

# Managing Leadership Image, Perception & Misperceptions



Rich Drinon, M.A., is a leadership speaker, trainer and coach. Over the past 25 years he has presented thousands of sessions for hundreds of organizations throughout the U.S. and Canada, including KSCPA. He has also conducted individual communication coaching for hundreds of leadership and management executives.

Rich has worked in leadership positions for local, statewide, national and international for-profit and non-profit organizations. He's a University of New Mexico Journalism graduate, and has a Master's Degree in Communication & Leadership Studies from Gonzaga University. His magazine articles have appeared in Kansas Business News, New Mexico Business Journal, The New Rock Times Music Magazine and Sports Illustrated. His book, "Stepping Up to Leadership" is the text for a Washburn University sponsored program he instructs on Directions in Organizational Leadership.

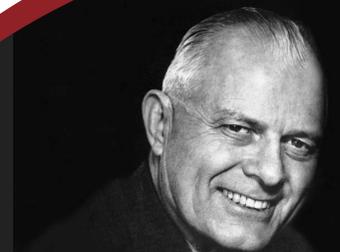
## MAKING A FAVORABLE FIRST IMPRESSION

Image is inescapable. For better or worse -- every leader has one. The leader's words, tone and actions are always being scrutinized and interpreted by others. The purpose of this article is to help the reader understand the dynamics of image, how to make a favorable impression and how to deal effectively with unfavorable misperceptions.

Your image communicates who you are, where you're from and what you're all about – in the eyes of the other person. Making a favorable first impression is usually the best way to enhance your image and get off on the right foot with others.

It only takes a few moments for someone to form an impression of you. Within a few seconds, another person has seen or heard you, screened you according to their view of the world and decided how they will proceed with you. You are either "in" or "out" with another person right from the start of the "relationship."

We judge others according to their non-verbal, vocal and verbal communication. Non-verbal communication makes up about 50 percent of the first impression; vocal communication represents 40 percent of the pie; and verbal communication the remaining 10 percent. People constantly make judgments about others and categorize them according to how they look, act, walk, talk, sound and the vocabulary they use. Humans quickly form opinions and those opinions dictate their continued relationship with another person.



## **A.D.E.P.T.**

A helpful formula for making a favorable first impression is A.D.E.P.T. Here are the ingredients of that formula, which can be cultivated for use on a daily basis to make sure you're consistently sending the best possible message and supporting your most positive image.

### ***A is for Attitude***

Successful leaders manage their attitude. They start their day on a positive note, and when outside forces come against them they keep their chin up and work through adversity. These leaders know what many have yet to learn – attitude is the individual's choice! So why not choose the best possible attitude each day before facing one's followers, colleagues or public?

There are numerous methods one can use to get into a positive state of mind. Some start their day by exercising, listening to upbeat music, reading something inspirational, praying or meditating. Others meet daily challenges by using affirmations or positive self talk techniques.

### ***D is for Dress***

It's important for leaders to understand what clothing is most appropriate for each situation and what colors look best on them. It's also vital that clothing fits correctly. There are several books that can teach you to present yourself in the most professional, fitting and favorable light. John Molloy's *Dress for Success* books or Carole Jackson's books *Color Me Beautiful* and *Color for Men* are great choices for educating yourself on how to dress in a manner that communicates the best possible message.

### ***E is for Expression***

Facial expressions are signals that speak loudly. One way that others determine what we are conveying is by the expression on our face. How is our eye contact? And, are we joking, serious, inquisitive, puzzled? Does our expression fit the situation, and match what's coming out of our mouth? To be understood clearly we must send a matched message – one in which our non-verbal, vocal and verbal communication is congruent.

### ***P is for Poise***

How you carry yourself sends a message about your frame of mind. When you carry yourself with poise, the mind follows with thoughts of confidence and determination. When you change your body language you change your mental state. Since the mind follows the body and the body follows the mind you always have two doors of access through which to improve your attitude and image!

### ***T is for Tone***

People read a lot from our tone of voice. They can determine our level of authority and assertiveness or lack thereof. They can decipher a person's mood, level of patience and personality type. A leader needs to convey the right tone in their voice for each situation. When meeting new people an individual usually wants to convey warmth and friendliness. When negotiating a tough deal, they may need to be neutral in what is conveyed. When disciplining a follower who is a repeat offender, one needs to increase the level of authority or assertiveness in their voice.

These five points: attitude, dress, expression, poise and tone all work together. Making a favorable first impression is part of being an effective leader. If you want to be liked, understood, trusted and respected, the first impression plays a starting role in getting those responses from others.

## **DEALING WITH HARMFUL MISPERCEPTIONS**

In *The Projection Principle* (1988), Dr. George Weinberg and Dianne Rowe suggest that how people see us usually determines how they will treat us. The opposite is also true, how people treat us will determine how they see us. This is called *The Law of Consonance*.

If we make a favorable first impression, people will generally treat us favorably – according to their perception of us. If we don't make a favorable first impression, someone may get a misperception of us and treat us unfavorably – according to their first impression.

It's also true that others, because of their psychological needs, will create identities for us that suit their view of the world. For example, they may stereotype us according to our age, gender, color, nationality or any number of other

factors. When people misperceive us, it can be difficult for them to like, understand, trust or respect us. As previously stated, people form opinions about others; then those opinions dictate their continued behavior. This can seriously impede our ability to communicate and collaborate with them.

### **HOW MISPERCEPTIONS LEAD TO PROBLEMS**

When we don't make a favorable first impression, are misperceived or when someone else categorizes us inaccurately, the biggest communications problems we face are being disliked, misunderstood, distrusted or disrespected. With these negative conditions in place, the going gets tough.

### **WE CAN CHANGE A PERSON'S MISPERCEPTIONS OF US**

Certain techniques can help us repaint someone's inaccurate mental picture of us. We must first determine if the person has a misperception about us or if the way they see us is really accurate. Here's a rule of thumb. If just one person, as compared to others, sees and treats us unfavorably it's probably a misperception. If most people see or treat us a certain way, that's a response to how we're generally perceived. For example, does just one person interpret you as difficult or incapable? Or does everyone seem to hold that same opinion? When dealing with a misperception, we can correct the other person's view of us. When dealing with reality (your own issues) we must correct our own behaviors (Weinberg & Rowe, 1988).

#### **Repainting someone's Inaccurate Mental Picture of You**

Explaining doesn't work! Action, rather than words, is required. We must change the person's behavior to change their mental picture. A new mental picture brings more new, preferable behaviors. We must get the other person to treat us differently so they will see us differently

#### ***Identify the unwanted behavior***

What does another person do, or not do, when they misperceive you? Do they avoid you, talk behind your back

or act unfriendly when you cross their path? Or perhaps exclude rather than include you, misconstrue or struggle with your words, look over your shoulder or refrain from giving you assignments requiring trust? Do they second guess or overlook you, call you unflattering nick names, treat you stereotypically, put you down in front of others? Or criticize openly, make fun or light of your decisions or commands, leave you out of important meetings or conversations, go behind your back, show no compliance to your rules, disregard your assignments or requests? These behaviors can all be the results of misperceptions.

#### ***Determine the preferred treatment you want***

What do you want to hear, or not hear from the other person? What do you want to see, or not see from the other person? What do you want to experience, or not experience with the other person? What does your preferred behavior look, sound and feel like? You must articulate this for the other person so they know how you expect to be treated.

#### ***Engage the individual regarding the behavior***

Assertively approach the individual about their behavior. Stay cool, calm and collected. Avoid getting emotional. Stay focused on the behavior more than your feelings. Too much emotion may thwart the use of this approach. If we approach with anger, blame or resentment, the person will become defensive. If we take a "poor me" approach they will make light of our request. This type of situation calls for a logical, step by step, assertive approach.

#### ***Ask the person to stop one behavior and replace it with another***

Be specific. Ask the person to stop the undesirable behavior. Be firm: Ask them to replace it with the desired behavior. Stay your course: Don't back down when you get resistance. Insist on the new behavior. Raise the stakes: If you don't get compliance, call in a boss or higher authority as a third party. Make a case of it: If you don't get the response you want, take the game to a higher level. There are laws against discrimination and harassment in the workplace. Take it to the limit if you must. Stop when you get the desired treatment.

### *Get Past the Resistance*

Chances are, most people will respond to your request after steps one and two. A few people will resist because you've brought something to their attention that embarrasses or challenges them. But if you stay your course they will comply. Even fewer people will keep up the behavior in light of a visit to the HR director's or boss's office. There are very few people who won't change their behavior under the threat of a law suit or legal action. On occasion you might run into someone who will not comply with your wishes. In that case, you may have to terminate the relationship, make a move or just decide to live with it (Weinberg & Rowe, 1988).

### **CHANGING OUR MISPERCEPTIONS OF OTHERS**

In order to best connect, communicate and collaborate with others, it's important that we also catch and change our misperceptions. We can do that by recognizing that we are treating a particular person much differently than others do. Others regard the person favorably but we don't. In this case, we are either very perceptive or we have a misperception.

The steps are the same when we misperceive someone. We must change our behaviors to change our view of that person. Stop avoiding them and start engaging them. Stop talking behind their back and start talking with them about problems. Stop criticizing and show them some appreciation. Work on a project with them. Give them a test assignment so they can earn your trust. When you treat people well you will come to see them in favorable light.

### **SOURCES**

Weinberg Dr., G., & Rowe, D. (1988). *The projection principle*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.

[CLICK HERE TO REGISTER  
FOR THIS SELF-STUDY SESSION](#)

---