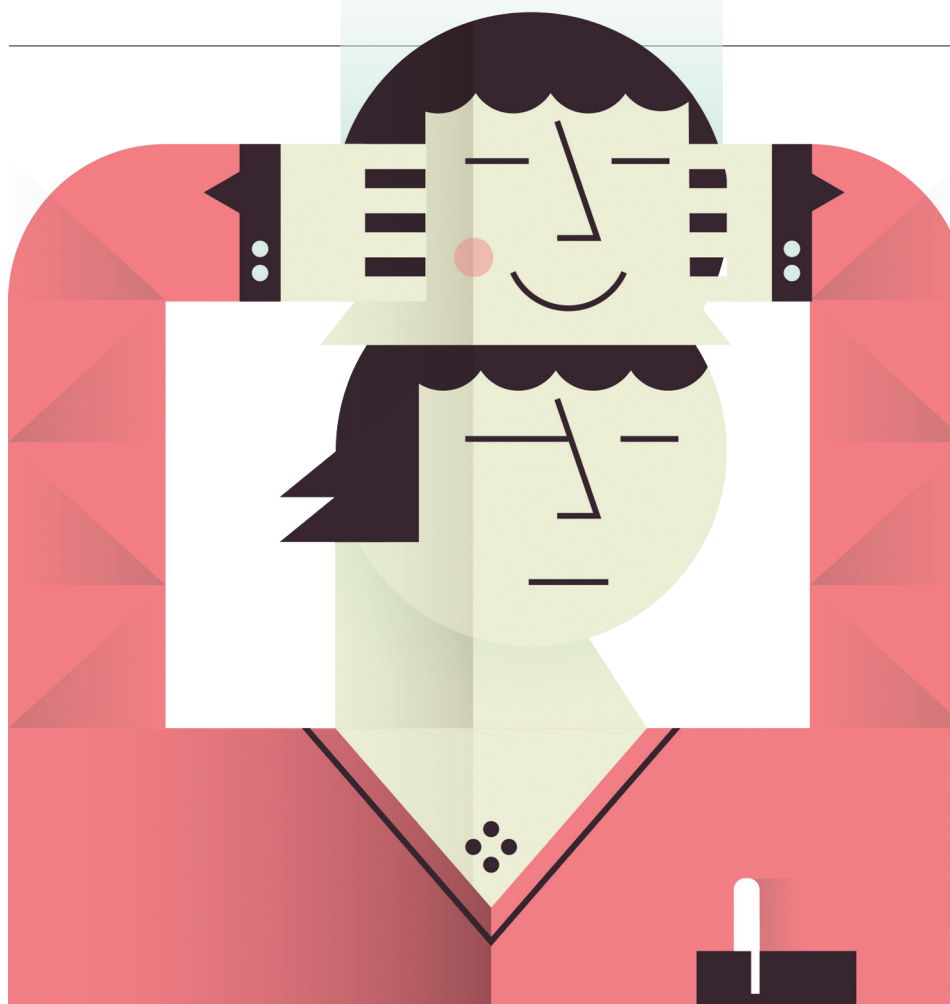


Managing Yourself

A Second Chance to Make the Right Impression

by Heidi Grant Halvorson



Years ago a friend of mine, Gordon, interviewed for a position at a prominent university. During his daylong visit to campus, he had lunch with a senior faculty member (let's call him Bob) who had final say over the hire. After their food arrived, Bob said of his meal, "You know, this is great. You should try this." Even though Gordon knew it was a dish he wouldn't like, he felt pressured to have a bite so as not to offend his potential future boss. The lunch continued pleasantly, with Gordon enumerating his accomplishments and Bob responding positively. Gordon was therefore more than a little surprised when he didn't get the job.

He learned why a few years later, after he'd been hired for a different position at the same university. Apparently, when Bob had said "You should try this," he had actually meant something like "You should try this *sometime*" or "My lunch is excellent," and he was deeply disturbed that a job candidate would have the audacity to eat right from his plate. He had no desire to

work with someone so disrespectful and ill-mannered.

Gordon's experience is an example of an all-too-common problem: unwittingly making a bad first impression.

Not coming across as you intend—particularly in your initial encounter with someone—can cause big problems in your personal and professional life. People may mistrust you, dislike you, or not even notice you. Sometimes the fault is your own: You screwed up and you know it. But more often than not, bad first impressions stem from certain biases in how people perceive one another. And this happens routinely: Research shows only weak correlations between what others think of us and how we see ourselves. So if you've ever felt underestimated, sensed that you inadvertently stepped on toes, or thought that false and hurtful assumptions were being made about you, you were probably right. The way we see one another can be irrational, incomplete, and inflexible—and largely (but not entirely) automatic.

To be fair, perceiving people accurately is hard. No one is truly an "open book." Studies show that although strong basic emotions—surprise, fear, disgust, and anger—are fairly easy to read, the more subtle emotions we experience daily are not. So how you look when you're slightly frustrated probably isn't all that different from how you look when you are a little concerned, confused, disappointed, or nervous. Your "I'm kind of hurt by what you just said" face probably looks a lot like your "I'm not at all hurt by what you just said" face. And the majority of times that you've thought, "I made my intentions clear" or "They know what I meant," you didn't and they don't. Psychologists call this disconnect the *transparency illusion*.

It's important to understand that your words and behaviors are always subject to interpretation. Imagine that you're at a meeting, and you begin staring off into space while a colleague is speaking. Are you bored? Are you thinking deeply about what she is saying? Are you wondering if you remembered to turn off the coffeepot? Your colleague has no way of knowing why you are behaving as you are, but she will pick an interpretation—because that's what our brains do.

There is good news, however. We now know that errors in reading people are highly predictable, because perception is governed by rules and biases we can identify and anticipate. It is therefore possible to ensure that you're making the right impression more often, and to correct any misperceptions that others have about you.

Understanding Perception

Any new person you encounter—a potential boss, a prospective client, a new colleague—is likely to evaluate you in two phases. In phase one, the person makes an initial assessment of you quickly and without conscious thought, relying on a variety of heuristics, stereotypes, and other assumptions—using cues like your physical appearance, your organizational role, and your body language to fill in the blanks. This is less out of laziness (though there is some of that) than out of necessity. In a brief first meeting, the perceiver has too much to notice, understand, and act on to give you undivided, unbiased attention. In phase two—if there is a phase two—the perceiver has to work a lot harder, paying closer attention, gathering disparate data, and making sense of it to draw informed, thoughtful conclusions about you. It takes serious mental effort to weigh all the possible factors influencing your

behavior and to reconsider the snap judgments made in phase one. So the perceiver needs to be motivated to do it and not too distracted.

In both phases, but particularly the first, the people forming an impression of you aren't simply passive observers. They have, without necessarily realizing it, particular questions they are trying to answer about you. It's as if they are looking through a distinct lens, or set of lenses, that shapes their view of you. The most powerful of these are the trust, power, and ego lenses. (Additional lenses, driven by personality, might also be present, but they're typically less important; see the sidebar, "Other Lenses of Perception.")

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The *trust lens* is employed when people want to figure out if you are friend or foe. Perceivers answer that question by tuning in to two particular aspects of your character: your warmth (your expression of friendliness, respect, and empathy), which suggests that you have good intentions, and your competence (evidence that you are intelligent, skilled, and effective), which shows that you can act on your intentions.

The *power lens* comes into play when there is a disparity of power, especially when the perceiver has more than you do. He or she gazes through this lens to assess your instrumentality: "Prove yourself useful to me, or get out of my way."

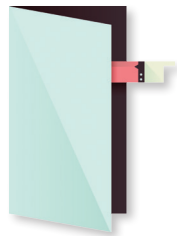
The *ego lens* gives the perceiver a sense of who's on top. Subconsciously, people often want confirmation that they, or their group, are superior to other individuals or groups.

Turning back to Gordon, there are several ways in which Bob's lenses no doubt influenced the outcome of the lunch interview. Gordon readily displayed his competence by reviewing his track record, but he failed to show warmth—indeed, the misunderstanding that led him to sample Bob's food ended up conveying a lack of respect. Competence without warmth is a terrible combination, because it suggests that you may one day be a potent foe. Also, in focusing solely on his own accomplishments while talking with someone more powerful, Gordon failed to emphasize his instrumentality. If he had better explained how his previous experience would help him to further Bob's goals at the university, it might have been a whole different ball game. As it was, looking through his trust, power, and ego lenses, Bob probably thought, Why hire an accomplished outsider who might work against me and make me look bad?

Coming Across the Right Way

So how can you use this knowledge of perception and its lenses to your advantage and consistently and effectively telegraph your intended messages? The first and most obvious strategy is to present the right kinds of evidence to help others draw the correct impression, keeping the lenses of perception in mind.

To get someone to see you accurately through her trust lens, project warmth and competence. Give the right physical signals: Make eye contact, smile when appropriate, nod in agreement, listen carefully without interrupting, sit up straight, and stand tall. And, especially if this is to be a lasting relationship, be a person of your word. Those who are perceived as principled and reliable are the most likely to be seen as strong allies.



To create the right impression in your perceiver's power lens, be sure to demonstrate your instrumentality at every reasonable opportunity. Make it clear that you want to help her be more effective in reaching your mutual goals.

And to be seen positively through her ego lens, be modest and inclusive. Go out of your way to affirm the strengths of others, and try to create a sense of "us," so that your perceiver can celebrate your achievements rather than feel threatened by them.

If you started off on the wrong foot and need to overcome a bad impression, the evidence will have to be plentiful and attention-getting in order to activate phase two thinking. Keep piling it on until your perceiver can no longer tune it out, and make sure that the information you're presenting is clearly inconsistent with the existing ideas about you. For instance, imagine that you missed a deadline on your first assignment for a new manager. Meeting your next deadline might or might not correct his impression of you. But what if you beat the next five deadlines by a week each time? That would certainly register. Your boss would naturally pay closer attention to see if the change lasts, and you would have successfully nudged him into phase two.

Another, complementary approach is to make your perceivers *want* to revise their opinions of you, thereby improving your image faster and with less effort. Here are a few strategies you might try:

Activate the desire to be fair.

Most people will tell you they strive to be open-minded and evenhanded in the way they judge and treat others. Psychologists call this having an *egalitarian goal*. Research suggests that when perceivers are genuinely committed to being fair, and when fairness has been recently reinforced

in their minds, they will to a large degree spontaneously and automatically inhibit biases that might inappropriately influence their perceptions. It's almost like skipping phase one and heading directly to phase two, where the impression you create will be more accurate and more in keeping with your intentions.

To activate the egalitarian goal, you can compliment your perceiver on his "fairness," "unbiased assessment," "keen perception," or "uncanny accuracy" in evaluating people. If you don't know the person well and would have no basis for making such a judgment, you might suggest that in his line of work or position in the company, the ability to accurately assess others must be a key skill. You wouldn't be lying; most people do need to accurately read colleagues and clients to succeed in their jobs. You can also try sharing your own challenges with fairness. Describe a time when you misjudged someone by letting some kind of bias get in the way. (To my embarrassment, I have a whole catalog of such stories, like the time I nearly called security on a disheveled man in a dirty T-shirt and sweatpants wandering the halls at Columbia. When I saw him again the next month, he was delivering a talk to the entire department on the complex new statistic he had just invented. A noted psychologist and statistician, he would later become one of my mentors.)

Make yourself necessary.

In many ways the easiest and most direct way to get other people to want to perceive you correctly—to make phase two processing worth their while—is to ensure that you have a role in their success. Psychologists call this *outcome dependency*. In a nutshell, it means that others can't get what they want without cooperation from you. This



Research participants who spent 15 minutes solving math problems were **four times more likely to lie** for personal gain in an ethics game than those who answered verbal test questions.

“THE SOCIAL AND ETHICAL CONSEQUENCES OF A CALCULATIVE MINDSET.”
BY LONG WANG, CHEN-BO ZHONG, AND J. KEITH MURNIGHAN

Other Lenses of Perception

Although the trust, power, and ego lenses are the ones that people use most often to form judgments about others, two sets of lenses specific to personality type can also come into play.

PROMOTION/PREVENTION

Does your perceiver tend to embrace risk or steer clear of it? Those with a promotion lens want to maximize gains and avoid missed opportunities, while those with a prevention lens try to minimize losses and maintain the status quo.

Advice: Identify the lens of your perceiver and speak the appropriate motivational language.

ANXIOUS/AVOIDANT

Does your perceiver have attachment issues? About half of U.S. adults have trouble relating to others. Some people display anxious behavior: They are needy, too accommodating, and sensitive to rejection. Others practice avoidance: They are aloof and struggle to connect.

Advice: If an anxious or avoidant lens is present, be empathetic, patient, and reliable.

is why the powerless pay such close attention to the powerful. And this is why individuals who must rely on someone else to deliver will take the trouble to better understand that person's character, intentions, and habits. If your perceiver needs to be able to predict your behavior, anticipate your wants and needs, and respond accordingly, she's got no choice but to enter phase two.

To create outcome dependency, try to identify opportunities for collaboration. For example, if your supervisor has underestimated you, consider asking for an assignment that would allow you to work with her more closely. It's natural to shy away from people who don't think highly of you, but you need to fight that instinct and instead stick to them like glue if you hope to correct their misperceptions. Things will get much more comfortable once they begin to realize that you're not so bad after all.

Seize the right moments.

Human beings have a deep and fundamental desire for control. Not

having it—because of stressors such as uncertainty, lack of choices, coercion, or micromanagement—reliably leads to feelings of helplessness, apathy, and depression. When people experience a loss of control, they naturally try to get it back. And if they can't do that by attacking the problem directly (for example, telling the micromanaging boss “I quit”), research shows that they may become more vigilant and detail-oriented about other matters, including the process of observing others.


You can take advantage of occasions when your perceiver is feeling at the mercy of outside forces: when your boss is stressed about meeting year-end goals, or when a colleague is struggling to complete a project on time or has lost an important client. Focusing on getting to know you better is a way for people to feel as if they're reclaiming control. So just by being present and, if possible, stepping up to help, you can highlight your strengths when your perceiver is most likely to notice.

ARE YOU WONDERING if Gordon was ever able to overcome that bad first impression he made with Bob? Yes, he was, with an approach that involved several of these strategies. First, he thought long and hard about the work that Bob (now a department head) was doing, and he took every opportunity to reach out and support Bob's agenda. He also made sure to project warmth during their interactions and to express himself with greater humility. After about a year, Bob invited him to participate on several key committees, and Gordon felt that the pair had established a level of trust. Nowadays, they even have friendly lunches once in a while—without sampling each other's food.

We all want to make good impressions that accord with the images we intend to project. Research consistently shows that people are happier and more satisfied and have better relationships and greater feelings of purpose when they believe they come across authentically. Life is simply easier and more rewarding when others “get” you and provide you with the opportunities and support that are a good fit.

But you can't sit back and wait for those around you to accurately size you up. You need to think strategically about encouraging and incentivizing them to see you in the best possible light. If you do, then it is really never too late to make the right impression. ♡

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