

Reducing Conflict 46 Perception Problems

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



This article is about perception problems in everyday life. No two people will see a phenomenon the same way. As our fingerprints are all unique, so is our perception of what is going on around us.

Hold up a Quarter

To demonstrate perception, I can hold a quarter out in front of me while I am facing you. I will describe a round metal object with an embossed head on it. You will describe a round metal object with an embossed picture of an eagle sitting on a branch. We are both describing the exact same object, yet we see it differently.

The phenomenon is generally true

The same phenomenon happens when two people see any kind of situation at work or at home. They see the same thing, but it has a different appearance depending on their personal vantage point.

This difference means they will draw different conclusions about what just happened and the significance of it. Taking the next step requires each individual to react to the stimulus in an appropriate way. Each person is free to react however he or she feels is appropriate for the situation. This is true even if both people perceived exactly the same thing. What would seem appropriate to one person might be the wrong thing to do for the other. All this discrepancy leads to squabbles about actions taken.

Example of an attendance problem

For example, let's suppose a manager is discussing an employee with a severe attendance problem with her supervisor. The manager and supervisor may have different opinions about the problem itself. Perhaps the supervisor knows the lady has a child who has special needs. This situation calls for many trips to the child's doctor. The supervisor wants to be lenient based on this knowledge.

From the manager's perception, this employee needs to have the same set of rules as everyone else. Special treatment will lead to poor discipline in the unit. The manager sees an untenable situation that needs progressive counseling, while the supervisor sees the need for flexibility.

Differences of opinion create a great deal of conflict in any workplace. From my perspective, I will be pretty sure my way is right. The trouble is that another person will be just as sure his perception and remedy are right.

The opposite of right is wrong

If I know that I am right, and you see things differently, then by definition, you must be wrong. In most instances, my reaction to this dichotomy is to try to educate you on why your perception is incorrect. You will try to get me to realize the error of my thinking. We are off to the races in conflict.

This genesis of conflict is going on in small and large ways each and every day. Is it any wonder there is so much acrimony in the workplace and at home? This problem is ubiquitous. What are some antidotes so we can reduce the conflicts between people?

1. **Seek to understand assumptions** – What is behind the perception?
2. **Try reversing the roles** – Force yourself to see a different perspective.
3. **Use Reflective Listening** – Make sure you are hearing the other person.
4. **Watch the language** – Ask more questions and avoid edgy statements.
5. **Agree to Disagree** – You can still be friends.
6. **Don't blow things out of proportion** – Keep differences small.
7. **Get a good mediator** – A third person can be helpful.
8. **Give in** - Letting the other person win is often a great strategy.
9. **Discuss calmly** – A calm rational discussion can often clear up the difference.
10. **Show love** – Keeping things positive helps a lot.

Humans have a remarkable ability to drive each other crazy. This tendency is worse when people are in close proximity. It is the reason why you can appreciate and love members of your family until they come to visit for a week. At a distance, it is easy to manage disagreements most of the time. When people are underfoot every day, the little things tend to become so irritating, that the conflict begins to snowball.

We all see things through a slightly different lens. We process assumptions about what is happening through our parochial brain. Conflict is going to happen. Take some of the evasive steps like the ones above to keep the volume down on interpersonal differences. Life is too short to be habitually annoyed by fellow workers or family members.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: *Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change*, *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations.