

Confidence and Communication Skills

The Power of Perceptual Positions

How you think, feel and behave are linked. Improve one and you improve the other two in a beneficial cycle. Too many people try to improve their confidence only by working on the way they think or feel. In this series of articles, I am going to show you another approach - how to change the way you behave. As you see the effects of your growing communication skills, you will find that your self-confidence automatically improves too.

A vital ingredient of skilled communication is *agile thinking* so, in this series of articles, I am going to explain a few simple, practical and very effective concepts that will make you a more skilled and influential communicator. This article is about *perceptual positions* - a very useful concept that will do more than improve your communication skills and self-confidence, it will also help you build better relationships.

Definition

A *perceptual position* is how one person 'sees' (perceives) things (reality) from his or her viewpoint (position). *Perceptual positions*, therefore, is how two or more people 'see' (perceive) the same 'thing' (reality) from their respective viewpoints (positions).

The premise that *perception is not reality* is central to the concept and, so, needs understanding in more detail.

Reality and perception

The human brain is constantly receiving incoming information - millions of bits of it every minute. This could be a big problem because the conscious brain is easily overloaded and even more easily distracted. (In fact, it is only really comfortable handling one thought at a time.) If too many bits of incoming information enter the conscious brain simultaneously, it would get stressed and 'crash' like an overloaded computer. Consequently, to protect the conscious brain from overload, the subconscious brain contains a *filter* that intercepts all incoming information and determines *what* is allowed through to the conscious brain and, as you see in a moment, *how* it is allowed through.

Here is an example. Imagine people at a party. They are in small groups, deep in conversation. If someone in one group asks the person next to him what the people behind them are saying, she may reply, '*I don't know. I can't hear them*'. (Parties are usually pretty noisy.) If, however, someone in the group behind mentions her name as part of their conversation, she would hear that. She believed she could not hear what the group behind her was talking about yet she heard her name. Therefore, she must have heard what they saying (otherwise she could not have heard her name) but she

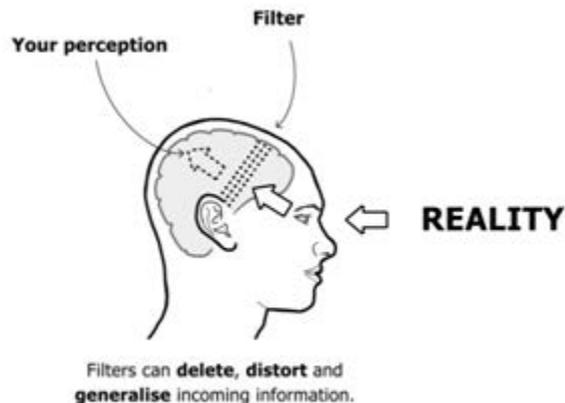
was not consciously aware of the other group's conversation until it was allowed through her filter.

Her subconscious brain kept the other group's conversation on its side of the filter knowing that if it was allowed through, it would distract her conscious brain from the conversation she was having with the person next to her. Hearing her name mentioned, however, her subconscious realised that the other group's conversation was relevant to her and allowed the conversation through the filter into her conscious brain.

It is important to note that her subconscious controlled more than *what* was allowed through (her name). She might, for example, have been flattered, assuming that people were saying positive things about her. Alternatively, she might have been angry, assuming that they were gossiping about her. This is an important feature of filters - they also control *how* information gets through.

The main purpose of the filter is to protect the conscious brain from overload. The subconscious brain determines *what* is allowed through. Also, the subconscious does not like to have to rationally evaluate all incoming information so it makes lots of assumptions based on its experience. This affects *how* incoming information is allowed through the filter.

All incoming information is subject to this *deletion* and *distortion* effect and, consequently, the information in our brains is our *perception*; it is not *reality*.



A popular metaphor is to say that we each have an individual 'map' inside our heads and, like all maps, it can only ever be a *representation* of real terrain; it is not, and never can be, the terrain itself.

Why perceptions differ

Everyone's filter is a product of their experience – their culture, upbringing, events in their lives, etc. Your filter contains your attitudes, values, and beliefs (AVBs). Some of these AVBs are similar to those of other people (for example, cultural norms) and some are specific to you (as only you have had your precise experiences). Consequently, if

two people are looking at the same thing, the deletion and distortion processes of their respective filters will give them two different perceptions. If, for example, two people look at the same glass of wine, one might perceive it as half full while the other perceives it as half empty. It depends on their attitudes, values and beliefs. The amount of wine in the glass is reality; 'half full' or 'half empty' is perception.



However, very few people make the distinction between reality and perception; to them, their perception *is* reality and, when people believe that their perception is reality, the consequences for effective communication can be negative.

Consequences for communication

Let us continue the map metaphor. Some maps are accurate and up to date, other maps are old and do not show new roads, bypasses, one-way systems, etc. Similarly, some people have a 'mental map' that is a reasonably accurate representation of reality while others have a mental map that is inaccurate and has not been updated since childhood. Some maps are designed for a specific purpose such as motoring, hill walking or site-seeing. Similarly, some people have specifically personal representations of reality based, for example, a career in the military, long-term unemployment, coping with a disability, being poor, being rich, etc. If you think of the people you know, your perception will be very similar to some people but very different from others.

This is an important point - in some situations the difference between your mental map and someone else's mental map can be enough to make communicating with them extremely difficult. Conversations with them can be a bit like giving someone directions by telephone while, without either of you realising, you are each looking at different maps of the same area. You can imagine how the conversation would not only be confusing but could easily deteriorate as frustration at each other's apparent stupidity and inability to 'see the obvious' gradually gets worse.

You might have noticed that discussions about religion and politics often deteriorate into arguments. This is because these subjects frequently engender deep and rigid views of 'reality'. So what the other person is saying is not filtered as their opinion, it is filtered as 'wrong'.

Using 'perceptual positions' to improve communication, relationships and self-confidence

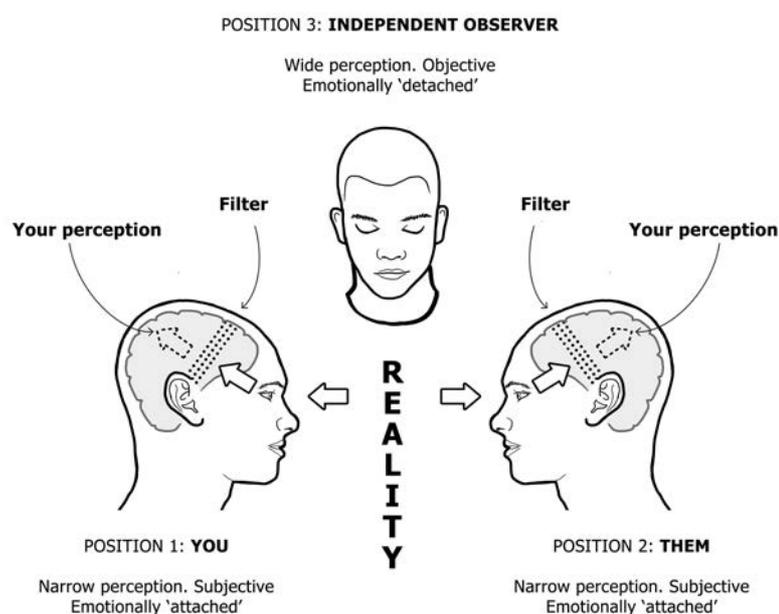
By understanding and using the concept of perceptual positions, you can overcome many communication and relationship problems.

First, you accept that it is normal to see (perceive) things from our own viewpoint (position) and that may not be the way other people see them. This makes it easier and more natural to listen to, and understand other people. Your awareness that perception is not reality makes it easier for you to understand other people, communicate effectively with them and, consequently, to enjoy better relationships with them.

Second, in the same way you understand that a map is not actual terrain, you understand that perception is not actual reality. It might be a good representation of reality, a poor representation, an out-of-date representation or a specialist representation. Most young parents with mortgages and careers, for example, will come to understand that the 'reality' they enjoyed as a carefree student has been overtaken by events and needs updating. Most parents of teenage children experience the different, 'specialist' representations of reality. Your awareness that perception needs updating makes it easier for you to grow and develop.

Third, you can develop *thinking agility* because, in any conversation between you and someone else there are not just two perceptual positions, there are *three* - how *you* see things (position 1), how *the other person* sees things (position 2) and how *an independent, objective observer* would see things (position 3).

Features of positions 1 and 2 are that people in them are *emotionally attached* to their own perceptions. This makes it difficult to be objective, empathetic, assertive and solution-orientated. Anyone in position 3, however, tends to have a clear and rational view of the overall situation *and* has a reasonable view of how people in positions 1 and 2 see the situation.



This is another key point - each perceptual position has advantages and potential disadvantages.

Position	Advantages	Potential disadvantages
1	Easier to stand your ground/be assertive.	Getting stuck there can make you stubborn, self-centred or aggressive.
2	You see the situation as the other person sees it; you understand them better; you empathise more.	Being 'emotionally blackmailed' into, or unintentionally drifting into, position 2, makes you agree too easily, concede too much, behave submissively, feel guilty.
3	Moving into position 3 helps you see the big picture, be objective, remain emotionally detached and stay assertive.	No serious disadvantages but could possibly make you compromise in situations where you should not.

You will have experienced all three perceptual positions, probably without realising it at the time. Any time you have stood your ground without compromise, you have been in position 1. Any time you have been emotionally blackmailed into agreeing with someone, you have been drawn into position 2. Any time you have listened to a friend complain about one of their colleagues and, because of your emotional detachment, you could see both sides of the argument *and* see a solution, you have been in position 3.

This is another important point – you can move between all three perceptual positions but it is only when you do so deliberately, that you get all the advantages and none of the disadvantages.

Position	Advantages	Potential disadvantages
1, 2, 3 flexibility	By <i>choosing</i> to move between positions 1, 2 & 3, you: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> immediately gain flexibility and agility in your thinking and behaviour, 	No disadvantages at all.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• are less susceptible to manipulation,• understand other people better,• generate good solutions,• improve self confidence as you achieve better outcomes.	
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Using 'perceptual positions' in practice

The concept of perceptual positions combines very effectively with behavioural techniques.

- You can stay in position 1, and not be emotionally blackmailed into position 2, by using assertive techniques such as the *3-part sentence* and the *broken record*.
- You can move into position 2 deliberately and in a controlled way, using *probing* to better understand the other person - not just *what* they want but, importantly, *why* they want it, what the situation *looks like and feels like* from their perspective. That leads to real understanding.
- When giving feedback, you can move into position 3 by *chunking up* or by using the *Rosenberg Framework* (often called the *non-violent communication* model).
- You can encourage the other person to understand your perceptual position by *summarising* to prove you have listened to them and then *framing* your input appropriately – 'So, if I have understood you correctly, let me explain my position'.
- You can encourage the other person to move into position 3 by a) *chunking up* in your summary; b) asking questions that can only be answered from position 3 (for example, 'When you present this proposal to the Board, what evidence will they look for?') or c) *pointing out a consequence* (for example, 'If we don't allow the time necessary to include this information in the proposal, I believe the client will find fault in the whole proposal. I'd rather include it and give the proposal the maximum chance of success').

This is the fourth key point – with the right techniques, you can use your behaviour to nudge the other person into a different perceptual position.

*(If you are not yet familiar with some of the behavioural techniques referred to above, most of them are explained in **Quietly Confident**.)*

Even more benefits

The benefits do not stop there. The perceptual position concept has even more to offer.

How many times have you had an unsatisfactory conversation at work and, when you have returned home in the evening, you have replayed it in your mind and felt upset or angry? How many times have you anticipated a forthcoming challenge (perhaps a presentation or a difficult conversation) and every time you thought about it you felt

anxious or stressed? If you have had such experiences, you have been stuck in position 1.

Imagine the difference if you replayed the unsatisfactory conversation from position 3. You could 'observe' the conversation rationally, understanding all perspectives and work out how to handle it better next time. Imagine the difference if you 'previewed' the challenging event from position 3 and watched it unfold perfectly.

The easiest way of moving into position 3 in examples such as these is to pretend you are watching the situation on a screen (television, tablet, laptop, etc) and, every time the actor who looks like you behaves in a way that is less than effective, stop the video, rewind and *replay the scene again as you want it to go*. (It is your imagination so you can choose to imagine a positive scene.) You can do more than tell the actor how to behave, you can also tell him or her how to *think* and *feel*. (Remember, how you think, feel and behave are all related; change one of them and the other two change automatically.) Do this as many times as necessary until the actor gets it right. You can then 'morph' into the screen so that now, instead of watching the scene from position 3, you are experiencing it from position 1. Replay it as many times as you like until it unfolds the way you want it to *and* you feel fine doing it.

Finally

You can get used to the *perceptual positions* concept by observing others in conversations and meetings, etc. You will probably notice how some people appear stubborn because they cannot see beyond position 1. Some people are too easily manipulated because they get drawn into position 2. Some people, however, are good at standing their ground and listening and being tolerant and being persuasive. They come across as positive, skilled communicators and quietly self-confident. They are usually the people with the *thinking agility* that the perceptual positions concept naturally engenders.

As you incorporate the perceptual positions concept into the way you think and behave, your communication skills will lead to better results. Those results will help you feel better in challenging situations. You will feel, and be more confident because how you think, feel and behave will be working together.

I hope this article has helped you understand perceptual positions. You can explore even more helpful ideas in *Quietly Confident*.