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How to Read People and Influence Perceptions

Competition for top leadership positions is tough. Intelligence and good social skills are the price of admission, but they're not enough. A high-potential candidate must master the intricacies of reading people, predicting behaviors and influencing perceptions—advanced communication skills that can be learned.

The effective CEO's presence and essence have changed tremendously over the last two decades. There's no hiding behind a title. What propels most executives to the top won't keep them there for long, unless they can continually improve their people-reading skills and manage perceptions.

If you have talent and skills, you probably know by now that they're not enough—unless you're lucky enough to bear the company founder's last name and are in line for succession.

Today's effective leaders have more than presence, charisma and charm. They are strategic about managing their communication skills and adroit at reading others' perceptions and values.

Perceptive leaders craft messages that meet their target audiences' needs. They understand which information will be filtered out, how messages become distorted and disregarded, and how information is assigned meaning.

While they are savvier than most at reading nonverbal cues, preconceptions about body language may cause them to miss more important signals. Leaders must learn to identify how people's values become filters for their perceptions.

Social Intelligence

Psychologist Daniel Goleman rocked the world of leadership development with his landmark book, *Emotional Intelligence in the Workplace* (2000), and his theories on EI's role in business interactions.

In 2007, he followed up with *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships*, which carried internal emotional awareness into the realm of external social facility.



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In the similarly titled *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Success* (2009), management consultant Karl Albrecht explores how social intelligence plays out in executive interactions. He suggests SI is “a combination of a basic understanding of people—a kind of strategic awareness—and a set of component skills for interacting successfully with them.”

Albrecht defines social intelligence in relatively simple terms: “the ability to get along well with others and to get them to cooperate with you.” He proposes five distinct dimensions that contribute to social competencies:

- ▶ **1. Situational Awareness:** A social radar used to read situations and interpret people’s behaviors in terms of possible intentions, emotional states and proclivity to interact.
- ▶ **2. Presence:** A range of verbal and nonverbal patterns, to include one’s appearance, posture, vocal quality and subtle movements—a collection of signals that others process into an evaluative impression.
- ▶ **3. Authenticity:** Others’ social radar, whose signals lead them to believe we are honest, open, ethical, trustworthy and well-intentioned—or not.
- ▶ **4. Clarity:** Our ability to explain ourselves, illuminate ideas, accurately pass data, and articulate our views and proposed actions—all of which enable others to cooperate with us.
- ▶ **5. Empathy:** A shared feeling between two people; a state of connectedness that creates the basis for positive interaction and collaboration.

Each dimension of social intelligence requires competencies well beyond the norm. Leaders cannot fake these qualities.

It’s no accident that Albrecht puts situational awareness at the top of his list. High-potential leaders must be able to read emotional contexts in any given situation.

Executives spend most of their waking hours interacting with and influencing others so they can meet any number of business objectives. Most of us believe we’re pretty good at reading people, but we may overestimate our prowess.

Body Language

We assign meaning to gestures, facial expressions and vocal intonations. We believe that people who cross their arms are closed-off and defensive. If a woman puts her hands on her hips, we assume she’s taking a stand and could become aggressive. When a man casts his eyes toward the ceiling, we think he’s considering something.

But such assumptions aren’t necessarily true, and they can distract us from other important cues. Leaders require a deeper understanding of the art and science of reading people to accurately decode body language.

People-Reading

Research shows that people are only 20 percent successful at reading body language. Determining the true meaning of visual, verbal and nonverbal cues requires a more complex analysis of other variables.

Consider the many clues we may miss during critical negotiations or board presentations. Have you ever left a meeting wondering how you fared? If so, you likely focused intensely on your presentation and failed to observe and decode others’ communication signals.

You cannot interpret signals if you’re not seeing them. An inner focus prevents you from observing, hearing, filtering, asking questions and interpreting signs. You’re simply not taking advantage of all observable, available data.

Flight Plan for Your Career

Airline pilots are astute observers in the cockpit. They see and read a variety of instruments and data within the context of their situation. They’re always aware of what is happening and what could happen long before decision time arrives.

Their observations force them to create a proactive management plan. They watch, anticipate and decode everything to optimize outcomes.

As a professional, you should follow suit. Observe, decode, assign meanings and formulate possible responses to what you see and sense.

The Invisible Iceberg

The stimuli we hear and see are merely the tip of a complex psychological iceberg. We know, with only one glance, when someone is upset. Many of us can walk into a meeting, instantly sense the tone and appropriately adjust our demeanor.

Why, then, can two people observe the same circumstances and draw completely different conclusions?

The brain filters incoming observations before it allows us to

reach a conclusion. Common internal variables may alter this process:

- ▶ Biases
- ▶ Flawed assumptions
- ▶ Memories
- ▶ Urgencies
- ▶ Agendas
- ▶ Fears
- ▶ Paranoia

“Truly advanced people-readers take this into consideration and strive to objectify their conclusions by factoring in the filters of their own world view,” writes communication consultant Harrison Monarth in *Executive Presence: The Art of Commanding Respect Like a CEO* (McGraw-Hill, 2009).

The Bias Trap

We have a tendency to apply our own values and choices to others. But smart executives know that engineers view the world one way, while salespeople see things in another light.

Different departments can hold different values. Failure to recognize this can cause gridlocks, delays and derailed goals. Evolved individuals realize the potential impact when gauging a situation and assessing individuals' readiness to buy into a plan.

Optimizing Outcomes

When mastering the art of people-reading, your ultimate goal is optimizing outcomes, not judging others.

In sales, this means understanding what prospects really need, their possible objections and tailoring your presentation accordingly. With your boss, it means avoiding potential hot buttons and predicting standards of successful performance. Selective timing and customized verbal and nonverbal messages are critical.

Each step requires the ability to read moods, sense levels of stress or distraction, and gauge openness and risk levels. Learn to say and do the right things, at the right time, with the right people.

The more you observe about others, while filtering out your internal biases, the more effective and empowered you'll become at reading people and situations accurately.

The Influence of Context

Much of social dumbness comes from not paying attention to available clues. We fail to see them when we're focused on crafting our best message and delivering it to successfully persuade others to our point of view.

All human interaction takes place in a context or a setting. Context creates meaning, and meaning shapes people's behavior. Situational awareness and people-reading depend on recognizing contexts and the meanings they create.

Each of us inherently knows this, yet many of us don't appreciate the extent to which context influences everything.

3 Context Dynamics to Observe

Watch for the following dimensions in any given situation:

- ▶ **1. The Proxemic Context:** This refers to the dynamics of the physical space in which people are interacting, the structures and positions within that space, and the way people's behaviors are influenced by it.

The definition of proxemic includes these three ideas:

- » a. The relative degree of physical proximity tolerated by an animal species or cultural group
- » b. The use of space as an aspect of culture
- » c. The study of differences in distance, contact, posture and the like in communication between two people

- ▶ **2. The Behavioral Context:** The patterns of action, emotions, motivation and intention that show up in human interactions.

- ▶ **3. The Semantic Context:** The patterns of language used in the discourse, which signal—overtly and covertly—the nature of the relationships, differences in status and social class, governing social codes, and the degree of understanding created (or prevented) by language habits.

Each of these dynamics is complex and beyond the scope of this article; however, their basic definitions should alert you that context is multilayered. That said, each of us can work on becoming better observers of context and learning to understand situations in more effective ways.

4 Steps for Better People-Reading Skills

The following steps can help you improve your ability to observe and read people and situations. Practice at least one over the next seven days, and notice any changes in the way you perceive and experience others. You will likely be more present, and your experiences will become richer.

- ▶ 1. Start using your senses instead of going through the day on autopilot. Sit in an airport, a restaurant or a mall and watch people. Try to figure out their relationships in couples or groups. Notice their moods, clothing and the ways they position themselves with others.
- ▶ 2. Observe the spaces in which you find yourself. Who sits where in meetings? How are offices or work spaces laid out? How does this communicate status or authority?
- ▶ 3. Listen for the various ways people use language to signal their social status and authority. How do people use slang, figures of speech, specialized vocabularies and clichés?
- ▶ 4. Observe the nonverbal signals people use to define and reinforce their relationships. How does the boss convey approachability? How do others do this?

The more you consciously use your senses and observe people, the more situational awareness you will gain. After a while, you'll pick up on things you never before noticed. You'll begin to incorporate new sensitivity into your communications and most certainly raise your level of executive presence.



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