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# ESSENTIALS OF ORGANISATIONAL BEHAVIOUR

with Gill Christy

THIRD EDITION

Pearson

# ESSENTIALS OF ORGANISATIONAL BEHAVIOUR

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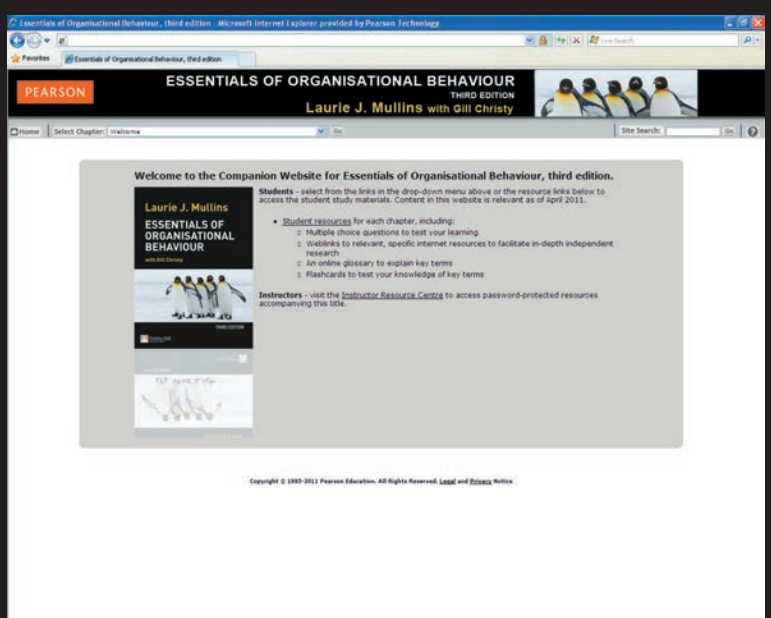


## PERCEPTUAL ILLUSIONS

Here are some examples to help you judge your perceptive skills. In Figure 4.9 try reading aloud the four words.

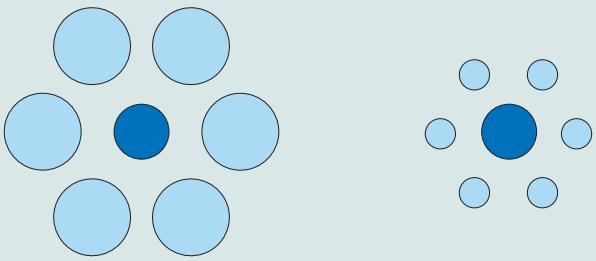
**Figure 4.9**

M – A – C – D – O – N – A – L – D
M – A – C – P – H – E – R – S – O – N
M – A – C – D – O – U – G – A – L – L
M – A – C – H – I – N – E – R – Y

It is possible that you find yourself 'caught' in a perceptual set that means that you tend to pronounce 'machinery' as 'MacHinery as if it too were a Scottish surname.

In Figure 4.10, which of the centre blue circles is the larger – A or B?

**Figure 4.10**




Although you may have guessed that the two centre circles are in fact the same size, the circle on the right (B) may well **appear** larger because it is framed by smaller circles. The centre circle on the left (A) may well **appear** smaller because it is framed by larger circles.

In Figure 4.11 try saying the *colour* of the word, *not* the word itself.

**Figure 4.11**

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| BLUE | GREY | YELLOW | MAUVE |
| BLACK | ORANGE | GREEN | RED |
| WHITE | PURPLE | BLUE | BROWN |

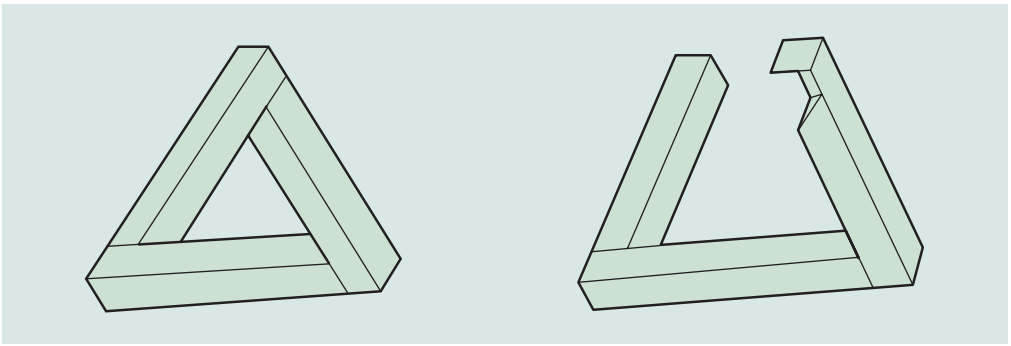
The physiological nature of perception has already been discussed briefly but it is of relevance here in the discussion of illusions. Why does the circle on the right in Figure 4.10 look bigger? Why is it difficult to say the colour, not the word? These examples demonstrate the way our brain can be fooled. Indeed, we make assumptions about our world that go beyond the pure sensations our brain receives.

### Beyond reality

Perception goes beyond the sensory information and converts patterns to a three-dimensional reality that we understand. This conversion process, as we can see, is easily tricked. We may not be aware of the inferences we are making as they are part of our conditioning and learning. The Stroop experiment illustrates this perfectly.[16] (See Assignment 1 at the end of this chapter.)

An illustration of the way in which we react automatically to stimuli is the illusion of the impossible triangle (*see* Figure 4.12).

**Figure 4.12**



*Source*: Gregory, R. L. *Odd Perceptions*, Methuen (1986), p. 71. Reprinted by permission of the publishers, Routledge, a division of Taylor & Francis Ltd.

Even when we know the triangle is impossible we still cannot stop ourselves from completing the triangle and attempting to make it meaningful. We thus go beyond what is given and make assumptions about the world, which in certain instances are wildly incorrect. Psychologists and designers may make positive use of these assumptions to project positive images of a product or the environment. For instance, colours may be used to induce certain atmospheres in buildings; designs of wallpaper or texture of curtains may be used to create feelings of spaciousness or cosiness. Packaging of products may tempt us to see something as bigger or perhaps more precious.

## SELECTION AND ATTENTION

What information do we select and why? The social situation consists of both verbal and non-verbal signals. The non-verbal signals include:

- bodily contact
- proximity
- orientation
- head nods
- facial expression
- gestures
- posture
- direction of gaze
- dress and appearance
- non-verbal aspects of speech.

Verbal and non-verbal signals are co-ordinated into regular sequences, often without the awareness of the parties. The mirroring of actions has been researched and is called 'postural echoing'.[17] There is considerable evidence to indicate that each person is constantly influencing the other and being influenced.[18]

*Cook* has suggested that in any social encounter there are two kinds of information that can be distinguished:

- **static information** – information which will not change during the encounter – for example colour, gender, height and age; and
- **dynamic information** – information which is subject to change – for example mood, posture, gestures and expression.[19]

### Culture and socialisation

The meanings we ascribe to these non-verbal signals are rooted in our culture and early socialisation. Thus it is no surprise that there are significant differences in the way we perceive such signals. For instance, dress codes differ in degrees of formality. *Schneider and Barsoux* summarise some interesting cultural differences:

> *Northern European managers tend to dress more informally than their Latin counterparts. At conferences, it is not unlikely for the Scandinavian managers to be wearing casual clothing, while their French counterparts are reluctant to remove their ties and jackets. For the Latin managers, personal style is important, while Anglo and Asian managers do not want to stand out or attract attention in their dress. French women managers are more likely to be dressed in ways that Anglo women managers might think inappropriate for the office. The French, in turn, think it strange that American businesswomen dress in 'man-like' business suits (sometimes with running shoes).*[20]

### Impression management

In some situations we all attempt to project our attitudes, personality and competence by paying particular attention to our appearance and the impact this may have on others. This has been labelled 'impression management'[21] and the selection interview is an obvious illustration. Some information is given more weight than other information when an impression is formed. It would seem that there are central traits that are more important than others in determining our perceptions.

One of these central traits is the degree of warmth or coldness shown by an individual.[22] The timing of information also seems to be critical in the impressions we form. For example, information heard first tends to be resistant to later contradictory information. In other words, the saying 'first impressions count' is supported by research and is called '**the primacy effect**'.[23] It has also been shown that a negative first impression is more resistant to change than a positive one.[24] However, if there is a break in time we are more likely to remember the most recent information – '**the recency effect**'.

## ORGANISATION AND JUDGEMENT

The way in which we organise and make judgements about what we have perceived is, to a large extent, based on our previous experiences and learning. It is also important at this point to be aware of the inferences and assumptions we make, which go beyond the information given. We may not always be aware of our pre-set assumptions but they will guide the way in which we interpret the behaviour of others. There has been much research into the impact of implicit personality theory.[25] In the same way that we make assumptions about the world of objects and go beyond the information provided, we also make critical inferences about people's characteristics and possible likely behaviours.

A manager might well know more about the 'type of person' A – a member of staff who has become or was already a good friend, who is seen in a variety of social situations and with whom there is a close relationship – than about B – another member of staff, in the same section as A and undertaking similar duties, but with whom there is only a formal work relationship and a limited social acquaintance. These differences in relationship, information

and interaction might well influence the manager's perception if asked, for example, to evaluate the work performance of A and B.

Judgement of other people can also be influenced by perceptions of such stimuli as:

- role or status;
- occupation;
- physical factors and appearance; and
- non-verbal communication and body language (discussed later in this chapter).

## Physical characteristics and appearance

In a discussion on managing people and management style, *Green* raises the question of how managers make judgements on those for whom they are responsible including positive and negative messages.

> *In my personal research people have admitted, under pressure, that certain physical characteristics tend to convey a positive or negative message. For example, some people find red hair, earrings for men, certain scents and odours, someone too tall or too short; a disability; a member of a particular ethnic group and countless other items as negative . . . Similarly there will be positive factors such as appropriate hairstyle or dress for the occasion . . . which may influence in a positive way.*[26]

A person may tend to organise perception of another person in terms of the 'whole' mental picture of that person. Perceptual judgement is influenced by reference to related characteristics associated with the person and the attempt to place that person in a complete environment.

### Perception and height

In one experiment, an unknown visitor was introduced by the course director to 110 American students, divided into five equal groups.[27] The visitor was described differently to each group as:

1 Mr England, a student from Cambridge;
2 Mr England, demonstrator in psychology from Cambridge;
3 Mr England, lecturer in psychology from Cambridge;
4 Dr England, senior lecturer from Cambridge;
5 Professor England from Cambridge.

After being introduced to each group, the visitor left. Each group of students was then asked to estimate his height to the nearest half inch. They were also asked to estimate the height of the course director after he too had left the room. The mean estimated height of the course director, who had the same status for all groups, did not change significantly among groups. However, the estimated height of the visitor varied with perceived status: as ascribed academic status increased, so did the estimate of height (*see* Table 4.1).

**Table 4.1** Estimated height according to ascribed academic status

| Group | Ascribed academic status | Average estimated height |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Student | 5′ 9.9″ |
| 2 | Demonstrator | 5′ 10.14″ |
| 3 | Lecturer | 5′ 10.9″ |
| 4 | Senior lecturer | 5′ 11.6″ |
| 5 | Professor | 6′ 0.3″ |

*Source*: Adapted from Wilson, P. R. 'Perceptual Distortion of Height as a Function of Ascribed Academic Status', *Journal of Social Psychology*, no. 74, 1968, pp. 97–102. Reprinted by permission of the publisher (Taylor & Francis group, http://www.informaworld.com).

Several popular surveys and newspaper articles appear to support the suggestion that tall men are more likely to be successful professionally, have better promotion prospects and earn higher salaries than short men. (We leave you to make your own judgement about this claim!)

An interesting example is the appointment (June 2009) of the new speaker of the House of Commons, John Bercow, who is 5′ 6″ in height. This appointment prompted newspaper articles about 'heightism' and perceptions about the 'shorter man'.[28]

### Critical reflection

'We often mask what we really feel, act in ways that cover our true emotions and speak words that we don't really mean – so in our dealings with other people we need to look beyond what is seen and heard and delve beneath the surface.'

*How do you think we can best judge the true beliefs and intentions of other people?*

## CONNECTION OF THE CONSCIOUS, UNCONSCIOUS AND PHYSIOLOGY

Perceptual processes demonstrate the integration of our conscious self, our unconscious self and our physiology.

- **Conscious self** – this means our immediate awareness of what is around us. The state of mind we are in when we are making decisions to act and the meaning we place on the world.
- **Unconscious self** – this relates to the way we carry out tasks with no active thinking taking place; the way we habitually do things automatically – our autopilot. These habits allow the conscious mind to be free to assess new and novel decisions. Habits are very important to us as we do not want to think about everything we do, but habits can get in the way when we want to change habits.
- **Physiology** – the interconnectedness with physiology has already been explained and there is growing evidence for using research identifying the mind–body connections. *Spitzer* explains that:

> *The human brain contains in the order of 100 billion ($10^{11}$) neurons and each neuron has up to 10 thousand connections of which less than ten are to the same neuron, such that each neuron is connected with a thousand other neurons. So there are approximately 100 trillion connections ($10^{14}$).*[29]

Each thought and activity corresponds to a pattern of neuron activity – so by repeating the same thought or action we strengthen the associated neural connection. Thus automatically connecting the conscious and unconscious mind with physiology, each aspect influences the other and our emotions operate in all.

### Framing

The term framing is used to explain how we interpret particular circumstances. Rather like a picture frame, we place into the frame our particular perspective, focus and colour on things. So if we are feeling happy our experience is being 'framed' in a positive way. What is in the 'frame' will depend on what is filtered in or out. Whether we look at a difficult situation as a 'problem' or as an opportunity, or whether we see a mistake as a terrible failure or as a learning moment, will depend on how we have 'framed' the experience. If we are in a good mood we may only filter in messages from our environment that confirm our happy state, we may create an inner dialogue in which our inner voice is reaffirming why we are feeling

so content. We may also be visualising a situation in which we are successful and these thoughts are establishing neural pathways. Helping people to reframe situations can be part of the coaching process.

### Appreciative inquiry

A reframing technique that has been used to positive effect in leading change has been the approach of appreciative inquiry. This technique, initially introduced by Cooperrider, Srivastva and colleagues[30] in the 1980s, created a theory called appreciative inquiry that proposed a constructive perspective on change. They started with the proposition that everybody sees the world through their own set of personal 'filters' and that sharing these could be helpful – thus differences should be valued. For every organisation, team or individual something works well, which is worth building on and extending. That which we understand to be reality arises from what we focus on and reality is created in the moment.

They emphasised the importance of language as the way we create our reality and that we can therefore use it to create many realities. Asking questions of an organisation, the group, the individual means they are influenced in some way and that people have more confidence to progress to the future when they take with them what has been most helpful and of value from the past. It is important to value difference because we see the world through our own set of personal filters that is often different from a shared set of reality. So, in their approach, teams of people are faced with a different frame, a different mindset in which to analyse and evaluate change.

*Hammond*[31] describes the different steps to solving an organisational problem:

**Traditional problem-solving approach**
- 'felt need' – identification of problem
- analysis of causes
- analysis of possible solutions
- action planning

**Appreciative inquiry approach**
- appreciating/valuing the best of 'what is'
- envisioning 'what might be'
- dialoguing 'what should be'
- innovating 'what will be'

## PERCEIVING OTHER PEOPLE

There are a number of well-documented problems that arise when perceiving other people. Many of these problems occur because of our limitations in selecting and attending to information. This selectivity may occur because:

- we already know what we are looking for and are therefore 'set' to receive only the information which confirms our initial thoughts; or
- previous training and experience have led us to short-cut and see only a certain range of behaviours; or
- we may group features together and make assumptions about their similarities.

The Gestalt principles apply equally well to the perception of people as to the perception of objects. Thus we can see, for example, that if people live in the same geographical area, assumptions may be made about not only their wealth and type of accommodation, but also their attitudes, their political views and even their type of personality.

*To interact effectively (present ourselves and communicate appropriately, influence others, work with them in relationships and groups or lead them) we must have a grasp of what others are thinking and feeling, including their motives, beliefs, attitudes and intentions. In social perception, accuracy and differentiation are essential but difficult. Achieving them may be linked to the complexity of a person's system of cognitive constructs.*

Maureen Guirdham[32]