

Part One

Improve Your Perception—Take Control
of How Others See You

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Power of Perception

There is no truth. There is only perception.

—Gustave Flaubert
French writer, author of *Madame Bovary*

How Do You Want to Be Known?

One morning in 1888, a man wakes up and goes outside to retrieve his newspaper. He returns to his home and sits down in his favorite chair as he does every day. He begins reading the newspaper and quickly turns to the obituary section. The man's brother has just died, and he wants to read what was said about him. In the obituary section, he is struck by the large headline: "The merchant of death is dead." He continues reading. The article tells of a merchant who became "rich by finding ways to kill more people faster than ever before." He finishes reading the obituary, closes the newspaper, and sits in shock. He is speechless and doesn't move. The obituary is supposed to be about his brother, but it was mistakenly written about him. He is alive—not dead—reading his own obituary.¹

This man, the inventor of dynamite, certainly doesn't want to be remembered as a "merchant of death." He decides to take

his fortune and use it to establish awards for accomplishments in various fields that benefit humanity. These awards are eventually granted to such famous people as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, the Dalai Lama, and Nelson Mandela.

The person who established these awards, including the Nobel Peace Prize, was Dr. Alfred Nobel. He is remembered today for establishing the Nobel Prizes—not for his explosive inventions. Though Dr. Nobel was initially perceived one way, he was able to completely change the perception people had of him and ensure that he was remembered in a positive light.

The Power of Perception

Leadership is a performance. You have to be conscious about your behavior, because everyone else is.

—Carly Fiorina
Former chairman and chief executive officer
of Hewlett-Packard Company

You are being perceived, either positively or negatively, every day of your work (and personal) life. Others are constantly viewing and making judgments of you. The impact of this perception can happen quickly; it takes only a few seconds to form an opinion. Even though you don't have control of how others view you, you do have control over your actions, which can substantially affect others' perceptions. David Sokol, chairman of the board of MidAmerican Energy Holdings Company, said, "My father taught me that it is difficult to control others' perceptions, but I can always control my own actions, and these actions can, over time, alter those perceptions."²

While this book focuses on how you can take *some* control of how others see you, it's important to note that there *is* a limit to the amount of control you have. In other words, you

can do only so much. You can't influence someone's perception 100 percent of the time. Recognizing this limitation helps you accept the circumstances when you encounter people who simply won't change their perceptions of you. Though unchangeable situations like these are rare, it is necessary to mention them. This entire section is focused on others' beliefs about you, and how you can beneficially alter them.

Proactively shaping others' perceptions of you is a key strategy for standing out, gaining credit for your work, and, ultimately, achieving career advancement.

The power of perception is important because it completely determines how people view you, and, therefore, how they act toward and around you. Their opinion can be positive or negative. If it's negative, it can undermine your career. You'll have to work even harder to make sure people appreciate your value and notice your overall impact. If it's positive, it can enhance your career and make it easier for you to attain what you want. Either way, you want to influence perception so that you are being seen as you want to be seen. When you can alter people's opinions to benefit yourself—by compelling others to see you as a valuable and impactful person at work—you will gain respect and influence. Proactively shaping others' perceptions of you is a key strategy for standing out, gaining credit for your work, and, ultimately, achieving career advancement.

Just as Dr. Alfred Nobel showed that he could make a choice—one that not many people would have made—to change others' opinions of him, you too can make choices that will positively affect perception. You want people to see you as the talented, smart, effective employee that you are. To be viewed as anything less would be a disservice to you and to all the effort that you put into your job. Having people on your side recognizing your talents and your worth will greatly enhance their appreciation for what you do.

What Is Perception?

It's not what you look at that matters.

It's what others see.

—Henry David Thoreau

American author and poet, best known for his work *Walden*

Perception is what someone notices, sees, or is aware of. When you perceive, you often unconsciously observe what is happening without being consciously aware of the content that's forming in your mind. The author of an article titled "Unwritten Rules: What You Don't Know Can Hurt Your Career," Laura Sabattini, PhD, says, "Employees learn not only by observing individual behaviors, but also by noting how people interact with one another, dress, and communicate verbally and nonverbally (for example, through body language but also via e-mail and at meetings)." You often form opinions when you have preconceived ideas about a topic or person you're observing, even if what you observe isn't real or true. Perception takes the prior knowledge you already have and filters your observations through this lens.

So how *do* others see and create an opinion of you? Perception is affected by a variety of factors, including:

- What people notice about you.
- The behaviors that make an impression.
- The image you have.
- The attitudes you project.
- The opinions you hold.

I have chosen to not address how appearance (clothing, grooming, style, etc.) affects perception and image, as there are many books already devoted to the subject. While it's certainly important, it's not an aspect of perception discussed in this book.

Beware of Ego Vision

You need to be honest with yourself about who you are before you can focus on the way you want others to perceive you. Everyone wants the promotion when the opportunity comes along. However, most of us fail to see that we may not be performing strongly enough in the areas that we need to excel in to receive a promotion. One client of mine who works at one of the largest design firms in the world said, “I have had people who think that because they can design a bathroom, they’re ready to lead a design team for an expansion of a 150,000-square-foot addition to a mall.”

You can begin by conducting a candid assessment of your true skill level. By comparing the way that others perceive you with your genuine skill level, you can determine whether your current ability corresponds to where you want to go. This is essentially about getting to the next stage, and to do that, you must be able to assess yourself—and your skill level—correctly. Though you might believe that you’re ready for advancement, you may not be evaluating your skill level accurately. You need to figure out what abilities are needed at the next level and discern whether you have them before you even consider the next step.

People can’t exert influence if their own perception of who they are is delusional. Before embarking on the next step, you have to ask, “Based on my current skills, am I ready to take on the next level?”

How Does Perception Work?

The reality of life is that your perceptions—right or wrong—influence everything else you do. When you get a proper perspective of your perceptions, you may be surprised how many other things fall into place.

—Roger Birkman

American psychologist and expert on behavioral assessment

Where does perception begin, and how does it progress into forming an actual opinion about something? Perception always starts with an observation that ultimately becomes cemented in your mind as the truth. The perception process includes eight levels that the mind goes through to create an ultimate and unwavering perception that you believe is your reality (see Figure 1.1).

The first step in the perception process is to *observe* something, such as a person, event, or situation. The step following this initial observation is to make an *assessment* of what you have observed, which involves reviewing and trying to understand it. After assessment, the formation of an *opinion* occurs. This entails the need to contemplate information that the mind collects. Opinion leads directly to the tendency to make a *judgment* based on the feelings, thoughts, and opinions developed. The moment a judgment becomes active in your mind, you have initiated the process of *perception*.

Once perception has started, the *reality* of what you see begins to take effect. This provides a level of certainty. Once the perception becomes the reality, the person begins to think that this is what he or she actually *believes*, and develops faith and confidence in this belief. The final step occurs when one

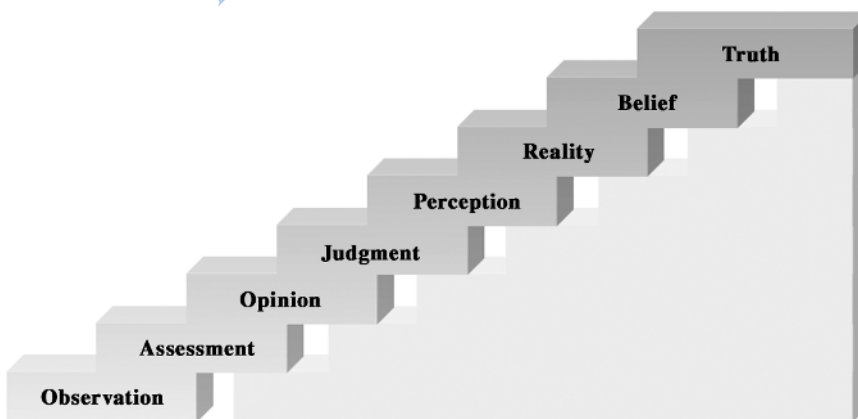


FIGURE 1.1 The Perception Process

considers the perception to be *truth*. The truth provides such certainty for a person that it makes it difficult to change or alter the perception that one has created.

By understanding these eight levels, you'll be equipped with the necessary awareness to challenge the perceptions people have of you. Further, you will resist forming unfounded opinions and judgments of others.

In an article titled "Perception Matters," Mike Myatt, managing director of coaching and leadership firm N2growth, took the expression "seeing the glass half empty or half full" and expanded the number of people who could view the same glass in many different ways.

It is quite clear reviewing the 11 different viewpoints that everyone can view the same situation differently. These are excellent examples of how perception changes based on each person. Someone's disposition, prior experience, and background directly impact how one views others. As you can see, 11 vastly different observations are created by answering the simple question, "Is the glass half empty or half full?"

1. **The Optimist:** The glass is half full.
2. **The Pessimist:** The glass is half empty.
3. **The Salesperson:** How much water would you like your glass to hold?
4. **The Accountant:** Does the glass really need all that water?
5. **The Attorney:** If there are enough people on one side of this issue I can file a class action suit.
6. **The Investment Banker:** I'm only 50 percent leveraged.
7. **The Engineer:** The glass is twice as big as it needs to be.
8. **The Quantum Physicist:** The glass has a 50 percent probability of holding water.
9. **The Philosopher:** If nobody looks at the glass, who's to say whether it's half full or half empty?
10. **The Politician:** Let's take a poll and then I'll render my opinion as to how full or empty the glass is.
11. **The Servant Leader:** Whatever the amount of water, I'll use it first to quench the thirst of those I lead.⁴

These 11 statements illustrate the fact that others constantly perceive you in a variety of ways, based on their own outlooks, attitudes, and backgrounds. Now imagine what it's like when you move beyond the simple subject of viewing a glass of water and take it to the most complicated living creatures in the world—human beings. Every person has his or her own unique way of viewing you. The more fully you can understand this concept and recognize the numerous ways in which you might be perceived, the greater control you will have over how that perception impacts how others view you. Without this knowledge, you allow people to develop their own (usually false) perceptions of you, founded through their own history and influence. When you understand how one seemingly straightforward situation can be viewed a million different ways, you begin to see the power of how perception affects others' opinions of you.

Why Is Perception Important?

It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you'll do things differently.

—Warren Buffett

American investor, industrialist, and philanthropist

Everything you do on a daily basis is being observed and documented inside the brains of every single person with whom you come into contact. These interactions can be extensive (for example, having conversations with your boss or employee) or limited (for example, copying someone on an e-mail). In either case, everyone has an opinion of you that directly affects your ability to be promoted, receive assignments you want, get a raise or bonus, and more.

Everything you do is being remembered by someone.

Everything you do is being remembered by someone. This is why perception is important. Case in point: A senior director at Procter & Gamble recently contacted me for coaching. He had spent three months focusing on improving the perception others had of him so that he could win a promotion when the next promotion cycle came around. When the time came, someone else was chosen instead of him. This was when our work began.

I told him during one of our coaching sessions, “Imagine that all of your colleagues have been watching everything you’ve been doing for five years. Although your actions have made an impression on them, they aren’t even aware of this impression. It’s not until they are asked during the promotion cycle, ‘Do you think that *this senior director* deserves a promotion?’ that they will call up all the unconscious situations, circumstances, observations, evaluations, and opinions they have generated in the five years of interacting with you.” The truth of this statement surprised him, and he immediately knew it to be accurate. My client realized how the perception others had of him during the previous years had negatively determined the immediate promotion cycle for which he had spent only a few months preparing.

Perceptions clearly have a substantial impact on your career. Once formed, they are difficult to change, and attempting to do so can take a long time. An article titled “Shape Perceptions of Your Work, Early and Often” points out: “Perceptions are also self-sustaining because, once people have formed an impression of another, they stop actively gathering new information.” In other words, once I have decided that you are smart, I won’t pay as much attention to every little thing you do, which means you can more easily get away with being not so brilliant without my noticing.⁵

People will rely on the perception they have of you rather than the actual work, accomplishments, and value you’ve contributed. As I clearly conveyed in the case with my client, the

past five years of perception are more important in determining whether you are promoted than are the three months (or even days) during which you hastily prepare before your performance review or next promotion cycle.

The Benefits of Perception Management

You are only as wise as others perceive you to be.

—M. Shawn Cole

Ensuring that you create the right impression inside your company will enable you to greatly benefit your career. The following describes the advantages of managing perception.

Impact Your Career Advancement

How quickly and successfully you advance in a company is a result of the perception you create, not just the merit you have accumulated or the skill level you have achieved.

Example: A senior business development manager who worked for Cisco Systems for 11 years contacted me for coaching because he wasn't advancing up the corporate ladder as quickly as he wanted to. Even though he had solid performance reviews and excellent job skills, he had gone four years without a promotion.

This man's attitude was that his work should speak for itself, and that he didn't need to do anything to help improve perception. By operating under this mind-set, he did very little to increase his exposure or visibility with senior management. Thus, executives at his company didn't know how valuable he was to the organization, which negated any opportunities for career advancement.

Keep Your Status as a Desired Employee Inside the Company

You can't rely solely on skill, merit, and hard work for employability and career success. You realize at some point in your career

that your continued achievement at a given company is based on perception.

Example: Two employees, both accountants but at two different firms (Ernst & Young and KPMG), came out of college and worked at their respective companies the same amount of time. They put in long hours, worked hard, and had similar skill sets. They both had nearly identical career success. On paper, they seemed to be very similar. However, one got laid off and the other one didn't. Why would this happen? Discussing the situation further, the two friends realized that one had created a better perception in his organization than the other had. Even though they both worked hard and developed first-rate skills, one had earned a reputation of not being much of a team player. This was all it took for the person to be laid off.

You can't rely solely on skill, merit, and hard work for employability and career success.

Perception is important; it can directly affect whether you are a desired employee. If an organization doesn't find you desirable, then you lose employability.

Eliminate the Negative Ways Others May See You

Others can view your behavior and attitude negatively. They may dislike you or look unfavorably on something you do. You want to eliminate these damaging perceptions and take actions that cause others to see you in a more positive light.

Example: Five people attend a regular weekly business meeting. Each has some personality trait that others might view negatively. One person talks too much; another doesn't listen well; the third person is quiet and doesn't speak up very often; the fourth is outspoken and assertive with her opinions; and the fifth person acts like a know-it-all, coming across as arrogant and condescending.

None of these people have any idea that they're exhibiting a behavior that someone else dislikes. The key to eliminating these habits is to begin to notice how your behavior affects

others. For example, when you speak up, do others begin to lose interest, look away, make faces, or become agitated? Observing others' reactions to you is the first step to becoming aware of the very actions that others find objectionable and then to being able to change them.

Reduce the Number of Career-Limiting Maneuvers

While it may take only a few moments to do something that others perceive critically, it becomes a career-limiting move and can impair you professionally for a long time to come.

Example: An employee and his manager were e-mailing each other back and forth about how to handle an issue with a client, and were both being honest about this client's particularly difficult personality. Some of these remarks were disparaging. When the manager provided, via e-mail, a detailed solution to resolve the issue, the employee decided to forward this e-mail to the client. However, the employee also accidentally included the electronic trail of disparaging private comments the manager had thought to be making in confidence. The client took offense to what was said in the e-mail and pulled the account from the firm.

Imagine that you were the manager in this scenario. You would have judgments and a strong opinion about the employee who made this error. You might judge the employee as careless, and most likely you would be hesitant to trust him again. It might take months or even years to restore this confidence.

Protect Your Online Public Image

The world is nothing but my perception of it.

I see only through myself. I hear only through the filter of my story.

—Byron Katie

American speaker and author, specializing in self-inquiry

The online world has added yet another dimension to the importance of perception. The World Wide Web was nonexistent 20 years ago, but its impact today has huge ramifications for your image. In 2010, the Nielsen Company produced a report about the effect of social media, which found that 75 percent of U.S. households (and 74 percent globally) visit a social networking site regularly. In short, three out of four people with whom you interact are engaging in social networking.⁶

Every online social networking site (for example, LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace) is out there for anyone to view. For that reason, you need to be aware of how you are portraying yourself in this public way. Whatever you do can be viewed by your company and directly affect how others perceive you. This is why it's best to separate your private life from your professional life whenever possible.

If you choose to display information on your social networking sites publicly, be aware that you always are connected to and representing the company for which you work. Its brand and image are extremely important to it. You must take care not to say anything negative online about your job, boss, coworkers, salary, lack of raises, and so on, because everything you say directly reflects on your company. People have been fired because of statements they posted on social networking sites. You also want to be careful about posting pictures from parties, vacations, or other personal events that portray you unfavorably or unintentionally reveal information about you. A client of mine told me once that his coworker had called in sick on Halloween. The following week, however, her boss saw pictures of her on Facebook in costume, looking quite well.

This is especially true if you are (or are about to be) looking for employment. Remember that employers don't just use online search engines to research job candidates. They rely more and more on social networking. In fact, a study conducted by employment search engine CareerBuilder.com found that nearly half of employers use social networking sites to research

potential job candidates. Information technology companies are especially likely to screen candidates this way; two-thirds of tech companies surveyed scour sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and MySpace to gather an up-close, behind-the-scenes look at candidates they can't determine from merely interviewing or reading résumés. So if you're in the job market—or may be in the future—be aware of what you put out on the Internet. If it's out there—good or bad—it's just a mouse click away from a hiring manager. And the results can be catastrophic. CareerBuilder.com's survey revealed that one in three employers found content that caused them *not* to hire a candidate.

It can feel as if you are just writing in your journal when you are on these social networking sites, and you might assume that only your friends (outside of work) will read them. It's easy to forget how vast is the network of people who can read what you write. You must always remain aware of how you are portraying yourself.

Here are a few tips to ensure that others perceive you positively online:

- Search your name on the Internet to see what content is on the Web.
- Check out other major social networks to assess whether you have made the impression you want to make.
- Identify the Web pages where you have posted information about yourself (including your résumé or other work-related items) and make sure they are up-to-date and positively reflect you.
- Remove any negative content.
- Provocative or inappropriate photographs or information top the list of red flags to employers. When in doubt, take it out.
- Create favorable content about yourself and try to make it appear as high as possible in search results.

- Use privacy settings so that your personal information and photos aren't viewable by the public.
- Write and submit well-researched, articulate letters to the editors of the top trade publications in your industry. Focus on current, relevant issues.
- Purchase your name as a domain name and create an active website that makes the best impression possible.
- Post on free publisher websites articles that you've written that convey your expertise.
- Write comments on other blogs that show your level of intelligence and expertise.
- Create a blog and write quality content for it.

The perception you create at work can be directly influenced by what you publicize on your social networking sites. Review all of these sites immediately, and remove anything that portrays you in a negative or unfavorable light.

I provide a summary of the key points and specific action steps at the end of each chapter. By implementing each of these ideas, you'll fulfill your PVI potential and reach your deserved next level.

Summary and Action Steps

Chapter 2 discusses the seven different influencers that directly affect and alter perception. Before we deal with these topics, let's review the material from Chapter 1 and see what actions you can take based on what has been covered.

Summary

- *Perception occurs on a daily basis.* Other people are constantly observing and forming opinions of you. Even though

perception directly affects how people view you, you do have control over your actions, which can alter perceptions.

- *Understand the eight levels of perception* (see Figure 1.1). Perception starts with an *observation* and ends with someone believing this perception as the *truth*.
- *Perception can directly affect your career advancement*. Perception helps you remain employable and reduces the number of career-limiting moves. Using your perception to your benefit eliminates the negative ways others might view you, and continues to enhance your level of desirability.
- *Online social networking affects perception*. If not monitored correctly, social networking can negatively affect the way members of your company perceive you. What you say and post is out there for public view, so it's important to be aware of how you portray yourself.

Take Action Now

- Consider how others perceive you in your company, both positively and negatively. Review the section “What Is Perception?” to help you generate ideas and information. Schedule with yourself a 30-minute self-reflection session that provides you the time to write out a description of how you are perceived.
- Conduct an assessment of your skill level wherein you honestly analyze your skills in terms of where you are versus where you want to be—and what you need to do to close this gap. Make two lists: one with the current abilities you possess, and a second one that identifies the skills needed at the next level. Compare the two and discern where you need to focus your improvement efforts right now.
- Review the section on “The Benefits of Perception Management” and select which one most resonates with you. Have you ever found yourself in a situation similar to any of

these—as either the person being perceived or the one seeing someone else in a certain light?

- Review all of your social networking sites from two perspectives. First, make sure you portray yourself as you want to be perceived. Second, make sure you represent your company's image appropriately.

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