

## Shaping Perceptions

*A commonly mistaken perception about perceptions is that these are visually based.*

By [Robert Pater](#) | Aug 01, 2015

Knowledge forms the foundation of the power to harness change toward improving performance. A personal example—when playing a musical instrument, knowing where you're trying to go reduces fumbling and discordance. I've been playing both piano and guitar for a long time. But as one of my friends insightfully says, "There's a difference between having 25 years of experience and one year, twenty-five times." In other words, it can be easy for me—and perhaps others—to keep on doing the same things without necessarily improving. I know this has been the case with my guitar playing, where I've been mostly stuck into the same rhythms. I found myself getting bored and therefore playing less frequently. So to refresh both my music and mind, I recently took some lead guitar lessons. By shifting my perception of the fretboard, I now better know *where* to accurately place my fingers and *how* to more smoothly shift them. It all started with perceiving the guitar neck differently.

The same applies to improving *anything*—Safety, leadership, communications, sports performance, etc. Henri Bergson contended, "The eye only sees what the mind is prepared to comprehend." The key first step to moving past any plateau of performance is discovering how to look at things differently. *Seeing* things the same way leads to *doing* things the same way. Shifting perception is *especially* critical when you have years of experience being "effective." This is how "good" blocks becoming "excellent," auto-piloting leadership rather than questioning and seeing what you might be missing. Real-life challenges rarely come with designated steps for staying in tune.

Here are some other keys for perceiving more effectively, which, in turn then enhance actions:

- *Start by seeing your blinders—in order to then remove them.* What you don't look for (perhaps you don't

want to see this), you're unlikely to see. And you won't consider what you don't believe is even possible; data will be written off immediately as "impossible." For example, do you believe, like me, that workers can become strong peer change catalysts for Safety? Even some who have a historically negative mindset? I know this is possible because I've seen it occur in literally thousands of instances. Psychologists report that predetermined mental constructs get in the way of seeing what's really going on. Such "inattentive blindness" or "self-sealing delusions" cause people to miss what's going on right in front of them. Preset ways of looking at Safety, or at workers, get in the way of seeing anything outside of what they expect. "Confirmational bias" is yet another shade of closed-loop thinking; a negatively cast manager becomes suspicious rather than pleased when hearing of a worker initiating Safety improvements, assuming the latter is just trying to "pull something." I've seen many perceptually myopic managers whose inattentive blindness resulted in their believing worker morale and trust is just fine when, in reality, this couldn't be further from the case. Some managers only compound the problem when they then either discipline or disregard the "messenger" who brings data that differs from their bias, information critical for building improvements. The way around each of these potential perceptual potholes is to elicit honest outside feedback. Be sure to actually seek out other points of view that are by no means your own defaults. Conversely, be wary of receiving a continual dose of all feel-good feedback. If everything seems "comfortable," something is wrong with what the leader's getting.

- *Manage your own (and then influence others') expectations.* Best leaders do their utmost to avoid letting their biases color where they look and what they see. They'd rather deal with disappointing realities, catching these at earliest possible stages, than deluding themselves by fiddling as their home organization burns.
- *Enlist all your senses.* A commonly mistaken perception about perceptions is that these are visually based. That's why people say "I see..." or "I look at it this way..." when grasping something. And haven't you heard of associating "visualizing" with planning something new? But in reality, not enlisting all our senses limits the information we receive. To widen perceptual intake, heighten listening skills—to the thrum of a work environment as much as to what others say and what others hold back. Consistently communicate clear expectations that everyone be alert to what's happening day to day by hearing out-of-the-ordinary sounds, *smelling* something "unusual" in the environment, when working with tools, *feeling* the differences that flags "this isn't right." (For example, most people can feel when a cutting edge becomes dulled.) We've found that internally feeling slight shifts of balance and forces loading are critical for preventing soft-tissue injuries (sprains and strains).
- *Select the best words.* Perceptions are frequently shaped by verbal expressions. Especially avoid "code" words that limit or divert others' perceptions by igniting emotional reactivity. For example, prefer talking about "control" (as in "Take personal control of your own Safety") to "accountability" (which implies, "We're waiting and ready to punish you for any Safety transgressions."). Also, be sure to define what you mean when communicating about "Safety." Is this just the prevention of accidents/incidents that people don't think they're going to have, or something more? And be sure to provide a clear picture of what you're specifically trying to see when moving toward a higher-level culture. Be aware of your language. Words tend to box in certain mindsets and exclude others. For example, talking about "the cause" of an incident limits thinking to perceive the last thing that happened. Better to shift mindset—

and perceptions—to "the contributors" that lead to the accidents.

- *Ask the right questions to shift perceptions toward taking action.* Focus on "What might be possible?" and "Is there anything we might be missing?" rather than "It's not possible to do that" or "We already tried and it didn't work."

There's no doubt that strong leaders shape their own and others' perceptions to focus on highest-level performance.

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