

4. Perception

Understanding Key Concept

- Perception is the process through which people receive, organize, and interpret information from their environment.
- Schemas are cognitive frameworks that represent organized knowledge about a given concept or stimulus developed through experience.
- Halo effect occurs when one attribute of a person or situation is used to develop an overall impression of the person or situation.
- Selective perception is the tendency to single out for attention those aspects of a situation or person that reinforce or emerge and are consistent with existing beliefs, values, and needs.
- Projection is the assignment of personal attributes to other individuals.
- Contrast effects occur when an individual's characteristics are contrasted with those of others recently encountered who rank higher or lower on the same characteristics.
- Self-fulfilling prophecy is the tendency to create or find in another situation or individual that which one has expected to find.
- Attribution theory is the attempt to understand the cause of an event, assess responsibility for outcomes of the event, and assess the personal qualities of the people involved.

The Perceptual Process

A spectacular completed pass during the 1982 National Football Conference championship game helped propell Joe Montana, former San Francisco 49er quarterback, into the legendary status he enjoys today. The reverse effect apparently occurred for Danny White, Dallas Cowboys' quarterback. He fumbled in the final minute of the same game and never obtained the status of his predecessor, Roger Stauback, even though White took the Cowboys to the championship game three years in a row.

This example illustrates the notion of perception, the process by which people select, organize, interpret, retrieve, and respond to information from the world around them. This information is gathered from the five senses of sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. As Montana, White, and Stauback can attest, perception and reality are not necessarily the same thing. The perceptions or responses of any two people are also not necessarily identical, even when they are describing the same event.

Through perception, people process information inputs into responses involving feelings and action. Perception is a way of forming impressions about oneself, other people, and daily life experiences. It also serves as a screen or filter through which information passes before it has an effect on people. The quality or accuracy of a person's perceptions, therefore, has a major impact on his or her responses to a given situation.

Perceptual responses are also likely to vary between managers and subordinates. Consider Figure 1.11, which depicts contrasting perceptions of a performance appraisal between managers and subordinates. Rather substantial differences exist in the two sets of perceptions; the responses can be significant. In this case, managers who perceive that they already give adequate attention to past performance, career development, and supervisory help are unlikely to give greater emphasis to these points in future performance appraisal interviews. In contrast, their subordinates are likely to experience continued frustration because they perceive that these subjects are not being given sufficient attention.

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE PERCEPTUAL PROCESS

The factors that contribute to perceptual differences and the perceptual process among people at work are summarized in Figure 1.12 and include characteristics of the perceiver, the setting, and the perceived.

The Perceiver A person's past experiences, needs or motives, personality, and values and attitudes may all influence the perceptual process. A person with a strong achievement need

tends to perceive a situation in terms of that need. If you see doing well in class as a way to help meet your achievement need, for example, you will tend to emphasize that aspect when considering various classes. By the same token, a person with a negative attitude toward unions may look for antagonisms even when local union officials make routine visits to the organization. These and other perceiver factors influence the various aspects of the perceptual process.

The Setting The physical, social, and organizational context of the perceptual setting also can influence the perceptual process. Kim Jeffrey, the recently appointed CEO of Nestle's Perrier, was perceived by his subordinates as a frightening figure when he gave vent to his temper and had occasional confrontations with them. In the previous setting, before he was promoted, Jeffrey's flare-ups had been tolerable; now they caused intimidation, so his subordinates feared to express their opinions and recommendations. Fortunately, after he received feedback about this problem, he was able to change his subordinates' perceptions in the new setting.

The Perceived Characteristics of the perceived person, object, or event, such as contrast, intensity, figure-ground separation, size, motion, and repetition or novelty, are also important in the perceptual process. For example, one mainframe computer among six PCs or one man among six women will be perceived differently than one of six mainframe computers or one of six men—where there is less contrast. Intensity can vary in terms of brightness, color, depth, sound, and the like. A bright red sports car stands out from a group of gray sedans; whispering or shouting stands out from ordinary conversation. The concept is known as figure-ground separation, and it depends on which image is perceived as the background and which as the figure. For an illustration, look at Figure 1.13. What do you see? Faces or a vase?

In the matter of size, very small or very large people tend to be perceived differently and more readily than average-sized people. Similarly, in terms of motion, moving objects are perceived differently from stationary objects. And, of course, advertisers hope that ad repetition or frequency will positively influence peoples' perception of a product. Television advertising blitzes for new models of personal computers are a case in point. Finally, the novelty of a situation affects its perception. A purple-haired teenager is perceived differently from a blond or a brunette, for example.

STAGES OF THE PERCEPTUAL PROCESS

So far we have discussed key factors influencing the perceptual process. Now we'll look at the stages involved in processing the information that ultimately determines a person's perception and reaction, as shown in Figure 1.14. The information-processing stages are divided into information

attention and selection; organization of information; information interpretation; and information retrieval.

Attention and Selection Our senses are constantly bombarded with so much information that if we don't screen it, we quickly become incapacitated with information overload. Selective screening lets in only a tiny proportion of all of the information available. Some of the selectivity comes from controlled processing—consciously deciding what information to pay attention to and what to ignore. In this case, the perceivers are aware that they are processing information. Think about the last time you were at a noisy restaurant and screened out all the sounds but those of the person with whom you were talking.

In contrast to controlled processing, screening can also take place without the perceiver's conscious awareness. For example, you may drive a car without consciously thinking about the process of driving; you may be thinking about a problem you are having with your course work instead. In driving the car, you are affected by information from the world around you, such as traffic lights and other cars, but you don't pay conscious attention to that information. Such selectivity of attention and automatic information processing works well most of the time when you drive, but if a nonroutine event occurs, such as an animal darting into the road, you may have an accident unless you quickly shift to controlled processing.

Organization Even though selective screening takes place in the attention stage, it is still necessary to find ways to organize the information efficiently. Schemas help us do this. Schemas are cognitive frameworks that represent organized knowledge about a given concept or stimulus developed through experience. A self schema contains information about a person's own appearance, behavior, and personality. For instance, a person with a decisiveness schema tends to perceive himself or herself in terms of that aspect, especially in circumstances calling for leadership.

Person schemas refer to the way individuals sort others into categories, such as types or groups, in terms of similar perceived features. The term prototype, or stereotype, is often used to represent these categories; it is an abstract set of features commonly associated with members of that category. Once the prototype is formed, it is stored in long-term memory; it is retrieved when it is needed for a comparison of how well a person matches the prototype's features. For instance, you may have a "good worker" prototype in mind, which includes hard work, intelligence, punctuality, articulateness, and decisiveness; that prototype is used as a measure against which to compare a given worker. Stereotypes may be regarded as prototypes based on such demographic characteristics as gender, age, able-bodiedness, and racial and ethnic groups.

A script schema is defined as a knowledge framework that describes the appropriate sequence of events in a given situation. For example, an experienced manager would use a script schema to think about the appropriate steps involved in running a meeting. Finally, person-in-situation schemas combine schemas built around persons (self and person schemas) and events (script schemas). Thus, a manager might organize his or her perceived information in a meeting around a decisiveness schema for both himself or herself and a key participant in the meeting. Here, a script schema would provide the steps and their sequence in the meeting; the manager would push through the steps decisively and would call on the selected participants periodically throughout the meeting to respond decisively. Note that, although this approach might facilitate organization of important information, the perceptions of those attending might not be completely accurate because decisiveness of the person-in-situation schema did not allow the attendees enough time for open discussion.

As you can see in Figure 1.14, schemas are not important just in the organizing stage; they also affect other stages in the perception process. Furthermore, schemas rely heavily on automatic processing to free people up to use controlled processing as necessary. Finally, as we will show, the perceptual factors described earlier, as well as the distortions, to be discussed shortly, influence schemas in various ways.

Interpretation Once your attention has been drawn to certain stimuli and you have grouped or organized this information, the next step is to uncover the reasons behind the actions. That is, even if your attention is called to the same information and you organize it in the same way your friend does, you may interpret it differently or make different attributions about the reasons behind what you have perceived. For example, as a manager, you might attribute compliments from a friendly subordinate to his being an eager worker, whereas your friend might interpret the behavior as insincere flattery.

Retrieval So far, we have discussed the stages of the perceptual process as if they all occurred at the same time. However, to do so ignores the important component of memory. Each of the previous stages forms part of that memory and contributes to the stimuli or information stored there. The information stored in our memory must be retrieved if it is to be used. This leads us to the retrieval stage of the perceptual process summarized in Figure 1.14.

All of us at times can't retrieve information stored in our memory. More commonly, our memory decays, so that only some of the information is retrieved. Schemas play an important role in this area. They make it difficult for people to remember things not included in them. For

example, based on your prototype about the traits comprising a “high performing employee” (hard work, punctuality, intelligence, articulateness, and decisiveness), you may overestimate these traits and underestimate others when you are evaluating the performance of a subordinate whom you generally consider good. Thus, you may overestimate the person’s decisiveness since it is a key part of your high performance prototype.

Indeed, people are as likely to recall nonexistent traits as they are to recall those that are really there. Furthermore, once formed, prototypes may be difficult to change and tend to last a long time. Obviously, this distortion can cause major problems in terms of performance appraisals and promotions, not to mention numerous other interactions on and off the job. By the same token, such prototypes allow you to “chunk” information and reduce overload. Thus, prototypes are a double-edged sword.

RESPONSE TO THE PERCEPTUAL PROCESS

Throughout this chapter, we have shown how the perceptual process influences numerous OB responses. Figure 1.14 classifies such responses into thoughts and feelings and actions. For example, in countries such as Mexico, bosses routinely greet their secretaries with a kiss, and that is expected behavior. In contrast, in this country your thoughts and feelings might be quite different about such behavior. You might very well perceive this as a form of sexual harassment. As you cover the other OB topics in the book, you also should be alert to the importance of perceptual responses covering thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Common Perceptual Distortions

Figure 1.15 shows some common kinds of distortions that can make the perceptual process inaccurate and affect the response. These are stereotypes and prototypes, halo effects, selective perception, projection, contrast effects, and self-fulfilling prophecy.

STEREOTYPES OR PROTOTYPES

Earlier, when discussing person schemas, we described stereotypes, or prototypes, as useful ways of combining information in order to deal with information overload. At the same time, we pointed out how stereotypes can cause inaccuracies in retrieving information, along with some further problems. In particular, stereotypes obscure individual differences; that is, they can prevent managers from getting to know people as individuals and from accurately assessing their needs, preferences, and abilities. We compared these stereotypes with research results and showed the errors that can occur when stereotypes are relied on for decision making. Nevertheless, stereotypes continue to exist at the board of directors level in organizations. A recent survey

from 133 Fortune 500 firms showed that female directors were favored for membership on only the relatively peripheral public affairs committee in these organizations. Males were favored for membership on the more important compensation, executive, and finance committee, even when the females were equally or more experienced than their male counterparts.

Here, we reiterate our previous message: Both managers and employees need to be sensitive to stereotypes; they also must attempt to overcome them and recognize that an increasingly diverse workforce can be a truly competitive advantage.

HALO EFFECTS

A halo effect occurs when one attribute of a person or situation is used to develop an overall impression of the individual or situation. Like stereotypes, these distortions are more likely to occur in the organization stage of perception. Halo effects are common in our everyday lives. When meeting a new person, for example, a pleasant smile can lead to a positive first impression of an overall “warm” and “honest” person. The result of a halo effect is the same as that associated with a stereotype, however: Individual differences are obscured.

Halo effects are particularly important in the performance appraisal process because they can influence a manager’s evaluations of subordinates’ work performance. For example, people with good attendance records tend to be viewed as intelligent and responsible; those with poor attendance records are considered poor performers. Such conclusions may or may not be valid. It is the manager’s job to try to get true impressions rather than allowing halo effects to result in biased and erroneous evaluations.

SELECTIVE PERCEPTION

Selective perception is the tendency to single out those aspects of a situation, person, or object that are consistent with one’s needs, values, or attitudes. Its strongest impact occurs in the attention stage of the perceptual process. This perceptual distortion is identified in a classic research study involving executives in a manufacturing company. When asked to identify the key problem in a comprehensive business policy case, each executive selected problems consistent with his or her functional area work assignments. For example, most marketing executives viewed the key problem area as sales, whereas production people tended to see the problem as one of production and organization. These differing viewpoints would affect how the executive would approach the problem; they might also create difficulties once these people tried to work together to improve things.

More recently, 121 middle- and upper-level managers attending an executive development

program expressed broader views in conjunction with an emphasis on their own function. For example, a chief financial officer indicated an awareness of the importance of manufacturing, and an assistant marketing manager recognized the importance of accounting and finance along with their own functions. Thus, this more current research demonstrated very little perceptual selectivity. The researchers were not, however, able to state definitively what accounted for the differing results.

These results suggest that selective perception is more important at some times than at others. Managers should be aware of this characteristic and test whether or not situations, events, or individuals are being selectively perceived. The easiest way to do this is to gather additional opinions from other people. When these opinions contradict a manager's own, an effort should be made to check the original impression.

PROJECTION

Projection is the assignment of one's personal attributes to other individuals; it is especially likely to occur in the interpretation stage of perception. A classic projection error is illustrated by managers who assume that the needs of their subordinates and their own coincide. Suppose, for example, that you enjoy responsibility and achievement in your work. Suppose, too, that you are the newly appointed manager of a group whose jobs seem dull and routine. You may move quickly to expand these jobs to help the workers achieve increased satisfaction from more challenging tasks because you want them to experience things that you, personally, value in work. But this may not be a good decision. If you project your needs onto the subordinates, individual differences are lost. Instead of designing the subordinates' jobs to fit their needs best, you have designed their jobs to fit your needs. The problem is that the subordinates may be quite satisfied and productive doing jobs that seem dull and routine to you. Projection can be controlled through a high degree of self-awareness and empathy—the ability to view a situation as others see it. In contrast with the usual negative effects of projection just described, there sometimes can be a positive ethical impact.

CONTRAST EFFECTS

Earlier, when discussing the perceived, we mentioned how a red sports car would stand out from others because of its contrast. Here, we show the perceptual distortion that can occur when, say, a person gives a talk following a strong speaker or is interviewed for a job following a series of mediocre applicants. We can expect a contrast effect to occur when an individual's characteristics are contrasted with those of others recently encountered who rank higher or lower on the same characteristics. Clearly, both managers and employees need to be aware of the possible perceptual distortion the contrast effect may create in many work settings.

SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

A final perceptual distortion that we consider is the self-fulfilling prophecy—the tendency to create or find in another situation or individual that which you expected to find in the first place. Self-fulfilling prophecy is sometimes referred to as the “Pygmalion effect,” named for a mythical Greek sculptor who created a statue of his ideal mate and then made her come to life. His prophecy came true! Through self-fulfilling prophecy, you also may create in the work situation that which you expect to find.

Self-fulfilling prophecy can have both positive and negative results for you as a manager. Suppose you assume that your subordinates prefer to satisfy most of their needs outside the work setting and want only minimal involvement with their jobs. Consequently, you are likely to provide simple, highly structured jobs designed to require little involvement. Can you predict what response the subordinates would have to this situation? Their most likely response would be to show the lack of commitment you assumed they would have in the first place. Thus, your initial expectations are confirmed as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Self-fulfilling prophecy can have a positive side, however (see *The Effective Manager* 1.4). Students introduced to their teachers as “intellectual bloomers” do better on achievement tests than do their counterparts who lack such a positive introduction. A particularly interesting example of the self-fulfilling prophecy is that of Israeli tank crews. One set of tank commanders was told that according to test data some members of their assigned crews had exceptional abilities but others were only average. In reality, the crew members were assigned randomly, so that the two test groups were equal in ability. Later, the commanders reported that the so-called exceptional crew members performed better than the “average” members. As the study revealed, however, the commanders had paid more attention to and praised the crew members for whom they had the higher expectancies. The self-fulfilling effects in these cases argue strongly for managers to adopt positive and optimistic approaches to people at work.

Managing the Perceptual Process

To be successful, managers must understand the perceptual process, the stages involved, and the impact the perceptual process can have on their own and others’ responses. They must also be aware of what roles the perceiver, the setting, and the perceived have in the perceptual process. Particularly important with regard to the perceived is the concept of impression management—for both managers and others.

IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

Impression management is a person's systematic attempt to behave in ways that will create and maintain desired impressions in the eyes of others. First impressions are especially important and influence how people respond to one another. Impression management is influenced by such activities as associating with the "right people," doing favors to gain approval, flattering others to make oneself look better, taking credit for a favorable event, apologizing for a negative event while seeking a pardon, agreeing with the opinions of others, downplaying the severity of a negative event, and doing favors for others. Successful managers learn how to use these activities to enhance their own images, and they are sensitive to their use by their subordinates and others in their organizations. In this context job titles are particularly important.

DISTORTION MANAGEMENT

During the attention and selection stage, managers should be alert to balancing automatic and controlled information processing. Most of their responsibilities, such as performance assessment and clear communication, will involve controlled processing, which will take away from other job responsibilities. Along with more controlled processing, managers need to be concerned about increasing the frequency of observations and about getting representative information rather than simply responding to the most recent information about a subordinate or a production order, for instance. Some organizations, including large farms, have responded to the need for representative and more accurate information by utilizing current technology. In addition, managers should not fail to seek out disconfirming information that will help provide a balance to their typical perception of information.

The various kinds of schemas and prototypes and stereotypes are particularly important at the information organizing stage. Managers should strive to broaden their schemas or should even replace them with more accurate or complete ones.

At the interpretation stage, managers need to be especially attuned to the impact of attribution on information; we discuss this concept further in the section on managing the attributional process. At the retrieval stage, managers should be sensitive to the fallibility of memory. They should recognize the tendency to overrely on schemas, especially prototypes or stereotypes that may bias information stored and retrieved.

Throughout the entire perception process managers should be sensitive to the information distortions caused by halo effects, selective perception, projection, contrast effects, and self-fulfilling prophecy, in addition to the distortions of stereotypes and prototypes.

Attribution Theory

Earlier in the chapter we mentioned attribution theory in the context of perceptual interpretation. Attribution theory aids in this interpretation by focusing on how people attempt to (1) understand the causes of a certain event, (2) assess responsibility for the outcomes of the event, and (3) evaluate the personal qualities of the people involved in the event. In applying attribution theory, we are especially concerned with whether one's behavior has been internally or externally caused. Internal causes are believed to be under an individual's control—you believe Jake's performance is poor because he is lazy. External causes are seen as outside a person—you believe Kellie's performance is poor because her machine is old.

According to attribution theory, three factors influence this internal or external determination: distinctiveness, consensus, and consistency. Distinctiveness considers how consistent a person's behavior is across different situations. If Jake's performance is low, regardless of the machine on which he is working, we tend to give the poor performance an internal attribution; if the poor performance is unusual, we tend to assign an external cause to explain it.

Consensus takes into account how likely all those facing a similar situation are to respond in the same way. If all the people using machinery like Kellie's have poor performance, we tend to give her performance an external attribution. If other employees do not perform poorly, we attribute internal causation to her performance.

Consistency concerns whether an individual responds the same way across time. If Jake has a batch of low-performance figures, we tend to give the poor performance an internal attribution. In contrast, if Jake's low performance is an isolated incident, we attribute it to an external cause.

ATTRIBUTION ERRORS

In addition to these three influences, two errors have an impact on internal versus external determination—the fundamental attribution error and the self-serving bias. Figure 1.16 provides data from a group of health-care managers. When supervisors were asked to identify, or attribute, causes of poor performance among their subordinates, the supervisors more often chose the individual's internal deficiencies—lack of ability and effort—rather than external deficiencies in the situation—lack of support. This demonstrates a fundamental attribution error—the tendency to underestimate the influence of situational factors and to overestimate the influence of personal factors in evaluating someone else's behavior. When asked to identify causes of their own poor

performance, however, the supervisors overwhelmingly cited lack of support—an external, or situational, deficiency. This indicates a self-serving bias—the tendency to deny personal responsibility for performance problems but to accept personal responsibility for performance success.

To summarize, we tend to overemphasize other people’s internal personal factors in their behavior and to underemphasize external factors in other people’s behavior. In contrast, we tend to attribute our own success to our own internal factors and to attribute our failure to external factors.

The managerial implications of attribution theory can be traced back to the fact that perceptions influence responses. For example, a manager who feels that subordinates are not performing well and perceives the reason to be an internal lack of effort is likely to respond with attempts to “motivate” the subordinates to work harder; the possibility of changing external, situational factors that may remove job constraints and provide better organizational support may be largely ignored. This oversight could sacrifice major performance gains. Interestingly, because of the self-serving bias, when they evaluated their own behavior, the supervisors in the earlier study indicated that their performance would benefit from having better support. Thus, the supervisors’ own abilities or willingness to work hard were not felt to be at issue.

ATTRIBUTIONS ACROSS CULTURES

Research on the self-serving bias and fundamental attribution error has been done in cultures outside the United States with unexpected results.¹¹⁵ In Korea, for example, the self-serving bias was found to be negative; that is, Korean managers attribute work group failure to themselves—“I was not a capable leader”—rather than to external causes. In India, the fundamental attribution error overemphasizes external rather than internal causes for failure. Africans attribute negative consequences—driving away fish and angering mermaids into creating squalls—to women but apparently not to men. Why these various differences occurred is not clear, but differing cultural values appear to play a role. Finally, there is some evidence that U.S. females may be less likely to emphasize the self-serving bias than males.

Certain cultures, such as the United States, tend to overemphasize internal causes and underemphasize external causes. Such overemphasis may result in negative attributions toward employees. These negative attributions, in turn, can lead to disciplinary actions, negative performance evaluations, transfers to other departments, and over-reliance on training, rather than focusing on such external causes as lack of workplace support. Employees, too, take their cues from managerial misattributions and, through negative self-fulfilling prophecies, may reinforce

managers' original misattributions. Employees and managers alike (see *The Effective Manager* 1.5) can be taught attributional realignment to help deal with such misattributions.