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Interpersonal perception

Think about how you are filtering information

Explored some basic communication principles in my column in the Nov. 12 issue of *Biz Times Milwaukee*. In this column, I'll extend those principles by discussing the process of interpersonal perception.

Different people have different communication skills. This can influence their relationships.

Another way that people differ is the way they perceive the world. It is tempting to assume that human behavior is a response to objective reality but as the comedian Lily Tomlin has observed, "Reality is nothing more than a collective hunch." The same stimulus may be present in our environment, but what we do with that stimulus is affected by individual differences.

How can we wind up with such diverse and even contradictory impressions? Chalk it up to individual differences in perception, which can be defined as, "the process by which we select, organize, and evaluate the stimuli in our environment to make it meaningful for ourselves."

Perception serves as a filter or gatekeeper so that we are not overwhelmed by all the stimuli that bombard us. A key aspect of the perception process is selective attention. We simply do not see or hear everything that goes on around us.

Both internal and external factors determine what sensory impressions we pay attention to. Internal factors are factors that are internal to us (i.e., our internal frame of reference) and include elements such as motives, values, interests, attitudes, past experiences, and expectations. External factors are factors that are external to us (i.e., characteristics of the target we perceive) and include elements such as motion, intensity, size, novelty, and salience.

So, the first step in the perceptual pro-

cess is noticing or attending to some stimulus. And, influenced by the factors discussed above, each of us will attend selectively to those parts of the stimulus that are deemed to be most relevant, stimulating, etc.

The second step in the perceptual process is the organization of the stimulus that has been perceived. Our thought processes automatically structure stimuli into patterns that make sense to the perceiver. One example of such patterns are cause-and-effect relationships. It is easier to see cause-and-effect relationships in

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the physical world than it is with social interactions and human behavior. Nevertheless, we organize social stimuli in the same patterns. Specifically, we tend to organize stimuli into schemas. Schemas are mental maps of different concepts, events, or types of stimuli that contain both the attributes of the concept and the relationship among the attributes.

Once they have been established, schemas affect how we handle future information because they determine what we attend to and remember.

The third step in the perceptual process is evaluation or interference. We interpret the stimulus in a subjective, rather than objective fashion. Our conclusions are biased by our individual attitudes, needs, experiences, expectations, goals,

values, and physical condition at the time. Not only do interpretations differ from person to person, but the same person can have diverse perceptions of the same stimulus at different points in time.

These perceptual differences and variations can lead to misinterpretation and damage relationships. Being sensitive to these errors, therefore, is critical. As you interact with others, keep in mind these

three major sources of perceptual errors:

1. Subconscious blinders

We use our own assumptions to interpret the events and behaviors of others.

2. Lack of awareness

We are unaware of our own values and norms and the way that others perceive us.

3. Projected similarity

We assume that other people are more similar to us than they really are or that situations are similar when they are not.

The underlying pattern in these processes is one of: (1) assumption or belief, (2) leading to behavior that is congruent with the assumption, followed by (3) observation

of consequences, which, to the extent that perception is occurring, leads to (4) confirmation of the original assumption or belief.

Testing the validity or desirability of this conceptual process is difficult. People tend to strive to preserve the “face” that others present to them. When people act “out of character,” social pressures are mobilized to force them back into their roles. In social situations, therefore, we tend to act in such a way that maintain our own self-image and the self-image we see others presenting.

This conservative interaction norm dictates that we cannot frankly tell others our impressions of them if these impressions differ from the face they are presenting. It also acts as an obstacle to our testing with others whether or not we are projecting the kind of self-image we think we are. “Do you see me the same way I see myself?” In short, this constrains the kinds of relationships we can build because we cannot seem to break through and forge genuine, reciprocal relationships with others based on honesty, sincerity, and candor.

So, what’s the point of all of this? The point is that if we truly want to improve workplace communication, then we have to move toward interpersonal genuineness and authenticity. “Understanding self and others,” therefore, emerges as a

foundational competency that all organizational members must seek to master, especially leaders, who are the principal architects of the organization’s “other bottom line” (i.e., its corporate culture – “How we do things around here”).

When a person is interpersonally closed off and unaware, communication and relationship building are impaired. Conversely, the more we know about ourselves and allow others to know us, the greater the potential for effective communication and relationships. When trust is established, people feel safe to be themselves in the group and to perceive others as they really are.

To move in the direction of openness requires that others give us feedback as to how they see us. Once again, trust is critical – so that people will risk telling us and so we will not react defensively to what they say.

Ultimately, it is only as we move toward assertive communication and open engagement with others that true sharing occurs. Only then, can truly meaningful relationships be forged. ■

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