

Book Review: Social Thinking At Work

**by Michelle Garcia Winner
and Pamela Crooke
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Disclosure: North River Press has agreed to publish a book authored by me (on a different topic). That said, I have no financial interest in the publisher, or in the book being reviewed here.

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Transformation Through Comprehension

Social Thinking At Work offers an exciting exposition of how the human mind processes social situations. Exciting, because clear understanding is the first step toward behavior modification. For people who, like me, have experienced a delay in acquiring social comfort, this book can serve as a guidebook along the path toward improved performance on the job.

As the title suggests, the examples and advice in this volume are geared toward readers who are in or entering the workforce. Its lessons, nonetheless, will be valuable in all sorts of social situations.

The authors chose the term "Social Thinking" because it is the process behind the resulting "social skills" that are perhaps more commonly taught. (Psychologists call this process "social cognition.") By trying out the tips given in this book, you can learn an approach to social understanding that will serve you well even as you encounter new and unfamiliar situations.

Exciting, also, because it is not only the target audience who can benefit from the clarity provided by this book. That audience, of course, is comprised of people with Asperger's syndrome, other related learning differences, or whom for any reason at all have had trouble learning how to be comfortable socially. Others who will gain insight here are people who provide a supporting role. Family members, friends, clinicians, and coaches of all descriptions will benefit from the explanations given on these pages.

The authors provide instructive anecdotes involving people, in specific situations, who may remind you of people you know, or perhaps even of yourself. These examples nicely help to illustrate the points that they have laid out, and to reinforce the essential principles taught in this book.

The authors point out that "...it is natural to seek out people who make us feel comfortable." And, "...the greatest indirect compliment we can give someone is by simply paying attention and showing interest..." The authors help to drive home the practical meaning of these (and many other) points by the use of their short anecdotes, as well as by giving specific tips and things to try out.

This is a very dense book, and many of the topics are revisited in different guises. I found this to be hugely helpful; to read the same basic lesson, worded in a different form or in a different context. It helped me to comprehend the points the authors were making.

Because there are two authors, at times there can be an unexpected shift in voice. I found this to be a bit jarring, but not unhelpful. Sometimes things were presented as "people who have difficulty with..." and sometimes as "we often have difficulty with..." This was actually a good reminder of the need to be able to do perspective-taking, which is a key lesson to be taken from this book.

The authors define perspective-taking as "the ability to look at things from a perspective other than our own." Based on my own experience, I would say that the hardest thing for people with delayed social cognition is the ability to see ourselves as others see us. By following along in this book, readers who share that challenge can learn steps to improve their ability in that arena.

The early part of the book is a fairly high-level explanation of the concepts one needs to know. That is followed, in the middle part of the book, by more specific examples of situations in which various challenges might arise. The final third of the book is a summary, with extremely useful lists of "tips and pointers" on how to use the knowledge you have gained earlier in the book.

As already mentioned, my recommendation to read this book extends to anyone who has an interest in helping those who are its primary audience. Educators, clinicians, parents, and others will gain insight into those of us who must struggle to acquire our social thinking. It will be useful in interpreting behaviors that might at first blush seem anti-social, rude, or uncaring. In fact, these actions may simply be thoughtless (in the literal sense) in that they are done without the perspective-taking and other skills that are taught in this extremely useful volume.

In fact, there is probably no one at all who couldn't benefit from the pointers contained in this book. We are all human; we all need to interact with other people in order to be successful and satisfied in life.

In sum, this book offers a refreshing approach to improving social success. Its basic message is that you can learn to pay close attention to what is going on around you, in terms of social interactions. By doing so, you will come to understand what it is you need to do to improve your comfort level, and your skills, in dealing with social situations.

This is, of course, easier said than done. Otherwise, you would not need a book packed with specific tips, examples, and explanations.

One of the key teachings of this book is that the evaluation of your job performance will not be dependent simply on how well you execute the technical aspects of your job. Equally important in your success will be your ability to get along well with your co-workers, as well as your ability to generate feelings of warmth and trust among all those with whom you come into contact.