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LeaderShift: Decision/Judgment Quality **How Great Leaders Manage Perceptions**

By Joe Hunt

As a leader, how well do you communicate? Have you ever been misunderstood because of things you've said taken out of context? It's a leader's nightmare. And a terrifying reality, how warped other people's perceptions of you can be, despite your best intentions.

Most leaders I meet in my work are excellent communicators. And yet, even they have a difficult time coming across the way they intend. Most of us struggle with this.



Even presidential candidates who have speech writers and spin experts in their corner don't always come across the way they intend. It's another election year and already the press is bouncing on outrageous statements from candidates. From the looks of it, we're in for an entertaining campaign. It's open season for both the press and candidates to take things out of context and misinterpret to suit their own agendas.

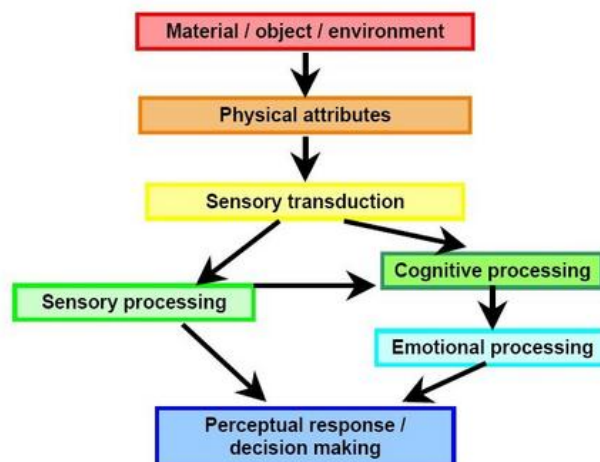
Human beings have a tendency to distort other people's messages to fit their own views. We've researched all this, and we know that perceivers are prone to many predictable errors. Perception is governed by rules and biases that we can identify and anticipate.

And still, it's up to the person speaking to clear up the signals they send and do their best to communicate what they intend in spite of this. Leaders cannot succeed without telegraphing their thoughts and intentions.

The Perception Process

Listeners experience a flurry of brain activity as they try to understand what you're saying. They're sizing you up, forming opinions of you and your message, comparing you to others, and remembering similar situations and opinions.

Most of what happens in perceivers' minds is automatic and unconscious. This is Phase 1 of the perception process, and it is riddled with bias.



In Phase 2, perceivers use the part of the brain concerned with logic and reason. This is a much more effortful thinking process, one that requires energy. Consequently, they avoid it to conserve brain resources.

More often than not, Phase 2 is never activated. People form opinions of you and your message with Phase 1 assumptions—and then they move on.

Two Flawed Assumptions

It's possible you think you don't need to manage perceptions. After all, you're pretty good at communicating and people seem to like you. You may think that as long as you're authentic and sincere, you shouldn't worry about how you're perceived.

“Statistically speaking, there are only weak correlations between how others see us and how we believe we are seen,” notes social psychologist Heidi Grant Halvorson in *No One Understands You and What to Do About It* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2015).

Without even realizing it, we're likely operating under two flawed assumptions:

1. Other people see you objectively as you are.
2. Other people see you as you see yourself.

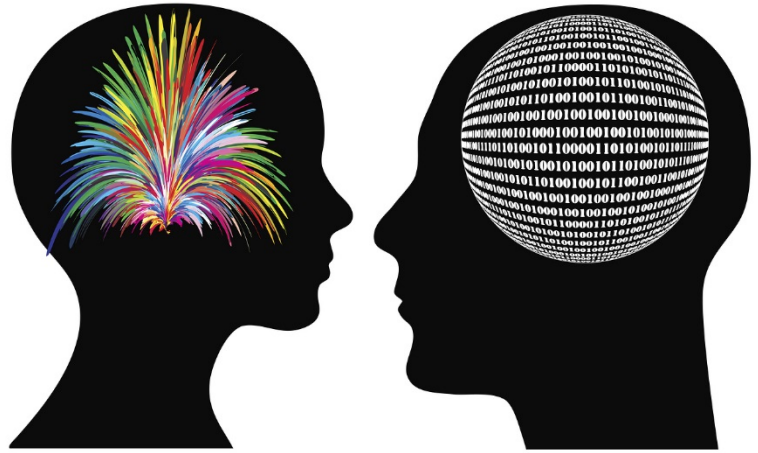
Neither of these beliefs is true. You're much harder to read than you imagine.

For example, your emotions are much less obvious than you realize. Strong emotions are easy to read: fear, rage, surprise, disgust. But the more subtle emotions we experience daily—frustration, annoyance, disappointment, impatience and respect—may not actually register on our faces. When they do, they're usually indistinguishable from other emotions.

How “Judgeable” Are You?

Some of us are more knowable than others. Leaders who are easier to understand deliberately express themselves in ways that encourage more accurate perceptions. Psychologists refer to this as “judgeability.”

If you don't tell people what they need to know, their brains will fill in the blanks, creating a personality profile that may or may not be accurate.



Perception Biases

Perceivers rely on rules of thumb so their brains don't have to work too hard:

1. **Confirmation Bias.** When people look at you, they see what they're expecting to see. They hear what they're expecting to hear. They seek (and will probably find) evidence that matches their expectations.
2. **Primacy Effect.** First impressions strongly influence how we interpret and remember information. People resist changing opinions once they're formed.
3. **Stereotypes.** Most people are biased, yet they deny being so. We are unconsciously influenced by stereotypical beliefs about gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, professions, socioeconomic classes and education. Our brains are wired to quickly sort friend from foe. We cannot turn off this feature, but we can become conscious of it.
4. **Halo Effect.** We tend to assume that people who possess one positive quality also have many others.
5. **False-Consensus Effect.** We assume other people think and feel exactly the way we do. We erroneously believe our bad habits are universal and normal.

3 Perceptual Filters

You never start from scratch when meeting new people. Their brains are rapidly filling in details about you, even if you've never met them before.

We view others through three lenses or filters: trust, power and ego.

The Trust Filter

The first thing people do when listening to you is determine whether to trust you. This decision is made almost entirely unconsciously.

Leaders can build trust in many ways:

- **Project Warmth and Competence.** This is perhaps the most important component of gaining others' trust. How well do you communicate friendliness, loyalty and empathy? Do you come across as intelligent, skillful and effective?
- **Trust Them First.** We are naturally inclined to reciprocate favors and extend trust to someone who has trusted us first.
- **Pay Attention.** Leaders who make eye contact, smile, nod, recognize individuals by name and really listen are the ones who excel at communicating.
- **Share Your Stories.** When you share past experiences (especially your mistakes), you become vulnerable, thereby extending trust to listeners.
- **Walk Your Talk.** People need to see you make good on your promises and carry out your stated intentions.

The Power Filter

Power changes the way we see other people, especially when there's a power differential.

When leaders speak, they must be mindful of how their power influences their message. Failing to address the issue leaves room for perceivers to fill in the blanks.

The Ego Filter

The ego lens has one goal: to protect and enhance the perceiver's self-esteem. Perceivers will always protect their self-esteem, including their decision to receive or reject a leader's message.

Successful Communication

Identify your ingrained assumptions, biases and filters so you can manage them more effectively. Halvorson suggests the following strategies:

1. **Take your time.** Always remember that your first impression may be dead wrong. There are always other possible interpretations of someone's behavior.
- 2.
3. **Commit to being fair.** We sometimes forget to be fair when we judge someone. The more you consciously implement fairness, the more accurate your perceptions will be.

Beware of the confirmation bias. Once you form an impression, you'll seek evidence to confirm it. You'll ignore other behaviors, even (and perhaps especially) if they contradict your impressions. Have the courage to confront your biases and accept reality.

Joe Hunt is a Managing Partner at Hunt Executive Search/The Hunt Group, a boutique executive search firm that provides human capital solutions to consumer goods, retail, life sciences and diversified industrial markets.

Contact Joe Hunt:

212.861.2680 | 800.486.8476 | info@huntsearch.com

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