Group Communication

Learning Material

Perceptions

Perception is a process of gathering sensory information and assigning meaning to it. Our perception of self and others is certainly a contributing factor in one-on-one communication; however, the impact on group communication is different. While one-on-one misunderstandings can be worked out with questions and clarification, group misperceptions can go undetected for some time before they become issues.

There are psychological and emotional perceptions than can distort understanding. It is important that we recognize our own perceptions so we can make adjustments accordingly and give meaning to our communication. The following perceptions are some common perceptions we may have experienced.

Cultural background - Hugging, two cheek kisses and touching that may be acceptable in some overseas businesses may be perceived as unsuitable in North America. Personal space of approximately 18 to 24 inches is generally considered to be appropriate for close friendships, 2 to 4 feet for social acquaintances and at least 4 feet away for people from the public, which would include most co-worker and professional conversations.

Social role - Asking the question, "What are you up to?" may have one meaning to a supervisor speaking to an employee but another entirely different connotation if a younger workman is asking a senior journeyman.

Education or previous experience – Previous encounters with people can impact perceptions. If an employee sees another manager at a section meeting behaving in a certain manner, they may perceive them in a way that is not typical of that manger. Knowledge about a topic or job role can also impact perceptions.

Expectations – Things that influence our understanding of the world around us can have an effect on our perceptions. If someone had a bad experience in a seafood restaurant, they may have perceptions about eating seafood in any restaurant. Conversely, a highly successful experience can set us up to believe all future experiences will be equally successful. One encounter may alter our expectations for the future.

Projection – An unconscious inclination to attribute other people with traits or qualities we hold ourselves. An example might be people who are usually tense may accuse co-workers of being stressed.

Feelings and attitudes – As mood intensifies, the chance of perceptual distortion becomes greater. Motivation is also a factor and it is important to know that the strength of our emotions impacts perception.

Stereotyping – Slotting people into categories based on a small percentage of possibilities is stereotyping. This type of thinking can lead to assumptions that may greatly limit our ability to communicate effectively.

First impressions – Whether it is a first impression or the last impression, there is evidence that shows our observations under either circumstance have a lasting effect on perceptions.

Group pressure – This is a powerful force in creating perceptions. People want to surround themselves with others of similar beliefs. It can lead to 'group think' tendencies where no new information is considered.

Tunnel vision – Carrying a narrow viewpoint without opening up to possibilities can influence perceptions and lead to restricted communication possibilities.

Implications of perception in communication

To reduce the chance of misunderstanding or miscommunication related to perceptions, we need to consider the following:

- Select, organize and interpret perceptions so there is awareness.
- Be aware of the impact of biases and make corrections accordingly.
- Do not argue over absolute truths.

Perception checks should include:

- ✓ Stating what we observe, with respect.
- ✓ Discussing possible interpretations.
- ✓ Asking for verification or clarification.
- ✓ Adjusting appropriately when moving forward.

Not all people have the same experiences, but we may believe that our history is the only truth or possibility. As children, many factors contribute to establishing our own filters, barriers, mental models and perceptions. As individuals, some people may have some things in common with others but individual perceptions are most likely a unique combination of attributes.

How we see ourselves contributes to our self-concept and self-esteem. How others see us contributes to the first or lasting impression we leave people with when we are communicating.

We also need to consider generational perceptions. If someone said "He's bad" in 1970, it would have a different meaning and resulting perception than if we heard the same statement today.

Our perceptions about the world and communicating can also lead us to specific behaviors that are assertive, passive or aggressive in nature.

Passive, aggressive and assertive communication

Passive

People behave passively when they do not feel safe sharing their ideas and opinions. They are reluctant to rock the boat and try to circumvent communication that will become confrontational. Passive communicators will stay silent for a very long time and when they do speak out, it is with carefully chosen words and phrases.

Misconceptions about passive communicators include ideas that they may have low self-esteem. This is not true for all passive communicators.

Aggressive

People who behave aggressively are skilled at manipulating communication. They will lash out with judgmental statements, finding fault with other people and situations. Their intimidating approaches to get the results they want are often met with mistrust and occasionally dislike. Aggressive communicators are direct and will not back down from a discussion until their needs are met.

Misconceptions about aggressive communicators include the belief that they are out to hurt people. In fact, many aggressive communicators are surprised to learn that their impact on other people is so intense.

Assertive

Assertive communicators have found the balance between knowing when to be clear and direct and when to back off a little or a lot to make the communication exchange positive and successful. Their approach is confident and respectful while still accomplishing the objective. Assertive communicators see everyone as equals in the conversation and are committed to listening attentively and making sure all points of view are considered.

Misconceptions about assertive communicators are that they never have apprehensive moments. Circumstances can challenge the best communicators, but assertive communicators seem to bounce back and recover quickly from misunderstanding.

Passive-aggressive

Passive aggressive communicators will say one thing but their non-verbal communication conveys a completely different message. It makes interpreting meaning difficult.

	Passive	**Assertive**	**Aggressive**
Verbal	Apologetic words Hedging Not getting to the point Rambling At a loss for words	Statement of wants Honest statement of feelings Objective words Direct statements	Loaded words Accusations Superior words Messages that blame or label
Non-verbal	Hoping someone will guess what is wanted	Attentive listening Generally assured manner Communicating caring and strength	Exaggerated show of strength Flippant, sarcastic style Air of superiority
Voice	Weak, hesitant, soft, sometimes wavering	Firm, warm, well-modulated relaxed	Tense, shrill, loud, shaky, authoritarian
Eyes	Averted, downcast, teary, pleading	Open and direct Making eye contact but not staring	Expressionless, narrowed, cold, staring
Stance/ Posture	Leaning on something for support, stooped	Well balanced, straight on, upright, relaxed	Hands on hips, feet apart, stiff and rigid
Hands/ Feet	Fidgety, fluttery, twisting rings, kicking motion	Relaxed motions, limited movement	Clenched, abrupt gestures, finger pointing, feet stomping
Entrance	Hesitant, apologetic, nervous	Confident, assured, composed, prepared, eye contact, smile	Pushy, loud, demanding, overpowering

Building rapport

Rapport comes from the French word *rapporter*, which means 'to return or bring back'. It models the complete process between receiver and sender and is the cornerstone of networking and understanding in relationships. It is part of a give-and-take process in communication that can determine success or failure. An essential ingredient in two-way communication, rapport can be used to influence, build trust and gain commitment.

We seem to know when it's happening and recognize when we see it with others. The signals people send each other while engaged in conversation go a bit beyond listening and attending to genuine care and interest. Rapport is an investment in a personal or working relationship that can be relied on when challenges arise.

Experts agree that some of the ways to begin building rapport start in conversations where the participants:

- Appreciate the other person's time and energy given to the conversation.
- Try to understand the other person before expecting they will be understood.
- Take a genuine interest in learning what matters to the other person.
- Take notice of how the other person communicates, including their style.
- Pick up on some words and phrases and adopt them into their dialogue.
- Sync breathing and posture.

This is essentially **matching and mirroring** which is the process of taking on another person's style and behavior to tune in to their values and beliefs with the purpose of gaining understanding. It's getting on the same page or meeting them where they are so we can move the conversation along. Mirroring and matching are particularly useful when trying to build rapport with the intention of resolving an issue such as a customer service complaint.

It is vitally important that matching and mirroring is done in a way that does not look like mocking or mimicking. That will kill rapport faster than anything.

When rapport is established, the conversation pacing can be lead in a way that is mutually acceptable. Pacing must happen before we can steer the conversation in a new direction. Pacing involves listening and paying attention to the other person.

How do we build rapport in a virtual world? It becomes less about visuals and more about using auditory and, if texting, written cues to develop understanding.

Creating the right setting for virtual rapport while in audio only environments such as conference calls or when using Skype, Ventrilo or Mumble:

- Determine the purpose of the gathering. If it is for some specific reason, make sure everyone understands what it is.
- Make sure everyone can hear each other and proper technology connections have been used.

- Introduce everyone or at least key people.
- Discourage small talk while the voice channel is active.
- Slow down when speaking and listen for language styles.
- Get attention before you make a key point or observation so that nobody in the channel misses anything.
- Use people's names more than you would with face-to-face gatherings.
- Visualize the speakers if you have met them before.
- Summarize and clarify to check for understanding.

Think of other opportunities and ways you might build rapport in a virtual world.

Internal and external communication practices

The topics discussed in this objective are meant as a guide for both internal and external situations; however, it is worthwhile taking a moment to assess the ways we communicate both within and outside our organization.

Small group connections

The most common face-to-face encounters are small group meetings and work sessions where problems are solved and decisions are made. They are often informal and intended to make efficient use of everyone's valuable time. In small groups, about half of the time will be spent sharing information. The other half will be devoted to dealing with disagreements and gaining consensus. More time is devoted to group agreement and friendlier interactions.

Environment
Getting together in small groups is most successful when all the contributors want to participate, anticipate successful outcomes and look forward to the gathering. We can enhance participation when we choose to meet if we have any influence on determining the location. The right room but more importantly the seating arrangement is a major factor. Everyone must be able to see each other and the leader needs to decide, depending on the purpose of the gathering, if they want to be seen as the leader or as one who sits among the participants rather than apart from them. A circle seating arrangement ideally accomplishes this requirement.

Group size
Too many people bogs down progress. With a large number of people, discussions can become unproductive and side conversations ensue. The result is a loss of focus. The ideal size for a group is 5 to 7 people. There needs to be enough people that it will promote good discussion and a variety of opinions will be represented.

Rules
The roadmap for the session may be implied, informally agreed upon or purposefully spelled out for the group. They are often simple expressions of agreement to honor the principles of effective two-way communication. There

may be a need to add additional rules that are appropriate for the situation. This could be something easy such as an agreement to keep all ideas simple and practical or to keep the timeline to one hour. Rules can help relieve any initial tensions if the participants do not all know each other.

Roles

Within the context of the group, people will assume a role according to personality and interest.

- Task roles include people who give and/or probe for information and content. Some will analyze the content and examine the reasons for providing the information that has been shared. Some will keep the group on track and others will record the discussion for later recall.

- Maintenance roles include those who will support the exchange of rich dialogue and others who will help to diffuse tensions when opinion differs. Some focus on keeping harmony within the group and offer to help straighten out misunderstanding and miscommunication. Gatekeepers ensure the lines of communication stay open and active.

- Negative roles manifest themselves in the people who aggressively criticize and blame others. Aggressors need to be confronted so the behavior does not completely stop the purpose of the gathering. Joking around is a natural part of group interaction but can become excessive. When it does, ignoring it will often cue the jokers to settle down

- People who are in attendance but withdraw or don't participate need to be drawn out; tapping into their strengths is one way to accomplish that.

- Finally there are those that completely dominate the discussion and do not allow others to speak. They should be acknowledged when their input is helpful but be held in check when they give a 'know-it-all' air that impedes progress.

Effective communication strategy

When we need to create a message that is more formal, may reach a larger group or needs some time to be carefully crafted, we might need a strategy. A communication strategy helps us to plan out the key thoughts, ideas and requests for action. A strategy supports understanding of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) involved, so we deliver the message in the most effective way to reach the objective.

SWOT Example:

Internal

Strengths	Weakness
• Extensive client database • Dedicated sales force in the community • Website and blog attract superior clients	• Not enough sales people for new markets • Limited personnel to maintain blog • Achievements of the Competitors
Opportunities	**Threats**
• New markets opening up in adjoining districts • Retiring sales people who want part-time work • Younger communications staff with new ideas	• Increase of Competitors • New regulations • Rapid change in technologies

Positive   Negative

External

There are five steps involved in designing an effective communication strategy:

1. **Create the message**
   It is critical to clearly and concisely identify what we intend to communicate. Do we want to inform, educate or activate the receiver?

2. **Target receiver**
   Identify who needs to receive the message and how much information needs to be relayed. A change in procedures for one department does not have the same importance to another department. Different people will have different information needs and will want to know what is relevant to them.

3. **Choose a communication medium.**
   Lean communication is essentially one-way in nature and includes mediums such as posters and company bulletins. Rich communication is 2-way and

invites receivers to provide feedback. Examples of rich mediums would be team meetings and on-line forums. Identify several ways to convey the message to ensure it is heard and processed appropriately.

4. **Identify resources**

   Identify who, if that is appropriate, is the best person to deliver the message. Should the message come from a senior leader, a team or pod lead, trainer, human resources person, peer or any combination of key stakeholders?

5. **Timing it right**

   Timing can make a huge difference in the success of a planned communication message. It is particularly important with an emotionally charged or difficult topic.

Points to remember

More steps on the road to better communication:

- Be aware of perceptions and ask for clarification to avoid misunderstandings.
- Address aggressive and passive behaviors with respect.
- Notice, learn and model assertive communication.
- Create a personal list of communication tips that are industry or organizationally appropriate.
- Plan bigger and/or more important messages with a strategy.