

CHANGE THE SNAPSHOT: CHANGE PERCEPTIONS

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Perceptions are clearly important to executives since they can make or break a career. The article gives some solutions to the most frequently asked questions that executives may ask themselves and their Human Resources Development (HRD) practitioner about perceptions and how to change them. The HRD practitioner may want to bring in an external coach to assist the executive in understanding the potency of the perceptions and for help in changing the behaviors that led to the perceptions. The article gives case examples from the authors' coaching and consulting practices.

INTRODUCTION

Just as a photograph becomes a memory of our perceived reality, or an indelible snapshot of a particular moment in time, in business, when we first meet and work with people, we form a snapshot or first impression. The snapshot is an image of our initial perception of people and may include our conclusions about their behavior, the kind of people they are, or their role. For instance, when we meet new executives who appear poised, confident and seem to be getting results, our impression is positive. Quickly we determine that we trust, like, or want to work with them. On the other hand, when we meet leaders whose behaviors are curt and abrupt, who seem to know all the answers, we decide that they are arrogant, and perhaps that we don't like, don't trust or don't want to work with them. Whether accurate or not, we keep these perceptions filed away in our memories. Perceptions like snapshots are difficult to change once they are imbedded in a person's mind. The truism that you can't make a first impression twice is particularly powerful in the business setting.

Perceptions have the capability of enhancing or destroying careers. For example, in the political arena, candidates viewed as "stiff," "weak," "dull," "quick to anger," or "not in touch" found their political ambitions dashed. In the corporate arena, once highly esteemed, high visibility executives discovered themselves regarded in the public eye as "thieves," "crooks," or unethical. Whether these perceptions were true or not, once they became embedded in the public psyche, their careers were doomed.

Likewise, people who work out of the public eye in thousands of business and other organizational settings must realize that perceptions others have of them have the power to either boost or derail their careers. What is unfortunate but all too common is that the negative perceptions are more likely to be unspoken, that is, not directly and clearly articulated to the executive. If they are not aware of these perceptions and do not take immediate action to change them, their careers could be in jeopardy.

IDENTIFYING COMMON PERCEPTIONS THAT DERAIL EXECUTIVES

With the assistance of a neutral third party such as a coach, executives can become aware of the perceptions or snapshots they are creating in an organization and how these snapshots affect their careers. In addition, the HRD practitioner can collaborate with the coach to form a team of support for the executive to reinforce new behaviors and ideas. Such a team can make a significant difference in the success of an executive's career.

There are a number of common perceptions that can derail an executive career. The ones that we have found most common in our practice include being perceived as:

- Too aggressive in making changes
- Not being a team player
- Not influencing the right people
- Not being collaborative enough
- Arrogant
- Not on board with corporate vision
- Running roughshod over direct reports
- Playing favorites with direct reports

One of the most difficult challenges for executives is changing the perceptions others have of them, particularly perceptions that have the capacity to negatively impact their careers. Typically, these impressions are conclusions about an executive's behavior, style, or way of thinking and being. Executives may request coaching themselves or have coaching suggested to them by their HRD practitioner or by their manager, because it is recognized that negative perceptions can slow down performance and get in the way of working effectively. Coaching helps them change the negative perceptions that others form about them, because coaches can illuminate blind spots and provide crucial, straightforward, honest feedback. This article will highlight several questions that executives or HRD practitioners can ask about changing perceptions and also provide insights from the authors' coaching practices.

Questions Executives and HRD Practitioners Ask About Changing Perceptions

Do first impressions really last?

I know myself. Why can't I trust my self-perception?

If I'm doing the 'right thing' for the company, why should I care about perceptions?

Do I really have to take perceptions seriously?

How can others help me?

How will people know that I am trying to change perceptions?

Do I have to admit I may have made a mistake?

Why is rebuilding trust so difficult?

Do First Impressions Really Last?

Changing perceptions take time. In fact, it usually takes six to nine months to change them. Because of the near indelible nature of perceptions, changing them will not happen overnight. Often, people in the organization have to be told of the leaders' new behaviors and see them demonstrated over and over again. HRD practitioners can reinforce the changes leaders make with their coaches. Josephine, a senior level executive in a high technology company, was a fast rising star. She learned from 360-feedback that her direct reports thought that she was taking over their projects and enjoying solving their problems for them. Their impressions were that she did not want to give her staff opportunities for growth and development of new skills. On the other hand, she stayed up late every night, feeling resentful for not being able to get her staff to take responsibility for their own work. Over the course of many months and by working closely with her coach, she began to understand how her own behavior was contributing to the perceptions; and with the help of her HRD practitioner, she began to provide professional development for her staff.

First impressions can last forever or until the executive works long and hard to change these perceptions. When an executive demonstrates automatic or habitual behaviors, these reinforce the belief that peoples' perceptions are correct. In addition, they can lead people to make up their own reasons for why the executives are doing what they are doing. In order to change perceptions, people must see the executive doing the new behavior over and over again for long periods of time in order to change the "snapshot" that they have formed.

I Know Myself. Why Can't I Trust My Self-Perception?

Research done by Mike Lombardo of Lominger Inc., and reported at the 10th Annual Lominger User's Conference in 2002, indicates that self-reports on 360-degree feedback are usually .75 above actual behavior on a 5- point scale. This means that people typically view themselves much more favorably than others view them. This "self-halo" effect is in part a defense mechanism. We rarely know how we come across, unless we have specifically taken the time and effort to develop self-awareness, both by becoming an objective, third-party observer of our own behavior, and by getting the objective, honest feedback from others whom we trust. Lominger's research (Lombardo, 2002) indicates that people who derail in their careers are most likely to overrate themselves on 360-instrumented feedback. "Self" is the least accurate rater, and particularly on interpersonal skills. Most successful executives know what they do well, where their skills and performance are mediocre, and most importantly, what they need to improve. The best way for executives to protect themselves against derailment is to get detailed information about strengths and areas for development early enough in their career to compensate for weaknesses.

One way for executives to gain perspective about others' point of view is to conduct a 360-degree feedback process or to cross check their self views with others outside of their department, division, or organization. Leaders can learn a lot from people with whom they interface at work. It's important to compare self-appraisal with the results of feedback from others, keeping in mind the possibility of errors in self-rating. Then executives can use the information to enhance or change behaviors or perceptions to form a view based on reality.

If I'm Doing the 'Right Thing' for the Company, Why Should I Care About Perceptions?

Steve, an executive VP, started on a controversial course of action without communicating his motives and intent to his peers and direct reports. Steve did not think it was necessary to communicate his intentions, because he knew he was making the right decisions for the company to succeed and his intentions were purely honorable. However, Steve was perceived as a “me only” player, because he did not share information with his peers or his team who thought he was overly ambitious and wanted to get another promotion, not help the company. Once Steve was viewed in this way, that view became the lens for all future interactions. In other words, Steve's team and his peers formed a snapshot and that snapshot “stuck,” even when his behavior and intentions did not match the perception. The only way Steve was able to change the snapshot was by making his intentions explicit with the help of coaching so that he was able to influence the way people thought about him.

The power of perceptions, particularly negative ones, is that they can inhibit our ability to truly succeed. Executives might actually have their company's best interests at heart, but if others do not share that view, or see things differently, it does not matter. Having honorable intentions are not enough; executives must make visible their thinking and their reasoning so that people can understand the changes they want to make and not paint the executive with a brush that's formed on little data.

Do I Really Have To Take Perceptions Seriously?

Executives must take perceptions seriously no matter what the reality of the situation actually is. Perceptions about the former CEO of General Electric, Jack Welch's employment contract, within the context of revelations about greed at the executive level of corporations, threatened to tarnish what had been a stellar reputation. Therefore, he wrote a letter to The Wall Street Journal (September 16, 2002), and stated, “One thing I learned during my years as CEO is that perception matters. And in these times when public confidence and trust have been shaken, I've learned the hard way that perception matters more than ever.”

Perceptions are not just “shadow puppets” as Michelle, a VP at a biotech firm, told us. Perceptions shape reality. At first, it was difficult for Michelle to accept that perceptions of her were important, since Michelle was achieving results for the company at meteoric speed. Unfortunately, Michelle had overlooked her peers in making rapid changes and they were furious. The company culture was one of collaboration. Her peers did not see her behavior as collaborative but rather as “empire building.” Michelle knew that empire building wasn't even on her radar screen so she dismissed their perceptions and did not take them seriously. After a 360-degree interview process, Michelle was able to understand the overwhelming evidence of her behavior and why their perceptions existed. Then the rebuilding of image – the changing of the snapshots – could begin.

Work on changing perceptions is more important than work on changing or separating reality and perceptions. Defensiveness and argument do not change perception and often reinforce the perception as reality for the other person. The question to ask and reflect on is “How do others see me?”

How Can Others Help Me?

Sean, an executive with a fast-growing high technology company, had worked for a number of East-Coast companies before relocating to the West Coast. The corporate cultures in which he had flourished were aggressive and encouraged long hours with a 'pull no punches' type of communication. When Sean got feedback from his boss that his style was rubbing peers and direct reports the wrong way, he enlisted the help of a coach. With the assistance of his coach, Sean created a network of internal people within his department with whom he had built good relationships and included his HRD practitioner. Sean was candid in his desire to change his perceptions, and he asked these colleagues if they would be of assistance. First they helped him understand the company culture in terms of acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Next they advised him about behaviors that were working and what specifically was not working. This feedback was invaluable to Sean. Over the course of many months, these colleagues helped Sean create new perceptions about his behaviors. And, over the course of the months, Sean learned to adapt to the more laid-back culture.

One of the best ways to deal with perceptions is to invest time in creating alliances with advocates that can head off time-consuming miscommunications. An alliance of peers, direct reports, HRD practitioners and one's boss, can support new behaviors. These advocates can be a built in support section that can help an executive change the perceptions of the organization. In some companies, it is important to find a mentor or sponsor who can help you understand the culture of the organization and what behaviors are needed to change some of the perceptions that people hold. A side benefit can be that the organization will see the executives as team players because of working with others.

How Will People Know That I Am Trying To Change Perceptions?

An executive, Jane, learned in an Influence workshop that she did not act like an expert during group meetings. Her peers had an unstated expectation that because of her functional role and title, Jane was to talk and behave in a certain way. It was not enough to come to the same group of peers and act like an expert, Jane had to tell them, "I am the expert in this room, and therefore we need to do X." Without pointing out her new behaviors, the team would have treated her in the same way as they had before the training. They had an initial snapshot of her that did not change, because Jane attended a training class. Their perceptions changed when Jane made explicit her role and her new behavior.

Changing behavior is not enough. Executives have to tell people that they intend to change their behavior and specifically show what they are trying to change. Some people don't recognize the new behaviors; because they still see the first "snapshot" that they took. The executive has to help others develop a new perspective. Typically, others don't even recognize that new behavior is occurring unless they are explicitly told.

Do I Have To Admit I May Have Made a Mistake?

Successful executives admit that they've erred and try to correct their missteps and thereby their image. It's important to admit mistakes, be vulnerable, and ask for help in fixing other's perceptions. For some executives, admitting mistakes is one of the most

difficult things that they have ever done. Tom Ucko, a Leadership Coach, advises executives in his Newsletter of Spring 1999, "Simply tell your associates that in the spirit of continuous improvement, you've chosen to enhance your leadership skills toward becoming the best leader that you can be. This conveys a powerful message about your integrity and models your commitment to professional growth."

For example, Josh, a senior level executive who had recently been promoted into a position with much greater responsibility and scope, received feedback that he was favoring some of the staff over others. This information stunned the executive. Josh decided to call together his new staff and openly shared that development was a priority, not only for him, but also for the entire division. Josh stated that he believed that the best executives were always learning and improving and that one of the things he wanted to work on was creating an egalitarian environment. By admitting that his behavior could have led to certain conclusions, Josh cleared the way for a new spirit of development.

Why Is Rebuilding Trust So Difficult?

Trust is something that one earns. It is not automatically given to everyone who has a vice president title. The way that an executive earns trust is by keeping commitments and following through on what is said. Employees hold executives to their word and if the words are inconsistent or perceived as dishonest, then trust will usually be eroded.

Tomasina, a marketing executive in charge of a high-profile company-wide project, said she was committed to the project. However, as business conditions and priorities changed, Tomasina began to divert the budget and resources to other projects without explaining the business case to her team. They came to the conclusion that Tomasina was not backing them and that their participation on the project would doom their careers in the company. Trust in this executive was broken; and it was almost impossible to get back.

Once trust is broken, it is an uphill battle to rebuild it. This occurs because we form a belief about the person's behavior, and then see all behavior through the lens of that belief. Every nuance is viewed as a possible infraction of the broken trust. In Tomasina's case, after she started diverting budget and resources, her staff construed every word and action as meaning that she was not committed to the original project, whether it was true or not. The team refused to trust her, because they saw her actions as reinforcing the perceptions that they had formed of broken trust.

Therefore, it is best not to break trust in the first place, and if it is broken to know that it will take a long time to rebuild with lots of consistent behaviors and actions that show how trustworthy the executive is. HRD practitioners can reinforce this message from the coach and can help reward executive behaviors that consistently build trust.

CONCLUSION

Prior to the advent of digital photography, photographs could never be altered. Now, photographs can be changed in an instant, not so with human behavior. Each of us, over the course of our development as fully functional human beings and professionals, develops a set of values, beliefs and filters that allow us to make

meaning and sense of our world. Perceptions become our reality and are quite difficult to change.

In business, many executive careers have stalled because of the perceptions of upper management, peers, customers and direct reports. Changing those perceptions is up to the executive. Coaches working with executives who want to change perceptions must first be certain that the executive understands the impact of the perceptions and is motivated to change. Changing the view others hold of the executive requires discipline and focused effort on the part of the executive, and also requires a long-term commitment on the part of the company.

In some cases, given the demands of the workplace, the speed of business life, and an environment that is not supportive of development, it is simply too late or not possible to change perceptions. In these cases, it is wise for executives to choose to live with the results of the perceptions they have created or move on. As one friend wisely stated, "We always take ourselves wherever we go."

We all have our own unique filters that are impacted by our core beliefs, values and ways of thinking. The challenge for the coach is two-fold. They must first convince executives that what is going on in their head, that is, their intentions, may not have been translated by others as planned. The second challenge is that executives have little influence over the filters of others, and must find clear and straightforward ways of communicating and behaving that leaves little room for doubt. Internal HRD practitioners can be helpful in these situations by reinforcing the behavioral changes and pointing out the perceptual shifts that the coach is working on with the executive. Because HRD practitioners are in the organization system, they can provide the coach with important cultural information that can make or break the perceptions others' hold of the executive.

It is possible to change the snapshot, and therefore the perceptions others hold of executives especially when the external coach teams with the internal HRD practitioner. The leadership coach can make the blind spots real for an executive in a way that is understandable and actionable. The HRD practitioner can make the fabric of the organization visible to the coach and to the executive in order to see the necessity for changes to occur. Executives who are aware of their blind spots and the true impact of their behavior on others can and have changed how others perceive them. It is not an easy road, but it is also not an impossible one.

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BIOGRAPHY

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