

Five Cookies

A story about assumptions, inference and behaviour.

A business woman has just made it through passport control and is looking forward to relaxing before her flight takes off. It's been a tough day, as two major client meetings did not go well and therefore she did not make the expected sales. She has around an hour before her flight leaves, so she buys a latte, her favourite magazine and a treat, a box of Millie's cookies. At around £6 for five these are expensive, but she feels she deserves a little luxury after the day she's had.

The airport is jam packed, but she finds a free seat and settles down at a small table, at which a Japanese man is already seated. With a relaxing sigh she begins to enjoy her magazine and coffee.

After approximately a minute she is rather alarmed to see the Japanese man help himself to one of her cookies. Although she is rather annoyed, she doesn't want to cause a scene, so she takes one for herself and gives the man a look of contempt.

The Japanese man smiles and then immediately takes another one.

The woman's initial surprise is turning to anger, her inner dialogue making remarks about this man that are unprintable! She removes another biscuit and munches noisily, her eyes fixated on him.

The Japanese man, not culturally accustomed to this much eye contact from a stranger, looks down and diverts his eyes, like a young child who's been naughty and is awaiting the inevitable parental reprimand.

A minute or two later, he reaches out to take the last cookie. Seeing his hand come across the table, the woman grabs the box. They both vie for the last cookie, the man's hand in the box and being pulled around the table by the business woman, knocking over her coffee and soaking her magazine.

Finally, the man whips the final cookie from the box, quickly breaks it in half, slides one half across to the woman and pops the other half in his mouth. In a flying rage, the woman hurls the box at him and threatens to call security. Highly embarrassed, he mumbles an apology in broken English, bows and walks away.

Ask the following questions (and relevant follow up questions) and generate a short discussion.

- How do you feel about the Japanese man's behaviour?
- What would you do if you were the woman?
- Would you have said or done something earlier? At what point? What would you have done?
- What do you think has happened here?

Continue the story...

The woman at the airport is livid: this man has helped himself to her precious biscuits, even when she has given him several signals to keep off! Anyway, she decides to run after this 'thief' and give him a piece of her mind. She looks down to grab her bag, and as she does so, to her horror she sees her unopened, identical box of Millie's cookies...

Now discuss the following questions...

- What do you think has happened now?
- How are you feeling now about the Japanese man?
- How do you feel about the way the woman behaved?
- How do you think HER feelings have changed?
- She will have experienced a massive shift in the "story" she was telling herself.
- The story now probably goes something like: "Oh my goodness, he shared his box of biscuits with me".
- "He gave me half of the last one, even when I got angry and threw the box at him."

The change doesn't end there.

If the woman thinks and feels differently, that may affect her behaviour. If she still decides to run after the man, she may apologise profusely, try to explain the misunderstanding and offer her biscuits as a way of saying sorry.

When you change your "story", this produces change in every level. Even your deepest psychological needs are changed if the story changes. This woman's need for respect and fairness quickly melted away when her 'villain story' disintegrated.

The shifts in your story and the resultant changes in feelings may rarely be as dramatic as in this cookie example. Yet when you challenge your story and climb down your ladder of assumptions and judgements back to the facts, the perspective you can gain can be the difference that makes the difference with other people.