

4

Perception of Self

How Others See You

I serve on several advisory boards, and on one of those boards, the chairman of the firm and I have become very good friends. Often we get together for dinner and discuss current business issues and opportunities that his firm is engaging in. It isn't unusual for me to speak with him several times a day. When he calls me, I try to take his call immediately, yet when I call him his secretary picks up and typically asks me if I can hold. He rarely picks up quickly. "He'll be with you in a moment" is the common refrain.

Nine out of ten times I am on hold for an extended period of time. Now when I call, I watch the timer on my phone and, when it hits two minutes, I just hang up. Who hasn't heard this tune before, especially among contacts you do business with regularly, and for whom you otherwise have a high regard?

Early in our relationship I used to get annoyed, thinking his behavior was very rude. Picture this: I am intimately involved in the day-to-day operations of his firm, and he isn't immediately responsive to my calls. If he is tied up, which is understandable, why doesn't he simply instruct his secretary to say he'll get back to me? This is not rocket science in the world of manners. It's common courtesy.

What is the reaction when a first-time caller is left on hold for an extended period of time? It is virtually guaranteed that the first impression will be negative. Arrogance, rudeness, thoughtlessness are just some impressions a person waiting might have.

I'm in a situation now with someone I've done a business deal with, and I've been in the position to potentially refer several people to him. But I've noticed his phone manners are wanting. In his case, he is remiss when it comes to returning a phone call. Now, what if I tell someone to call, and that person leaves a message and there is no returned call? Not only is my referral unimpressed but he's also probably wondering why I recommended him. What's worse is that my credibility is potentially diminished, and I will think very hard about making any other referrals to him unless they are qualified. That means I may say something like, "I'll be glad to introduce you to him, but he is a little quirky. He isn't great about returning phone calls." If he can't return a phone call, how well can he execute his business?

Since it's obvious that this type of behavior offends people, why do it?

**Rule
8**

Wake up! Be aware of what you do or don't do and how those affected will react.

The explanation is different for different people. In the case of my friend, he is just oblivious, and he isn't thinking about the person on hold. He literally doesn't realize what he's doing. For many executives they're flexing their fragile egos by exercising the control they perceive they have. Don't take it personally; they just don't care.

I have another friend who worked most of his life for large public companies. I mentioned this man's habit of leaving me on

hold or not returning my calls. He said that in corporate America this type of behavior is more common than most people think. Rudeness is the norm. If you demand an immediate response, you are fooling yourself. He said to exercise patience. They expect you to grovel, especially if they perceive that you need them more than they need you. It's a silly little power play exercised by executives and others who are, at their core, incredibly insecure.

Many of these people have low self-esteem, or feel they are underpaid and look to exhibit power wherever they can. The reality is that they would be better off building as many relationships and friendships as possible because as we all know corporations tend to go through periods where large numbers of people are systematically laid off. In today's fast-moving, volatile economy, sooner rather than later, many of those who wield the power will find themselves on the other end. They'll be terminated and hope someone else will be in a position to help. I wonder how they'll feel if nobody returns their calls. Sherry Lansing, a powerful Hollywood studio executive, makes certain she returns everyone's calls within twenty-four hours. Would it surprise you to learn that she's been at the head of Paramount longer than any other current studio head? If she can do it, so can you.

Rule
9

Leo Durocher, the legendary baseball manager, once said, "Nice guys finish last." He had it wrong: Nice guys finish first.

So, what to do about my friend, the chairman, who was constantly leaving me dangling at the end of my telephone cord? One evening while I was having dinner with him, I decided to broach the touchy subject of his phone habits. I never directly confront someone with his or her problem, however. I tend to go deeper, trying to unmask the psychology behind the behavior.

PERCEPTION OF SELF—NOT SELF-PERCEPTIONS

I began by asking him a somewhat disarming question: “Do you know what perception of self is?” He thought for a moment and answered, “Is it how I perceive myself?”

I said, “No, to the contrary. Actually it is being aware and sensitive to how the person you are interacting with perceives you. Let me give you an example. When I call your office and you leave me on hold, are you sensitive to the fact that I am sitting there waiting for you to finish your call? I know that when I receive a call and I am on the other line, I am really uncomfortable about leaving somebody on hold for anything other than a brief period of time—fifteen or twenty seconds even seems long. In fact, if my existing conversation runs longer than a short interval, I excuse myself for a moment and pick up the party on hold just to ask them if I can call them back shortly. Many times when I call you I’m on hold for three or four minutes and ultimately just hang up. You probably are not even conscious that I was there, or that I became intolerant waiting. I am sure that I’m not the only person you do this to. Someone who isn’t your friend or close to you could easily be offended or just think you are arrogant, neither of which is the message you want to send. I think it is extremely important that you are always conscious of the way people perceive you.”

My friend listened and, to his credit, acknowledged that I was right. He committed to managing this aspect of his business, and I decided to test the results the next day. I called my friend and I was only on hold for fourteen seconds. The chairman has since become a more thoughtful respondent. I hope he is doing the same with others.

“Perception of self” is an essential awareness. I know that when I meet someone new, I control his or her perception of me. I feel

empowered by this. I convey enthusiasm and sincerity. Most important, I am knowledgeable. Based on the reactions I receive, I sense a positive perception from my initial meetings.

When you finish a first meeting with someone, do you feel that the person you spoke with is interested in you and what you do? Did you impress them? Do they like you? Did you have their attention? Any product or service that you are selling starts with whether you are positively perceived.

Think about these points for a moment. People buy, invest, in people.

Recently, I introduced an early-stage (pre-revenue) telecom company to an entrepreneur in transition. I thought there might be a good match. Steve is an accomplished businessman who began his career at one of the major telecoms and worked his way up to become the right-hand man to the president and CEO. He went on to start several successful technology-based companies and ultimately took them to the point where he created some modest capital. He was now looking for his next opportunity.

He was extremely intrigued by the company's business model and anxious to be involved. During the first couple of weeks Steve would call me many times each day to discuss the opportunity and what I thought the company's reactions were to him being part of their team. Our conversations became so analytical that I was wondering if he was too anxious. The irony is that for the fifteen years I have known Steve his analytical intensity has annoyed me on many occasions. I think his business career has suffered from this problem. Still, Steve is very smart and could potentially be the missing component on the executive team of the new company.

A meeting was scheduled to discuss the company's financial needs and his potential role. The day before the meeting Steve was pacing in my office and asked my opinion of what he was going to say. "How does this sound?" he asked. "Dave, did you

speak to your partners more about my involvement? I know that I can roll out this product nationwide. I am ready to start right away and . . .”

I immediately cut him off.

“Steve, stop. You are being way too pushy. You sound desperate. Relax. Let them come to you a little bit. You have the right credentials, and they know it. You don’t want them to perceive desperation. Reverse the roles. Let them convince you to be a part of the company. They know you are the missing piece.” I suggested that he tell them: “I’m very interested in the business. I’ve done all the due diligence, and I may be ready to make a commitment. However, things are still in an early stage and the market is difficult, and I’d like to hear what some of your ideas are involving strategy and the competition.”

In his initial approach, Steve looked like he was hungry for a job. When this occurs, you devalue your assets. The other side then begins thinking they have the wrong person, they may have aimed too low, or, at the minimum, their negotiating prowess is enhanced.

With the second approach Steve is asking them to sell him on joining their team.

Credibility is an essential part of how you are ultimately perceived. In my core business, on a daily basis I am presented with opportunities to finance transactions that need to close immediately. These transactions are normally secured by real estate. So brokers constantly pitch me with new deals. Some recent examples illustrate the range of trust and respect I would give to two different brokers.

In the first one, a mortgage broker called me about a Key Biscayne home that was up for sale. He briefly explained the particulars. It was a third mortgage on a very expensive home in a very exclusive neighborhood. The house was worth \$15 million, and the first and second mortgages totaled \$8.9 million. That

left approximately \$6 million of equity in the house, and because the owner was going through a divorce, he needed an additional \$2 million. The owner was a successful lawyer, and he was trying to stave off a foreclosure. Even if he sold the house in a distress sale for \$11 million my investment would be protected.

Well, briefly, this wasn't a transaction that I was very interested in. It was, however, a high-profile piece of real estate so I made one call and in five minutes I got the real story. I found out it wasn't worth anywhere near \$15 million. In fact, six months ago they had had an auction in the house, where one hundred people showed up on the lawn, and the starting bid was \$12 million, and no one bid for it. The prominent lawyer was indeed going through a divorce, but the broker neglected to mention that his client was being prosecuted for absconding with money from his clients' escrow accounts. Now either the broker was incredibly inept or he was outright lying. I assumed he knew the house's history. He didn't really care whether I made a good or bad loan. I didn't think he was inept, but he withheld that information, and, in fact, he totally portrayed a completely different scenario. So immediately, he has zero credibility. I know never to consider anything he says as having a basis in fact.

Coincidentally, right about the time that deal was offered to me, another broker made an appointment with me to propose another deal. He came to my office with a very thorough package, told me a very precise story about a transaction in Puerto Rico. I asked to meet with the principal, who gave me the exact same story. They had all the details, all the backup data, and nearly all of my questions answered before I asked them. Then the broker said, "There are a couple of issues you should know about," and he just laid out all the risks, all the possible encumbrances. Now, I'm interested in this transaction. I'll do some more due diligence before making a decision. Already, I respect this broker. He's given me the perception that he's credible. If someone calls

me and says to me, “Do you know this guy?” I’m going to say you should hear him out. He’s a sharp guy, on his game, and he says it the way it is. And that’s worth a lot.

Perception of self is probably one of the most important barometers of awareness. Ask yourself these key questions:

- How do people who you know perceive you?
- How do new introductions react to you?
- Are you viewed as smart and sharp at what you do?
- Are you viewed as a giver or as a taker?
- Do others *think* you are connected?
- Are you well liked by your peers; are you viewed as a good person?
- Do people respect your opinion?
- Are you honest and sincere?
- Do you follow through with what you say you are going to do?
- Do you take the lead in conversations?
- Are you ever overbearing or overanxious when making a point?

It is sometimes hard to be objective when taking a self-examination quiz such as the one above. I liken it to the obvious job interview question when you’re asked to describe your weak points or flaws. It’s a purposely loaded question, because nobody any good will say they have none, even in jest. It requires taking a candid step back. If you have difficulty making an assessment, I suggest you ask someone you have a fairly intimate business relationship with to evaluate you. Ask him to be painfully honest. If he exposes the negatives, you know you have some personal work on your agenda, not to mention a real friend.

YOU ARE OFTEN PERCEIVED BY THE WAY YOU LOOK

Everyone has heard the story about how a hip young black man, dressed in the latest ghetto fashion—flashy sneakers, Lakers jersey, baggy three-quarter pants, ostentatious jewelry—walks into the local Bentley dealer. He spends five or ten minutes inspecting the high-priced cars, and he cannot get a salesman to wait on him. The showroom staff has no idea that he's a rap star, worth millions, probably would make an impulse buy for a car costing six figures, and pay cash—if only someone were merely attentive. Today, luxury car salesmen are a bit smarter. But it's a telling story about perception. Businessmen wearing Armani suits with expensive cuff links and silk ties are fawned over, even if they have no intention of buying. The perception may be wrong, but this is the reality of things.

I have a friend who has a successful pension-consulting business. When I first met him, he had just a small actuarial shop, and I wondered why a guy who seemed to have so much going for him wasn't doing a bigger business. The first thing I noticed was that his buttoned-down shirt had a frayed collar. Now, this in itself is not a particularly big thing. But the frayed collar distracted me enough to begin inspecting his entire wardrobe. His suit was not pressed, and, when I looked closer, it seemed outdated. The material was a cotton and polyester blend, not wool. His socks clashed with his suit. Normally, I'm not a snob about how expensively someone dresses. Plenty of people on a budget know how to coordinate clothes and put together an outfit that looks good.

My take in short? A nice enough guy, but a lousy dresser in a profession where conventional business dress is expected. Did the clothes make the man? Obviously not. A bad perception,

however, can scotch a deal. And trust me, it can begin with a frayed collar.

I made a superficial judgment dictated by his shabby appearance. My perception, like narrow-minded luxury car salesmen, was wrong. Over time I began to realize the quality of his character and how smart he truly was. We served on a board together and after two years or so, it became obvious that the one thing he didn't focus on was his attire. His suits were old and poorly fitting. His shirts and ties were unfashionable. I'm not suggesting that he was inappropriate; he just didn't have perception of self in this regard. He didn't see what others saw.

This man heads a financial services company, and one of his primary functions is to bring in new business. As we became good friends, I ultimately felt comfortable enough to talk to him about his appearance. One night over dinner I said, "David, I want to tell you something. I want you to understand that you are my dear friend and my comments are intended to be constructive.

"You are the president of your company, so you are also the rainmaker. When you sell your services, think about whom you are speaking to, the president, the CFO, or the owner of the company. You are trying to convince these people to hire you to manage some of their most important assets, often millions of dollars. You are asking owners of companies to trust you with their pensions.

"But your clothing looks like it was acquired at the Salvation Army. You look impoverished. If someone is going to trust you with the company retirement plan, don't you think you need to *look* successful? Even if I thought you were brilliant, there is a limited possibility that I would not give you my assets to invest. You need to dress the part. Here's what I would like you to do. Come with me and get some custom-made shirts and new suits. Trust me. Look at it as an investment that will pay dividends."

After a few weeks of prodding, David took my advice. He

looked great with the wardrobe makeover. He admitted the new clothes made him *feel* confident. His self-esteem got a lift as well. His business has improved dramatically, and so has the way that others perceive him.

**Rule
10**

The perception may be wrong, but it doesn't matter.
Perception is reality.

A lot of people are not cognizant of the way someone sees them. They just aren't sensitive to the reaction that a person has to them. Often, it comes down to looking in someone's eyes. When you look in someone's eyes, you can tell whether you have them engaged or not.

There is a list of things to be mindful of that can create a negative perception. If you meet someone who has discolored teeth that really stand out, it subliminally creates a bad impression. Sometimes it isn't even subliminal. I'm actually turned off to someone like that on a certain level. Why? Because on a certain level, lack of good hygiene is a turnoff. And I'm a curious type. I think, this person is driving a Mercedes, takes off whenever he wants to play golf during the week, and obviously has the money to have his teeth fixed. Is there some reason why he doesn't? Is he out of touch? Or just doesn't care?

**Rule
11**

Drive yourself to be better—every day.

A colleague told me a story about how his close friend from high school sent his daughter to have breakfast with him. This woman was a newly minted Ivy League graduate, top grades,

obviously intelligent and ambitious. She was searching for a job in politics, and my colleague was very well connected, having worked for some influential public figures. He was very impressed with her, but one thing bothered him. During conversation with her, he noticed she had a tongue stud, and this kind of ornament can be very distracting. He told me, "I respected her right to wear body jewelry, but I told her father the truth. I couldn't comfortably recommend her to the kinds of people who were in a position to hire her. They would be totally turned off."

Now, since this woman is obviously high caliber in every respect, she could have the attitude that suggests, "This is who I am, and if you can't handle this part of my appearance, then you're someone who I don't want to work for anyway." If this is true, then it's an arrogant pose. If she is simply ignorant and unaware of the impression she's making, then it's up to another adult to clue her in. Whatever the reason, her appearance is not good. She has to be informed that her look is offensive to a lot of people within the business she's attempting to penetrate.

This just means you should be mindful of presenting yourself in the best possible way you can. You cannot skimp when it comes to your attire, and, of course, you should choose your accessories wisely. Buy clothes that make you look as presentable as possible. Because the first thing someone sees is your physical appearance. They have an immediate reaction. They draw an instant conclusion, fair or unfair, right or wrong. That's reality. And if you can put yourself in the most advantageous position with that first perception, it's going to pay dividends.

To summarize, it's crucial that you are on top of the way you look, the way you sound, and the way you present yourself. The smallest detail can put somebody off, and people in business have remarkable memories. You will continually run across someone who cannot deal with someone else for the pettiest reason. It's illogical, I know, but this is the way the world works.

Again, be sure you ask yourself: Are you cognizant of the way people are perceiving you? When you're speaking, does the person listening think you're smart? Do you have their attention? Just how well are you engaging them? Do they respond to you in a way that says you control the conversation? Do you feel that person is energized by you?

If I'm in control of a conversation and I know a person is responding to me, it gives me a good deal more confidence. If I think the person likes me, I know I have them. You can do this, too.

