s).

Before the initial session, I did a little preparation to clarify in my own mind what skill I wanted to learn from my model that would have the biggest impact on my sight reading ability. This was responding resourcefully to surprises. For the initial interview, I made just a few notes, relying more on the video to capture the required information. I concentrated mainly on finding out the key pieces of how to cope with surprises, and how to get something useful from them. On several occasions I checked whether my model behaved in a similar way when faced with surprises in domains other than music, and cross referenced the key pieces that were common.

I was very grateful for a second interview (which I also recorded on the camcorder). This time around, I reviewed the previous material and then went on to look at the meaning of the surprises, why it might be useful to learn from them, what impact that has and what needs to be in place to sight read well and to respond resourcefully to surprises as "on the fly".

I then watched the video of both interviews and noted the most significant or useful points. These were then sorted and arranged to form the section that follows.

Results

The Most Useful Pieces

When asking my model about the method he used for coping with surprises in the area of sight reading, lots of interesting and useful bits came up. I trimmed this down to the minimum key pieces that would produce the desired effect, and ended up with a 5-step strategy. I cross checked this with two other life areas that he had previously given examples of performing his skill (i.e. training a group and driving a car). The same 5-step strategy with the same key pieces in the same order were also running when encountering surprises in those life areas too, so I was convinced I had the 5 most useful steps.

The 5-Step Strategy

- 1) Ke External feeling or trigger, such as a jolt or jar
- 2) Ki Internal feeling, an undesired reaction to the surprise (e.g. an "ugh" feeling)
- 3) Ki Internal feeling, a growing curiosity (e.g. about the meaning of the surprise)
- 4) Aid Internal dialogue, a single question (e.g. what would I do differently next time?) or comment (I'll come back and take a closer look at this afterwards).

The aim is to choose the most useful question or comment. This will depend on what the situation is and how much time you have time. If the situation allows enough time (sight reading often doesn't) then there is the option to use more than one question or comment.

- 5) Ki Internal feeling - time to move on. This can be either an 'a-ha' feeling (if step 4 revealed a new learning) or a feeling that indicates the urgency of the situation, (reminding you that it really is important to move on).

Neurological levels

The strategy reveals how to respond more positively, but I had a many questions about why it is important and what the motivation might be for making the effort to learn such a strategy.

It is important to be in an environment that is supportive, helps your progress and makes it easier for you to cope with surprises. For sight reading, there are some necessities: a piece of sheet music; something to make sounds with (e.g. our own voice or an instrument); reasonable eyesight with which to read. For the novice sight-reader, it is helpful if the environment is quiet, although this is not essential (noises can be ignored, with practise). However, beginners and advanced players all find it virtually impossible to sight read if there is background music or noise that produces a rhythm that interferes with the music they are trying to make. It is not essential whether sight reading alone, or in front of a group (although beginner's might want to practise alone or just with their tutor).

Moving on to behaviours, there are a number of things that can help when sight reading, or more specifically when responding to surprises. As part of preparation beforehand, it helps to put your physiology in a position that feels positive and promotes anticipation. At the end of running the 5-step strategy mentioned earlier, it helps to move the physiology (even if only slightly) as this helps to reinforce the notion that something has changed.

Next, for capabilities, it is advisable to have practised the 5-step strategy until it is fluent and automatically available whenever the feeling of surprise has been experienced. It is also useful to be able to manage your own state, particularly to maintain an open/curiosity state.

My model shared his strong beliefs and values about why it is important for him to respond to any surprise in the best way possible while he is sight reading. He believes it is important that the audience he is playing for (which might be himself, but is usually another person or even a group) should receive the best possible impression of the piece of music. Also, the "best possible impression" is a balance of the best quantity and best quality that the player can produce on that one spontaneous occasion.

When sight reading, it is important to give the audience the best possible impression, in order that they experience an emotional impact as close as possible to the composer's original intention. The role/identity of any excellent musician is to be an effective communicator of emotional experiences.

Communicating emotional experiences directly is about sharing on a global scale. Music, as a form of direct emotional communication goes beyond written or spoken language, traverses cultures and has a huge potential to bring people together through shared experiences.

Practical Application

There are many areas of life when we experience surprises. There are a variety of responses, ranging from being delighted to sheer panic. Often, we feel things are out of our control, perhaps we even feel like victims.

Back around 1980, there was a popular TV show called "Tales of the Unexpected". This was a series of half-hour stories with a twist in the tail. Would the show have been as popular if it had no twist, if it had been "Tales of the Completely Predictable"?

So, it is possible that unexpected surprises can be a blessing in some situations. Could it be possible that they might be a blessing in some of our own real-life situations? Often, particularly when we panic or feel frustrated, we don't regard the surprise as a blessing. In fact, we can sometimes be so immersed in feeling rotten we can even stop noticing what's happening around us. If we were able to act differently, we could begin to make some choices about whether some of these surprises might well be blessings in disguise.

A very useful 5-step plan for coping with surprises is as follows:

- 1) Feel the surprise
- 2) Notice your reaction to the surprise
- 3) Become very curious about the purpose of the surprise
- 4) Ask yourself a useful question
- 5) Move on with life

You can probably remember the last time you encountered a surprise. Maybe you felt a jolt, or felt as though you were thrown a bit. You almost certainly remember how you reacted to the surprise. Were you frustrated? Frightened? Angry? We are probably all too familiar with these first two steps, feeling surprised and noticing our reaction.

Step three involves growing very curious about the surprise. Just suppose the surprise was a blessing in disguise (and it might be a very convincing disguise). What kind of blessing would it be? I wonder if you would be fooled, or if you would see through the disguise? Do you think if you removed the disguise you'd find an old friend or a new one? Those were a few seeds of curiosity that you can begin to grow right now, so that you can pluck them later for use at your surprise dinner, when curiosity will help feed your desire for something new.

Step four is when you get to ask yourself a useful question. Have you ever asked yourself a question? Perhaps you're asking yourself one right now. Perhaps you're asking whether you understand the true meaning of these points being made, or whether you're missed any points and need to read them again. Perhaps you're asking "why would I want to ask myself a question?" Inside our heads, we are often talking to ourselves, but we do not always notice it. When we are very curious, we naturally want to ask questions to satisfy our curiosity. When we encounter a surprise and open the door or curiosity, we invite an inquisitor (and he often introduces us to a new friend or two).

Step five is when it's time to move on. Sometimes step 4 reveals a new insight from which we learn, and having learned it we can naturally move on. On other occasions, time just runs out and we have to carry on regardless. We can always be curious again later, and maybe think about the surprise in a dream while we are sleeping. Moving on is very compelling and cannot be ignored. Imagine a bungee cord, with one end tied around your waist and the other end tied to a racing car. As it drives away, how long could you wait around until the laws of physics take their course?

I encourage you to experiment with this 5-step plan whenever you encounter surprises, and would be interested to hear of any useful experiences (my contact details are on the front).

Mark Sparrow