Leadership & Perception

Originally Published On The Executive Hub:

We’ve all heard the saying “perception is reality,” but is it true? Does perception never, rarely, sometimes, or always equal reality? While I long ago reached the conclusion perception does in fact matter, it may not be for the reasons you might think. I have found the majority of people tend to be myopic with regard to perception – they understand their own perceptions, but are quite often either ignorant or intolerant of other’s perceptions. Here’s the thing – the most important item to understand is success as a leader has very little to do with your perceptions, but rather it has everything to do with the perception of others.

Let me be clear – I’m not suggesting you ignore your perceptions, subordinate your perceptions, or change your perceptions, but I am strongly suggesting you take the time to both be aware of, and understand the perceptions of others. What I’ve just espoused has nothing to with compromising your values or being disingenuous. Rather my reasoning simply hypothesizes that if you’re not in touch with the perceptions of meaningful constituencies, your success will be impeded by your tunnel vision.

Let’s start the analysis by examining the definitional differences between “perception” and “reality”:

Perception Defined: a perception is a belief, theory, hypothesis, feeling, appearance, opinion, observation, insight, awareness, or sensitivity. It may or may not constitute reality, and initial perceptions often change with the passing of time, the changing of circumstances, or the receipt of additional information.
Reality Defined: Reality is certain, authentic, actual, true, and factual. True reality is undeniable, (factually) indisputable, and not subject to debate (rationalization).

Attitudes, perspectives, and positions can in many cases be born out by facts. However they can also be little more than emotional or philosophical beliefs that are far from factual statements. The best example I can give is to ask you to revisit the image above – Is the glass half empty, or is it half full? My answer is yes. You see both answers are correct, both answers are a matter of perception, and to my points made earlier, both answers are very telling. If you’ll allow me to take a deeper dive on this illustration you’ll start to see why understanding other’s perceptions are critically important. Let’s look at how different individuals might view the glass:

1. **The Optimist**: The glass is half full.
2. **The Pessimist**: The glass is half empty.
3. **The Salesperson**: How much water would you like your glass to hold?
4. **The Accountant**: Does the glass really need all that water?
5. **The Attorney**: If there are enough people on one side of this issue I can file a class action suit.
6. **The Investment Banker**: I’m only 50% leveraged.
7. **The Engineer**: The glass is twice as big as it needs to be.
8. **The Quantum Physicist**: The glass has a 50% probability of holding water.
9. **The Philosopher**: If nobody looks at the glass, who’s to say whether it’s half full or half empty?
10. **The Politician**: Let’s take a poll and then I’ll render my opinion as to how full or empty the glass is.
11. **The Servant Leader**: Whatever the amount of water, I’ll use it first to quench the thirst of those I lead.
Those of you more creative than I could likely come up with a much longer list, but I think this exercise makes the point that understanding other’s perceptions is a critical part of being an effective leader. What’s interesting to me is most people actually form their perceptions in a very similar fashion. They take inputs (information), process them through a variety of filters (experience, emotions, expectations, moral and philosophical positions, etc.), those filters in turn create an output (accurate or inaccurate perception), which leads to an action (good or bad decision). Again, all of us use a very similar process; we just have access to different types of inputs, use different filters, arrive at different perceptions, and therefore make different decisions. It’s learning to access better quality information and/or develop a more refined filtering system that will allow us to have more accurate perceptions and create a better understanding.

The most powerful part of understanding the process described in the paragraph above is taking the time to understand the mechanics of this process as it applies to others – particularly those you lead and communicate with on a frequent basis. If you understand where someone is getting their inputs, and which filters they use in creating their outputs, you’ll be able to better understand and impact their perceptions, and ultimately, this will lead to greater influence over their decisioning process. This is very simple, but very powerful, and should be understood by anyone in a leadership position.

The bottom line is great leaders take the time to understand the various constituencies and spheres of influence they come in contact with. “My way or the highway” thinking, and/or positional dictatorships rarely create the culture and performance demonstrated by winning organizations. Whether you agree or disagree is not the point – the point is understanding the perceptions of others affords you a source of intelligence, a learning opportunity, and the ability to keep lines of communication open.

So back to my original question: Does perception never, rarely, sometimes, or always equal reality? Please leave a comment and share your experiences.