

KNOWING ONESELF: AN EXERCISE IN PERCEPTUAL ACCURACY

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Perception is a standard topic covered in virtually every OB text. It is commonly noted that managers frequently base decisions and actions on their perceptions of others and, thus, an understanding of factors influencing perception is important. Following such statements, any of several tacks are typically followed to explore the nature of the perceptual process. For example, successive sections might be devoted to how values, needs, and expectations impact interpersonal perceptions, how perceiver characteristics influence the perception of others, and how situational factors vitiate perceptual accuracy.

More often than not, suggestions for increasing one's understanding of the perceptual process are offered in order to increase the likelihood of smooth and effective interpersonal relations. Readers are told, for instance, that managers should be cognizant of the complexities inherent in the perceptual process, being sure to seek reliable evidence before judgments are made, or that greater accuracy in perceiving one's self can make it possible to be more flexible in seeking evidence and shifting position as additional evidence becomes available.

The first suggestion that managers should be aware of perceptual complexities in making judgments is easily reinforceable through a discussion of topics such as stimuli selection, figure and ground, grouping, and closure. Unfortunately, there is little classroom material available for reinforcing the second suggestion that an accurate understanding of self can result in more effective interpersonal adjustments.

The "Knowing Oneself" exercise was designed to provide material for this purpose. Reproduced in Figure 1, this exercise attempts to show how one factor — anxiety — affects both our perception of self and others and, thus, our interpersonal adjustment. Students are asked to complete the exercise as a homework assignment. Once collected, various responses are read aloud and discussed in class. Responses from previous terms which are particularly helpful in highlighting different aspects of the perceptual process may also be shared. These responses may be either personal or job-related. The former are particularly appropriate for use with students who have limited organizational exposure.

An unedited student response is reproduced in Figure 2. As a typical response from a student with prior work experience, the situation described

is an ideal springboard for establishing that (a) anxieties are experienced by everyone and (b) certain anxieties are common across individuals. Using this response as an example, initial classroom discussion might center on the anxiety associated with being “rejected” (i.e., laid-off) and how this anxiety influences one’s self-perception, as well as perception of others (i.e., one’s former employer and colleagues, family, friends). The commonality of this anxiety can be demonstrated by asking class participants to consider instances where they, too, have felt rejected. Such instances might include not being accepted into a particular group or not receiving a much desired job offer. Classroom discussion might then focus on the confusion typically experienced when the accuracy of one’s self-perception is placed in doubt. The example response describes a student who had always perceived herself as “someone who knew what she wanted, went after it, and got it” in the eyes of my friends and family.” How do different people resolve such confusion? What influence do thoughts about what others think have on an individual’s self-perception? Relations with others? What interpersonal adjustments can an individual who is aware of the likelihood of such feelings make to minimize their negative effects? Can simply being aware of such feelings enhance the effectiveness of a person’s self-monitoring skills? These are just a few issues that can be raised to prompt classroom discussion. Each is aimed at establishing the importance of accurately understanding one’s self in effectively dealing with others.

In addition to aiding respondents in more accurately understanding their own self-perception, the “Knowing Oneself” exercise offers the following additional benefits:

- (1) It creates an openness leading to an increased cohesiveness among class participants.
- (2) It offers a realism uncommon in a typical class assignment.
- (3) It underscores how self-perception is influenced by both endogenous and exogenous factors.

FIGURE 1

An Exercise in Knowing Oneself

Knowing Oneself

This exercise is intended to identify specific situations involving anxiety-laden associations that consciously or unconsciously affect an individual’s self-perception. Examples of anxiety-laden associations include feelings of personal inadequacy, doubts about social relations with peers or members of the opposite sex, periods of loneliness or states of depression, feelings of anxiety with regard to past embarrassing situations (for example, with family or “losing face” before friends), anxieties about your body and its various functions, anxiety about your appearance, or perhaps your future.

The purpose of this exercise is two-fold. (1) To create an awareness of such associations within each exercise respondent. By confronting such difficulties and learning to replace anxiety-laden associations with substitute constructs, they can be “unlearned” or overcome. (2) To develop an understanding of how anxieties influence self-perception.

These descriptions will be used to demonstrate the commonality of such feelings and as a basis for future classroom discussion.

FIGURE 1 (continued)

An Exercise in Knowing Oneself

All respondents are *guaranteed* strict anonymity.

Directions: In your own words, describe in detail two anxiety-laden associations you experience or have experienced and describe how they affected your self-perception.

FIGURE 2

Sample Responses

Student A

After having worked for eight years as a project engineer for a large utility company, I lost my job due to a companywide force reduction. As a result, I was filled with anxiety about being able to find another job here in Baton Rouge and about how to go back out into the job market and “sell” myself as a valuable employee. My anxiety became more intense as I began my job search and found that jobs in my field were practically nonexistent in Baton Rouge. I had always considered myself lucky in that I had known since high school what I was interested in and in what field I wanted to pursue a career. I had worked toward my goals and had achieved several of them. I had an interesting job, and I really liked the people I worked with, and in addition, I was paid very well. I had always perceived myself as being “someone who knew what she wanted, went after it, and got it” in the eyes of my friends and family. But after I was laid-off, I began to feel confused. There were so many alternatives to choose from — should I move to another state, should I stay home and be a full-time mother and wife, should I go back to school? For the first time in my life, I found myself not knowing what I wanted to do. I started to feel that people were looking at me in a different light. I thought they now pitied me and felt that I would never be in control of my career again. I now realize that the anxiety I was feeling at the time distorted my view of my family’s and my friends’ opinions. They had been telling me all along that this was an “opportunity,” and they knew I would not only survive it, but make it work in my favor. I just couldn’t hear what they were saying until I did decide what I wanted to do, and the anxiety went away.