The Seven Stages of Action and the Three Levels of Processing

The stages of action can readily be associated with the three different levels of processing, as shown in Figure 2.4. At the lowest level are the visceral levels of calmness or anxiety when approaching a task or evaluating the state of the world. Then, in the middle level, are the behavioral ones driven by expectations on the execution side—for example, hope and fear—and emotions driven by the confirmation of those expectations on the evaluation side—for example, relief or despair. At the highest level are the reflective emotions, ones that assess the results in terms of the presumed causal agents and the consequences, both immediate and long-term. Here is where satisfaction and pride occur, or perhaps blame and anger.

One important emotional state is the one that accompanies complete immersion into an activity, a state that the social scientist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has labeled “flow.” Csikszentmihalyi has long studied how people interact with their work and play, and how their lives reflect this intermix of activities. When in the flow state, people lose track of time and the outside environment. They are at one with the task they are performing. The task, moreover, is at just the proper level of difficulty: difficult enough to provide a challenge and require continued attention, but not so difficult that it invokes frustration and anxiety.

Csikszentmihalyi’s work shows how the behavioral level creates a powerful set of emotional responses. Here, the subconscious expectations established by the execution side of the action cycle set up emotional states dependent upon those expectations. When the results of our actions are evaluated against expectations, the resulting emotions affect our feelings as we continue through the many cycles of action. An easy task, far below our skill level, makes it so easy to meet expectations that there is no challenge. Very little or no processing effort is required, which leads to apathy or boredom. A difficult task, far above our skill, leads to so many failed expectations that it causes frustration, anxiety, and helplessness. The flow state occurs when the challenge of the activity just slightly exceeds our skill level, so full attention is continually required. Flow requires that the activity be neither too easy nor too difficult relative to our level of skill. The constant tension coupled with continual progress and success can be an engaging, immersive experience sometimes lasting for hours.

**FIGURE 2.4.** Levels of Processing and the Stages of the Action Cycle. Visceral response is at the lowest level: the control of simple muscles and sensing the state of the world and body. The behavioral level is about expectations, so it is sensitive to the expectations of the action sequence and then the interpretations of the feedback. The reflective level is a part of the goal- and plan-setting activity as well as affected by the comparison of expectations with what has actually happened.