

Perception: A Guide for Managers and Leaders

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Abstract

Managers and leaders in organization are entrusted with employees whom they must work with and through to realize organizational objectives. In organizations, perceptions of leaders, managers and employees shape the climate and effectiveness of the working environment. Perception is the way we all interpret our experiences. Having the right perception is significant skill for any effective leadership. It is important to understand that perception is often portrayed through communication in any organization be it big or small and therefore, it is a pertinent tool in leadership. What sets great leaders apart is their ability to manage perceptions in the process of handling people and organizational issues. What people often observe or assess as your ability to be a leader and your effectiveness becomes their perception, which in turn becomes reality.

Keywords: Perception, Organizations, Decisions, Leaders and Managers.

1. Perception

Psychological investigation of human behavior began with the study of perception by Wilhelm Wundt in Germany, in 1879. Since that time it has been significant in understanding human behavior. The important revelation is that no two people experience and interpret sensations, situations, or their own feelings the same way. Just like lights, that sequentially flash on and off are perceived as motion, people use visual and auditory causes around them to interpret and react to their immediate environment. In addition to external influences people also react to internal feelings, ideas, expectations based on past experiences and other personality experiences they might have.

1.1 Perception in leadership

In organizations, perceptions of leaders, managers and employees shape the climate and effectiveness of the working environment. Perception is the way we all interpret our experiences. It is a marvelous and difficult part of human behavior; managers must realize that all individuals have differing perceptions. People are not necessarily successful by attempting to serve their values. People do not, in fact, do what serves their values. They do what they perceive will serve their values. First, this means that there is always a time gap between the brain's consideration of a behavior and the behavior itself. Second, the processing that takes place in this time period, is what can be referred to as perception. In the work place, when employees and employers have very strong differing perceptions about quality, quantity, schedules, etc, it becomes very difficult to accomplish meaningful objectives.

Most of the time people believe that they are effective and efficient leaders using their perception but their supposed followers may have a very different perception. In scientific community Berelson and Steiner in their book *Human behavior*, define perception as the complex process by which people select and organize sensory stimulation into a meaningful and rational picture of the world. We react to specific situations based on what we see rather than on what it really is. Often we see only what we want to see in a given situation. Similarly how we react depends on what we hear, not necessarily on what was said. Perception therefore is just another tool, under utilized, that requires an administrator to develop the true desire to be the best he/she can be. Using all of the tools available to us we can achieve great things with our employees

Generally leaders possess three major skills in many organizations i.e. that of vision, interpersonal skills and technical skill. We seldom forget one important skill that is vital for any leader. That skill is perception. Having the right perception is significant skill for any effective leadership. It is important to understand that perception is often portrayed through communication in any organization be it big or small and therefore it is a pertinent tool in leadership. A leader can have the best intentions and honest concern for his or her employees but if he does not communicate in a manner that employees can comprehend then their perception may work contrary to the right intentions. That is the power or

influence of perception in any leadership. A leader sensitive to perception of employees must use communication as a tool to either reinforce a positive perception or change a negative one. Having the right perception is not only about becoming competent, polyvalent and productive but also about nurturing diversity and being able to live with all employees

There are very important things to consider in order to understand the vital role of perception.

1. Objective perception is difficult if not impossible. Each individual selects, organizes and interprets information gained from their senses and internal awareness differently. Managers must learn that one of their most important considerations is the way employees and other managers will perceive a given managerial decision or action.
2. In addition to mechanics of perception, it is also important to recognize that every person has a unique frame of reference that includes all of the internal and external factors that affect behavior. Interpretation of their experiences is dependent on many factors not directly related to their immediate situation.
3. It is important to recognize that values, beliefs and attitudes are important factors affecting perceptual process.
4. The amount of energy we expend accomplishing a task is directly related our perception of its importance. This is significant in work environments. Unless employees perceive their job assignments as interesting and worth, while their level of effort is likely to be relatively low.

2. Perceptual Process

Perception is our sensory experience of the world around us and involves both the recognition of environmental stimuli and actions in response to these stimuli. Through the perceptual process, we gain information about properties and elements of the environment that are critical to our survival. Perception not only creates our experience of the world around us; it allows us to act within our environment.

Although there are different ways to describe perception process stages, most psychologists describe it in terms of three stages. The first is sensory stimulation; for example, smelling a scent that reminds you of a childhood moment or hearing a song you haven't heard in a while that reminds you of something special. In this case a leader's mind goes back to an incident that occurred some times in the past. Good or bad memories are invoked which may influence ones reaction in a given situation. The second stage in the perception process is the organization of that stimulus in your brain; i.e., forming a positive or negative cerebral response to the stimulus. This is a process in which we strive to organize things in such a way that they make sense to us. A good example would be you are involved in some talk with someone. The person does not seem to provide all details as you expect. You then try to fill in those details. From the details that you fill in, your response to that message may not be as the person expected. The third and final stage of the perception process involves interpreting and expressing the thoughts that have been elicited, often involving an emotional response such as smiling at the scent of apple pie, or perhaps becoming a bit choked up by the feelings evoked from hearing the song you've just heard.

The entire process of perception illustrates one thing that in organizations, dissatisfaction comes because managers do not hear what employees say but what they expect them to say. On the other hand employees do not hear what their leaders say but what is expected. Lets consider this phrase "snake in the the grass" stop for a while did you see what really the phrase contained? or did you see what you expected to see? Am sure most people will report seeing snake in the grass. Omitting one of the words in the phrase (there are two the's) they did not expect two "thes" beside each other. From this simple illustration you can see that often as we perceive, we select, organize, and interpret the information available to us to conform with our expectations. Leaders can easily use what is known as the sandwich Technique: changing behavior by criticism; praise and an employee by telling him something nice he has ever done. Then tell him all the bad he has done and finally finish the talk with something positive and the prospects of his work. You will discover that the individual does not change expectations to deal with criticism in fact the criticism is ignored because he has had what he was expecting at last.

2.1 Factors that influence perceptual process

Despite a myriad number of things that tend to influence the way people perceive things or situations the most pertinent ones are those that are within oneself like habit, motivation, learning, specialization and social background.

Habit: Habits are formed slowly and sometimes unconsciously and as the saying goes 'habits die hard' and therefore individuals perceive objects, situations and conditions differently according to their habits. A good example will be that of a retired soldier who throws himself on the ground when he hears a sudden burst of car tyre. There are other several instances in life settings where individuals tend to react with the right response to the wrong signals

Motivation: Motivational factors increase the individual's sensitivity to those stimuli which he considers as relevant to the satisfaction of his needs in view of his past experience with them. A thirsty individual for example has a perceptual

set to seek a water fountain or a hotel to quench his thirst, which increases for him likelihood of perceiving restaurant signs and decreases the likelihood of visualizing other objects at that moment in time. Likewise a worker who has a strong need for affiliation, when he walks into a hall tends to look for his colleagues.

Learning: The state of learning influences and plays a crucial role in the perception process. However, it should be recognized that the role of learning is more pronounced in respect of complex forms of perception where the symbolic content that is familiar creeps into the process. People perceive as per their levels of learning. It is therefore essential for the organization to make its management knowledgeable and educated for their effective performance and behavior.

Specialization: The modern organizations value specialization. Consequently the specialty of a person that casts him in a particular organizational role predisposes him to select certain stimuli and to disregard others. Thus in a lengthy report a departmental head will first notice the text relating to his department.

Social background: The employee perceptions are based on social backgrounds. Socially developed employees have a more positive attitude towards development rather than less developed employees.

There is a phenomenon referred to "Inattentional Blindness": a failure by a person to perceive objects that are there because our attention is focused elsewhere. Inattentional blindness occurs even when the object of interest is momentarily obscured by something of importance that would have been noticed had the observer been more generally aware. For example, if you have ever entered a hall and been so focused on finding a seat that you did not notice one of your friends waving to you from across the room, you experienced inattentional blindness. Too much focus on the task of finding a seat obscured your ability to recognize the wave from your friend. Inattentional blindness happens when what we are looking for does not match the objects that we are seeing.

When what we expect to see does not match what we see, we can experience inattentional blindness. When systems are set up to handle certain kinds of processes, problems, or issues, they can be blind to opportunities for improvement. When ideas are proposed that do not match what we are expecting to hear, we ignore them or are not even aware that they were expressed because of inattentional blindness. This happens most of the time in organizations when leaders are pushing for a certain agenda and, when leaders have a strong focus on what they want to achieve, they may miss opportunities. Their inattentional blindness may make them fail by overlooking other perspectives of the same issue.

What sets great leaders apart is their ability to manage perceptions in the process of handling people and organizational issues. What people often observe or assess as your ability to be a leader and your effectiveness becomes their perception, which in turn becomes reality. Perceptions that are not well managed become rumors, then gossip, then backbiting, which leads to destruction of the leader himself or even the functioning of the organization. Unmanaged perceptions therefore become a reality that was not intended and that becomes the image of the leadership in that organization. Employees then begin to interpret information and decisions emanating from the management in the light of the perception developed. Perception management requires, asking questions and getting feedback from others. Most leaders typically do not receive feedback very often and, in many cases, when given it is usually not in the most constructive manner. However, effective feedback provides information that lets you know how you are doing.

Perception management is hard work because it requires that one is aware of himself as well as he is sensitive to his response and reaction to other people; however, we can all grow and develop individually and as leaders as we work at giving and receiving feedback. The Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu said, "Knowing others is wisdom, knowing yourself is enlightenment." As leaders we need to go beyond knowing others, we need to understand our own strengths and weaknesses by going deep into ourselves in addition to listening to our voices. This enlightenment will expand self-knowledge and enhance our self-confidence, which will enable us to work more effectively as leaders

Leaders can protect themselves from erroneous perception if they work sensitively with their employees by considering different points of view. This can be achieved by encouraging those around you to offer their observations, ideas, and suggestions even though they may challenge the stated goal or outcome. They may be identifying a stamp ling block that other team members are not seeing. A leader can also step away from the action and take another view to make sure he is seeing the whole picture, not just the part that you find most interesting. Finally one should be aware that we often see what we expect to see. We can be blind to even big changes that do not match our expected reality.

3. Conclusion

Managers and leaders in organization are entrusted with employees whom they must work with and through to realize organizational objectives. The practice of leaning how to manage perception, needs to be taken seriously and if one has a bad perception of the situation and do not consider all of the facts that are involved such as external factors that you or anyone else have no control over you may make the wrong decision, in turn causing negative consequences for the organization and yourself. In order to have good perception of any given situation you must analyze all of the pertinent

information involved in a timely manner, without making a hasty decision. In addition, a leader should develop good listening skills and decisiveness in order to succeed and be able to deal effectively with all problems that are directed to him for resolution.

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