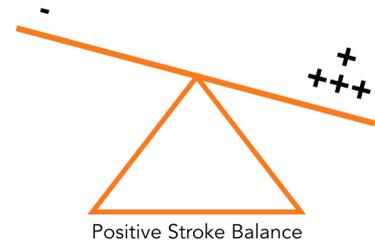


Leadership Programme

Strokes

Culture. Motivation. Relationships. Big topics broken down into their component parts - strokes. A simple and powerful idea.



The Egostates model suggests that there are only six basic Egostates that each of us engage in. So what is it that makes us so different as human beings? And what is the reason that some of us spend more time in certain Egostates than others?

Human beings are social animals. There was and still is, to some extent, safety in numbers. Forming social groups requires us to build relationships. Building relationships requires us to recognise another's presence. We may do this through a smile, a hug, a kiss, saying "hello" or giving a compliment. It signifies to another person that they exist. In the model, any unit of recognition is termed a Stroke. The term originated with Eric Berne in the 1960s in his seminal work on Transactional Analysis (TA). Understanding how we use strokes, how different people have different recognition requirements, and how we can use this knowledge to tailor our behaviour to others' needs is an immensely powerful tool. It is, perhaps, especially important in the work environment. Particularly as at work we often find ourselves with colleagues who are very different.

Positive and Negative Strokes

Babies learn early on that smiling produces a positive response from people around them. This response, or positive stroke, reinforces the behaviour and makes it more likely the baby will smile again in the future. In our interactions with others at work and in social or family situations, strokes are the ways we acknowledge to those around us that we know that they are there. Because human beings are innately social, we all need these positive gestures of recognition. Without the feedback that they offer, we feel ignored, unappreciated, and ill at ease, even if we don't know exactly why. This is how we learn appropriate, socially acceptable behaviours. However, we also need to learn what not to do, so it is important we receive negative strokes: a reprimand, a punishment, having something taken from us to make it clear that we are out of order. Without negative strokes we would not learn boundaries and would continue to act in ways that were socially inappropriate.

We might expect that we would always seek positive strokes and seek to avoid negatives. This is not the case. Our need for recognition is so profound that, in the absence of positive strokes we will pursue negatives.

Verbal and Non-Verbal Strokes

Strokes can be expressed with or without language. In a work environment we deliver important positive and negative strokes by commenting on people's work and performance such as "that was a good report"; 'you did really well on your presentation,' or 'thanks to everyone for getting the results in on time,' those are positive strokes of recognition. However some of the most powerful strokes are delivered in the absence of language. For example, looking at someone when they are talking to you is a simple positive stroke that confirms that you are listening. Similarly, bringing a colleague a cup of coffee in the morning, touching her on the arm or even just smiling in welcome are all positive strokes. Rolling your eyes or staring at someone delivers strong negative strokes conveying disapproval. Walking through an office without acknowledging people could be perceived as being ignored or even dismissed.

Non verbal strokes, particularly eye contact, facial gestures and body positions, are powerful modes of communication conveying subtle messages which we are often unaware that we are giving. The impact of these can be huge and can lead us to be perceived in ways we did not expect or anticipate.

However, the way in which negative strokes are delivered has a great impact on how they are received. A negative stroke, delivered ineffectively, can easily be perceived as from **Critical Parent** and responded to in kind.

Again, negative non-verbal strokes – a frown, a raised voice, abrupt or angry gestures – often carry the most power. For example even when the words are positive, 'Thank you for getting the statistics to me in time for the presentation', if they are delivered with an angry expression and tone of voice, the negative stroke will outweigh the positive. Negative strokes can be unintentional as well as deliberate. The short-sighted man who has forgotten his glasses may appear to be ignoring his colleagues when he fails to return their nods of greeting!

Stroke Economy

This refers to the availability of positive and negative strokes in any given environment (or economy). We are all brought up in environments which vary in terms of the number of available strokes. Some of us were raised in highly social environments where people engaged in a lot of conversation and exchanged a lot of feedback. Others will have been brought up in environments where people were more introverted and fewer strokes were exchanged. We tend to feel comfortable when we are operating in stroke economies that fit with our past experience and will self-select jobs, teams or organisations with a stroke economy similar to our own.

Like individuals, different teams have different stroke economies – you can pick up on them the minute you enter their working environment. Some places are buzzing with conversation whereas others are much quieter and more reserved.

We are also the products of the wider cultural environments in which we have grown up or subsequently been involved where the number of Strokes, the economy, varies.

Understanding the different tendencies of diverse cultures is very important, and can also be a lot of fun. In Europe alone for example, there tends to be a significant difference in the stroke balance of people from southern, Latin cultures than in people from Nordic cultures, with the tendency for southern

Europeans to need and provide a lot of feedback, both positive and negative, while their northern European counterparts tend to be more restrained. When companies with seats in different countries merge or come together, finding common ground can be a challenge! In some countries, for example, it can be the norm to stand very close to the person to whom we are speaking, while gazing them in the eye. If that person is from a lower stroke economy, they are likely to start edging nervously away, while evading eye-contact. This may prompt the speaker to move forward, even closer, in order to make himself comfortable again, resulting in mismatched perceptions. An awareness of difference can be very useful. Even in cultures with common historical roots, differences can be interesting. Britons in the United States, for example, will notice that most interactions involve wishing the other person a nice day, telling them that it's been an immense pleasure to meet them, and so forth. This is because North Americans, on average, have a higher positive stroke balance than most people from the United Kingdom.

Recently we worked with a team derived from the United Kingdom and Sweden. We soon noticed some interesting differences in terms of stroke balance, especially when it came to writing. British children are taught to write letters and emails with a beginning, a middle, and an end, and to start and finish each communication with certain formalities, such as 'Dear so-and-so,' and 'Sincerely yours'. We tend to experience these formalities as positive strokes and their absence as negative. In Sweden, conversely, written communications are very short and to the point. Because the various members of the team were not aware of these cultural differences, the Britons felt that they were receiving cold, unfriendly emails from their Swedish colleagues, while the Swedes wondered why their British colleagues spent so much time waffling and wishing them the best and sending their regards when they "should" really have focused on getting the message across. The UK colleagues perceived the short, terse Swedish Communications as **Critical Parent** and were beginning to react in **Rebellious** and **Compliant Child** by ignoring the content. The Swedes were frustrated by the length of their counterpart's emails, hooking their **Rebellious Child**.

As soon as they figured out that Britons and Swedes have different stroke balances, especially in terms of written communication, the 'problem' became a point of interest and the source of a lot of laughter!

While our cultural background has a big impact on the way we think and behave, cultural identity is not fixed in stone: our stroke balance can change under the influence of new environments and cultures.

Stroke Currency

Currency refers to the different types of strokes available in any given stroke economy. People give strokes in different ways and people have personal preferences in terms of the type of strokes they value. Some people are motivated by being part of a team, others by promotion. Some value money, others a career which offers a good balance between their work and home life. For this reason, organisations always struggle to design reward systems that work for everyone as people's preferences are so different.

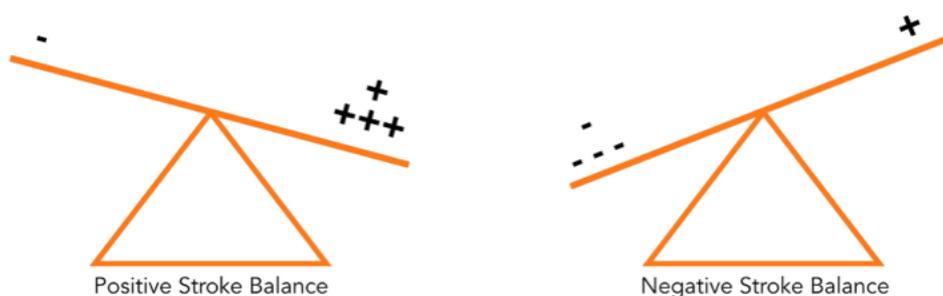
Organisations have a myriad of rewards or stroke currencies : the gold watch after 25 years' service; the meal out for a successful project team or the parking space when you become a senior leader. We've done some work with a multinational pharmaceutical company where, when employees reach the first tier of leadership, they are given a screen by their desk that offers them a greater degree of privacy. On

reaching the second tier, they get two screens. At the third, they get moved to an office near the window, and they take their screens with them, so they have both natural lighting and privacy. At the fourth, they move into an office with walls but no door, and at the fifth tier, they work in an office with a door. Looked at from outside, this might seem a little odd, but within the culture of the organisation screens are not just screens; they are stroke currency and very meaningful symbols of recognition and relative power in the workplace. They quietly but effectively convey a message to both the recipient and his or her colleagues.

A more commonplace form of stroke currency is the exchange of food or treats in the workplace, as a gesture that says, 'I like you and appreciate you'. This is a stroke currency that is also important in family and many other social situations. Coming from a different culture or environment that doesn't recognise the currency as important can give rise to confusion. Because the physical things that we use as symbols meant to convey friendship, cooperation, and togetherness are important to us, we often feel rejected and hurt if someone turns down our sincere invitation and gift. Imagine an employee who enters a company with 'cake on Fridays' tradition, and turns down the invitation to have a slice. He might just not like cake – but unless he's careful, the impression he may give will be that he's not interested in getting to know his colleagues.

Stroke Balance

Stroke balance describes the balance between positive and negative strokes that a person likes to receive. When we are growing up, we receive both positive and negative strokes. Gradually we evolve a balance – a mixture of positive and negative strokes with which we feel comfortable and familiar. This is like a finely balanced pair of scales: it may balance equally or tip down on the positive or the negative side.



For example, if we have been brought up experiencing a much greater proportion of negative to positive strokes, we are likely to develop a negative stroke balance. This means that, if we later find ourselves in an environment where we are exposed to a high proportion of positive strokes (e.g. a certain class at school, an organisation, a different culture), we may find it difficult to adjust. In fact, what we tend to do is discount strokes that are inconsistent with our stroke balance. We may do this by downplaying positive strokes ("it was a team effort"), by mentally cancelling the stroke: ("she says that to everyone"), or by questioning the motives of the person delivering it: ("what does he want from me?"). In fact many would prefer to hear more negative strokes than any type of positive stroke.

A positive stroke balance is the reverse of this: in this case we are likely to have grown up in environments where positive strokes were plentiful. This means that we will try to keep a greater ratio of positives in our adult lives. We may seek out positive strokes over negative strokes, and we are likely to enjoy praise. This does not mean we reject negative strokes - we prefer and can listen better to negative strokes when we have positive ones as well.

Most of us give strokes to others in a way that is consistent with what we look for in our relationships, rather than what our friends and colleagues necessarily want or need. If you're a person with a high positive stroke balance, chances are you remember other's birthdays, say a cheery 'hello' to everyone when you come to work and provide a lots of positive verbal and non-verbal feedback. If one of your colleagues or employees has a low positive stroke balance, you may find this odd, maybe even irritating or offensive. In turn, you may find it difficult to understand how your frequent, enthusiastic validations can be annoying to them. In fact, they are inconsistent with their stroke need and your colleague is experiencing your constant friendly overtures as intrusive and over-the-top. They may even question your sincerity and wonder why you can't understand that they'd rather be left alone. The guy at the round-table meetings who seems to thrive when his work is criticised will baffle you.

In order to have a good, reciprocal relationship with a colleague or employee, it's hugely important to understand what their stroke balance is, and to make an effort to tailor behaviour towards them in terms of what *they* need. It's about being aware of the existence of varying stroke needs, their preference for positive, negative, verbal and non verbal, strokes; by observing how others interact. We all give manifold clues as to our stroke balance in the way we speak with others, in the frequency with which we seek out contact, and in the way we use nuance and body language. When in doubt, there's absolutely nothing wrong with asking someone how they perceive the strokes that you are giving them: 'Did you like it when I brought you coffee yesterday without asking, or would you rather I didn't?'; 'Would you like everyone at work to make a fuss about your birthday, or do you prefer to keep celebrations low-key?'; 'What sort of feedback do you find most useful when it comes to helping you continue to improve your performance at work?'

The leader of the team

Leaders are smart to be aware of the existence of different stroke balances, and of the dynamics that these can create in their teams. In a team dominated by people with a high positive stroke balance, the team member with a low positive stroke balance may flounder. Recognising that this person needs to receive a different sort of feedback and recognition than the others, a team leader can take that person aside and, using the effective Egostates, explain the situation while providing them with strokes that are more consistent with their personal stroke balance. Of course, nobody can be alert at every moment to the specific details of every single person's stroke balance right then; what matters is being aware of their stroke balance in general, and when there is a particular issue to be addressed. If a leader notices a team member behaving differently than usual, or when there is a specific problem, this is the time to explore their stroke balance or needs in detail.

Stroking effective Egostates

By using strokes consciously and intelligently from the effective Egostates, we can develop more effective relationships with colleagues and teams. By consistently providing them with the sort of strokes they need and can hear, their effective Egostates can be attracted. For example, imagine that you are working with someone who tends to be very dismissive, and to take decisions very quickly, without listening to all the details. You may experience them to be in the **Critical Parent** Egostate in relation to you. They are dismissing your ideas, and coming across as disrespectful. In order to attract their **Adult** Egostate, to be more analytical and to listen more, you can ask more **Adult** questions. You can be alert to when they move into an **Adult** ego state, compliment them on their insights when this occurs, and listen to them attentively and respectfully. By doing so, you are effectively using a reinforcement technique that will help them access a more effective ego state in their interactions with you. At the same time as 'stroking for an ego state' you are effectively providing feedback about the ego state and behaviours that you do not want.

Positive Conditional	Positive Unconditional
<p><i>"That's a good <u>idea</u>."</i></p> <p><i>"These <u>figures</u> are great."</i></p> <p><i>"I appreciate the <u>time</u> it's taken to do that."</i></p> <p>A performance related bonus.</p> <p>Being asked for expert opinion.</p> <p>Getting extra responsibilities on account of past performance.</p>	<p><i>"What a great <u>team</u>."</i></p> <p><i>"I want <u>you</u> all to be <u>involved</u> in this."</i></p> <p><i>"I'm glad I'm working <u>with you</u> on this project."</i></p> <p>Being actively listened to.</p> <p>Being included in decisions affecting you.</p> <p>Being informed of the impact of a change.</p>
Negative Conditional	Negative Unconditional
<p><i>"The way you treated that customer was not up to scratch <u>because</u>..."</i></p> <p><i>"I'm disappointed with this report <u>because</u>..."</i></p> <p><i>"This proposal isn't good enough <u>because</u>..."</i></p> <p>Being moved sideways following poor performance.</p> <p>Being excluded from tasks because of poor performance.</p> <p>Failing to gain accreditation because standards were not met.</p>	<p><i>"This team is useless."</i></p> <p><i>"You're not paid to think, just do it."</i></p> <p><i>"We'll tell you when you need to know"</i></p> <p>Being excluded from decisions affecting you.</p> <p>Being over-protected from the impact of change.</p> <p>Being criticised in public.</p>

Strokes and Motivational Feedback

As well as positive and negative strokes, we can also think of strokes as being conditional (for doing something) or unconditional (for being someone). A conditional stroke is one we receive where it is contingent on something we have done. An unconditional stroke is one we give to someone else simply for being who they are.

A conditional stroke is one we give or receive for doing something, whereas an unconditional stroke is more about the person.

For example, let's say that at work we give a report or a PowerPoint presentation, and our colleagues and boss provide us with their responses. These responses are conditional strokes, dependent on our report. As we discussed, these can be negative or positive, and can be delivered using differing currencies and in differing amounts. An unconditional stroke is our response to the person themselves. Positive unconditional strokes may be valuing someone just because they are there, or telling someone we like them because of who they are, rather than anything special that they may have done. A negative unconditional stroke could be ignoring someone or insulting them, as opposed to ignoring their action or work.

Positive conditional strokes are important in reinforcing behaviours you want to encourage. If you don't recognise these behaviours, the danger is that they will not sustain. The maxim here is: "Stroke what you want to see".

In the work environment, the most effective way to give people positive feedback is through the positive conditional; to be specific, so people know exactly what they've done well, because that way they know what they need to do more of. Positive unconditional strokes are very powerful in building a strong sense of team spirit and loyalty. They give people the message they belong, that they fit in, that they are valued. Positive unconditional strokes become ever more important in times of uncertainty or when times are tough.

Negative conditional strokes are essential in managing poor performance and in giving people developmental feedback (see below). The key thing to bear in mind is to deliver negative conditional strokes from the effective Egostates, otherwise the risk is they will simply be rejected and elicit resentment.

Negative unconditional strokes can be very damaging. For this reason we have laws or work policies to manage them. Note that negative unconditional strokes can take quite a subtle form. We can find ourselves giving them even without meaning to, (e.g. by not communicating with people on things of importance to them, not taking the time to listen to people, by not walking the floor), which may be interpreted as not showing an interest in people.

Strokes and Developmental Feedback

Negative conditional feedback can be given from the ineffective Egostates, from the **Critical Parent** or **Rebellious Child** mode, such as 'That was a crap report: that was really terrible and if you don't get this right and back here by noon tomorrow, well, I'm sorry, but I'm demoting you,' or 'If you don't get this right next time, it will affect your bonus,' or 'I don't know where this idea came from; it's really ridiculous.'

Speaking from such an ineffective Egostate, the deliverer is demonstrating they are not prepared to listen and understand reasons why, and does not respect the person to whom they are providing feedback. This behaviour will almost certainly hook an ineffective Egostate in return. This means that the criticism will be ignored or discounted, that people don't learn from their mistakes, and that a cycle of ineffective behaviour has not been halted.

Quite simply, regardless of the level of apparent compliance and the number of times the subject says 'yes', negative strokes done badly fall squarely into the ineffective Egostates and are not taken on board and fully engaged with. Negative strokes given from an effective Egostate, instead, provide them with a base from which they can develop, learn, and grow.

Strokes and Effective Feedback

Giving effective developmental feedback is an essential tool in the context of coaching and managing poor performance. Combined with an understanding of Egostates, the strokes model provides a fundamental framework for delivering effective feedback, even for the most difficult messages. The key thing is that it is delivered in a way that is both authentic and constructive.

The most powerful way of providing effective negative conditional feedback is by using all three of the effective Egostates. We have found that, while there can be a place for starting with **Adult**, the impact often sounds harsh. There's no framing, it's too blunt, and the intended adult message is perceived as coming from **Critical Parent**. We think it is smarter to begin giving negative conditional feedback from the **Free Child** Egostate. Two possible approaches are outlined below.

1) The **Free Child** Opening

1. Deliver two positive conditional strokes first – before giving developmental feedback it is useful to highlight positive aspects of the individual's performance. This makes it clear that you are taking issue with an aspect of their behaviour, not them as a person, and makes it less likely they will take the feedback personally.

"Your technical knowledge is second to none and you are clearly a popular member of the team"

2. Say how you feel, using "I" and why, being specific. In the Egostates model, this is a combination of **Free Child** and **Adult**. This takes the form of more authentic, honest remarks and uses conditional negative strokes, such as:

"I am concerned about your performance. You missed your most recent milestone which has delayed the whole project"

This contains a vital statement as the **Free Child** attracts the other person to listen in **Nurturing Parent** and therefore hear the reasons in **Adult**

3. Offer your support to help resolve the problem. In the Egostates model, this involves the **Nurturing Parent** Egostate:

"What can we do to ensure this does not happen again?"

4. Listening properly to the other person (in **Nurturing Parent**) means that we begin to think about their issues, problems and ideas. This takes us back to the **Adult** Egostate where we together problem solve the issue (**Adult**):

"If we institute the new process that you suggest then these milestones would not be missed in future? Take me through that again...."

A note about using the [Free Child](#) Egostate for feedback: just as stroke balances tend to vary from one culture to another, as they do from one individual to another, the vocabularies that are used in different cultures to describe emotion are often different. For example, when working with an all male team recently, it quickly became evident that they were uncomfortable using terms such as 'frustrated' or 'angry'. Finally, in discussion, we determined that the best [Free Child](#) expression for them to use when providing negative conditional feedback was 'I'm concerned'. Said authentically it proved a very effective [Free Child](#) statement which attracted colleagues to listen. Being aware of the culture and background of the people we work with is enormously helpful!

2) Setting Boundaries From [Nurturing Parent](#)

This is an effective approach where feedback has been given a number of times before but not been taken and where it's time to be tough and firm. It relies on earlier approaches having been supportive from [Nurturing Parent](#), such as: "This looks like it's been hard for you", where the emphasis was on listening and acknowledging feelings.

1. Again this starts with the [Free Child](#) "I feel" followed by a clear statement of your expectation from [Adult](#).

"I feel really disappointed about this. I think I've been really clear that I needed this to be in the same style as the previous report to ensure consistency, with the figures corrected. My concern now is that I need it by Friday at the latest."

2. You then offer a choice from [Nurturing Parent](#), stating the consequences in [Adult](#).

"I appreciate its short notice so it's really important you let me know if there's anything you need. I'm very keen that you develop the skills to do these reports but its also important you hit the standards and deadlines otherwise I'm unlikely to pass such a task to you again."

3. This allows you to follow up in [Adult](#) with the specified consequence if the expectation is not met.

"OK, so given what we spoke about last time and the consequences for the dept of being late, I've decided to give next month's report to John to do".

Strokes and Performance Management

Best practice in performance management, especially when having difficult conversation, suggests five key points:

1. Plain speaking where you are specific
2. Descriptive and non-judgemental language
3. Timely – given at the right moment and not avoided
4. Balanced – praising good as well as negative work
5. Constructive – suggesting ways forward

Strokes are important in understanding what makes people tick. The difficulty is that we tend to see the world through the lens of our own stroke currency, stroke balance and stroke economy. In other words, we tend to give strokes based on our own preferences. Deploying feedback and performance management skills effectively requires leaders to step outside their own experience and put themselves in the shoes of those they lead. Understanding the stroke preferences of people in your team can help you reward and motivate them, determine optimal levels of feedback or support to develop others and plan how to give feedback to improve performance that falls short of your expectations.