No One Understands You and What to Do About It

Heidi Grant Halvorson

©2015 by Heidi Grant Halvorson
Adapted by permission of Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation
ISBN: 978-1-62527-412-0

Key Concepts

- *Misperceptions are predictable.* While the way people judge other people may seem random, there are actually common thought processes underpinning these judgments, including biases, assumptions, and stereotypes. Understanding this is the first step in changing others' perceptions.

- *Individuals do not see themselves as others see them.* People tend to mistakenly assume others have the same view of themselves as they have. In fact, people are very complex and can be difficult to understand. It is more typical for others' views to be quite different from one's own.

- *First impressions are long-lasting impressions, and that can be detrimental.* It is very difficult to overcome a first impression. Subsequent views of a person typically build on and confirm that first impression. This unconscious way of thinking thwarts people's ability to change their opinions about someone else over time.

- *Overcoming biases and assumptions takes work.* Biases and assumptions are largely unconscious and are part of Phase 1 thinking, which is automatic and used most of the time. Phase 2 thinking, which produces analytical thoughts, takes conscious effort and is more difficult to carry out.

Summary

Introduction

Individuals are often misunderstood by others, despite what they consider to be their best efforts to communicate clearly. This disconnect can create many issues, both in the business world and in an individual's personal life. At the heart of the problem is the fact that many people are unable to accurately see themselves as others see them. They simply do not know how they are perceived, so they cannot make adjustments to present their
true selves. In *No One Understands You and What to Do About It*, Heidi Grant Halvorson explains the unconscious drivers behind the misperceptions people have about one another and provides a practical guide to making sure the impressions individuals make are exactly the ones they want to make.

**PART I: WHY IT’S SO HARD TO UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER**

**You Are Surprisingly Hard to Understand**

Most individuals think other people around them “see” them the same way they see themselves, but the reality is that they are likely off the mark. In general, people tend to share two inaccurate assumptions: that others view them objectively and that this view aligns with their own view of themselves. In reality, it is very hard for people to truly know and understand one another.

First of all, people cannot read minds. In the absence of mind reading, all communication (both words and actions) are subject to interpretation. Not only that, people do not necessarily make it easy for others to understand them. For example, the gestures and facial expressions a person displays could represent a variety of states of mind. Thus, it is up to the perceiver to infer meaning and sort out subtleties.

Some people are easier to understand (or are more *judgeable*) than others because they provide information more readily and do so in a way that aligns well with those around them. Still, even in the best of situations there is always the risk of other people “filling in the blanks” to create a version of an individual that does not match that individual’s version of himself or herself.

Complicating the situation is how others tend to integrate what an individual says and does to fit into their own constructs and beliefs, regardless of the individual’s intent. Every word and deed is open to interpretation by others. The wide disparity in viewpoints regarding the president of the United States is a simple example of how the same words and actions are viewed dramatically differently by various people. These differences of opinion prove how an individual can be judged and assessed as a person based on others’ perceptions rather than by anything inherent to his or her own personality.

**Your Observers Are Cognitive Misers (and So Are You)**

People’s minds have a lot to process. Information is flowing all the time, so the mind looks for shortcuts to make processing that information faster. Those shortcuts lead to misconceptions and misperceptions that can have long-lasting and detrimental effects in terms of individuals being accurately understood and seen for who they really are.

*Heuristics* (conceptual “rules of thumb”) and *assumptions* (judgments based on previous information) are methods the mind uses to simplify the information flow and make sense out of the world without having to think too hard. However, these unconscious techniques can seriously skew people’s impressions of one another, guiding and influencing perceptions that may be far from the truth.

*Confirmation bias* is the tendency for people to see what they expect to see and to look for (and interpret) words and behaviors that confirm their impressions of others. Confirmation bias is a very powerful and prevalent assumption-based cognitive behavior. First impressions (or the *primacy effect*) are an element of confirmation bias. First impressions are extremely difficult to overcome and can influence an initial meeting between two people or the long-standing perceptions family members have of one another.

*Stereotyping* is another assumptive behavior the mind uses to help categorize similar things. Sometimes stereotypes are very overt, such as in the case of racism. Other times they are entirely unconscious.
People's minds use the *halo effect* to attribute multiple positive qualities to people simply because they possess one positive quality. The halo effect seeks to eliminate inconsistencies in perception (*cognitive dissonance*). People also have the tendency to believe other people think and feel like they do, that any negative qualities they themselves possess are normal and possessed by others, and that they are more virtuous than other people.

While all of these cognitive behaviors distort accurate perceptions of others, the good news is that being aware of them is the first step toward consciously intervening to minimize their impact.

**The Two Phases of Perceiving People**

Humans perceive one another utilizing two thought phases:

- *Phase 1 thinking* is unconscious and automatic. It is based on what the mind takes in through what it perceives overtly and is heavily influenced by all the unconscious assumptions the mind makes (based on past experience and other frames of reference). Phase 1 thinking is what allows people to make sense of the world around them, but it also leads to significant misjudgments.

- *Phase 2 thinking* is conscious and involves a deliberate analytical process. It requires effort. In Phase 2 thinking, perceivers are aware of assumptions, biases, and stereotypes and seek understanding beyond what they perceive overtly. While Phase 1 thinking addresses the “what,” Phase 2 thinking addresses the “why.”

If individuals want to be perceived accurately and perceive others accurately as well, they have to be cognizant of the Phase 1 perceptions operating in any given situation and work to employ more Phase 2 thinking.

Perception does not take place in a vacuum. Typically, when a person sizes up another person, he or she has an agenda—one that involves trust, power, or ego. Understanding how the three lenses of trust, power, and ego influence Phase 1 perceptions increases the chances of individuals being perceived the way they want to be perceived.

**Part II: The Lenses That Shape Perception**

**The Trust Lens**

The *trust lens* comes into play when people first meet or are getting to know one another. Establishing trust is critical and has serious implications in both the workplace and interpersonal relationships. For example, without trust, leaders cannot motivate their people, colleagues cannot work together effectively, and marriages cannot last.

When deciding whether or not to trust someone, people look for two things:

1. Does the other person have good or bad intentions?
2. Is he or she capable of acting on those intentions?

For the most part, this is a Phase 1 process, not conscious thought. The answers to these questions are decipherable through the words and deeds that demonstrate two key qualities: *warmth* and *competence*. Warmth represents good intentions while competence represents the ability to act on them.

Warmth is conveyed in a number of ways, including facial expressions, tone of voice, and general friendliness. Those who want to increase their warmth should:
• Show attentiveness by making eye contact, nodding, and smiling.
• Demonstrate empathy.
• Be willing to trust others first.

Competence is conveyed through past accomplishments, follow-through, self-assurance, and nondefensiveness. Simply making eye contact is an excellent and easy way to increase others’ perception of one’s competence. Additionally, those who want to further convey competence should:

• Demonstrate strong willpower.
• Downplay overconfidence.
• Use “power poses” (stand up straight, lean forward, put shoulders back, and keep legs apart).
• Emphasize their potential to improve upon past achievements.

Conveying warmth and competence to increase trustworthiness is a delicate balancing act. An overemphasis on warmth can project a lack of competence. Too much emphasis on competence can project coldness. The winning strategy is to convey warmth through deeper character qualities (courage, fairness, honesty, and loyalty) rather than through overt behaviors (sociability, agreeability, and humorousness).

Good leadership depends on trust. Employees will not support and follow a leader they do not trust. It takes both warmth and competence to engage others as followers. However, when it comes to the warmth/competence paradox, warmth should be projected first.

The Power Lens

The *power lens* is unique in that it is often situational. While there are people who are considered powerful people (politicians, CEOs, and celebrities), at any given time anyone can be in a position of power. The most important thing about the power lens is that it belongs to the person in power. The powerful person in any given situation is going to view others in terms of what that person can do for him or her, and not the other way around. That dynamic can happen to anyone at any time.

Power has a good, a good-and-bad, and a bad side. Feelings of power can make people more productive, energetic, and happy. Power can also inspire risk taking that leads to great accomplishments, but may also lead to disasters. Lastly, power can make people very selfish. In general, the longer someone is in a position of power, the less likely he or she is to think of others.

Powerful people tend to think their time is very important (and often this is true), so they are reluctant to spend it on anything that does not best serve their goals. Therefore, individuals who want to get a powerful person’s attention need to view their own behavior in terms of the payoff for the powerful person.

Powerful people tend to leave much of their thinking about others in Phase 1 because it is simply easier. Those who want to influence powerful people and be seen for their true selves must take deliberate steps to be recognized in a way that matters to the powerful person. *Instrumentality* (helping a powerful person reach his or her goals) is the key to standing out. First, individuals must have a good understanding of the powerful person’s desires and goals. Next, they should prioritize their own performances so as to help the powerful person achieve those goals. These are the keys to making the power lens work in one’s favor.
The Ego Lens

The sole purpose of the ego lens is to protect the perceiver’s self-esteem. Like the other lenses, the ego lens takes place in Phase 1 thinking and is often unrecognizable to the perceiver.

The ego lens comes into play in one or more of the following four ways:

1. By focusing on how the perceiver or the perceiver’s group is better than others, thereby protecting self-esteem.
2. By focusing on how the perceiver and the perceived are the same, and thus can “share the glory” without any threat to self-esteem.
3. By determining there is no threat to the perceiver’s self-esteem because there is no competition over specific qualities or circumstances. This is a neutral situation.
4. If scenarios 1, 2, or 3 do not apply, the power lens dictates that the only option is to either avoid or sabotage the other person, thereby neutralizing any potential threat.

Relevance and closeness are factors used in determining how much of a threat or enhancement another person might be. The more relevant a person’s accomplishments and abilities are to another’s (e.g., competing in the same sport), the more of a threat that person is.

Because the ego lens is all about what matters to the perceiver (and how that person might feel threatened), the individual being perceived would do well to gain an understanding of the perceiver. By doing so, an individual can take steps to neutralize bias and diffuse the threat.

Strategies for neutralizing bias and diffusing threat include:

- Being modest about accomplishments and showing vulnerability.
- Affirming the other person through genuine praise and appreciation.
- Creating an “us” mentality by identifying commonalities and deemphasizing comparisons.

Part III: Lenses for Particular Personalities

Eager Reward-Seekers and Vigilant Risk-Mitigators

Everyone views others through the trust, power, and ego lenses at some time or another, but there are also lenses that are specific to certain types of people. These personality-driven lenses come with some unique biases. By understanding the personality-based lenses through which others might be perceiving the world, individuals can tailor their approaches and communication styles to better achieve their desired results.

Most people want to have a balance between striving for new achievements and preserving what they already have. However, each individual is also likely to have a tendency to be either more promotion focused (seeking out new opportunities with an air of optimism) or prevention focused (more concerned about avoiding risk). Both groups of people respond to different types of language. These different types of language can be used as motivators. Promotion-focused people respond better to communication that emphasizes creativity, opportunity, and adventure. Prevention-focused people respond better to communication that emphasizes risk-mitigation, security, and stability.

In addition to the behavioral tendencies displayed by these two types of people, the following other contributing factors can help individuals identify their own and others’ personality-based lenses:
• **Age**: A focus on promotion tends to be more prevalent among young people, who have not had the opportunity to achieve or fail in the world.

• **Emotional tone**: Promotion-focused people tend to be very excited, demonstrative, and effusive when they accomplish a goal. Prevention-based people tend to avoid the limelight and take quiet satisfaction in disaster avoidance.

• **Job role**: Promotion-focused people tend to hold roles in the creative fields, whereas prevention-focused people are more likely to be in fact-based professions, such as accounting, legal, or engineering.

Individuals seeking to influence either of these personality types can be more effective by modifying their communications to appeal to the appropriate lenses. Framing the same situation in a way that appeals to one type or the other is an effective way to achieve results. Additionally, the best teams and partnerships include members from both personality types.

**The Clingy, Anxious Perceiver and the Aloof, Avoidant Perceiver**

There are also lenses that result from early life experiences. It has been estimated that approximately 50 percent of adults in the United States have difficulty relating to other people because of mental constructs created when they were children, which are by-products of the level of attachment they had to their caregivers. Psychologists have created three models:

1. **Securely attached**: Children who had responsive and loving caregivers grow up confident and able to relate well to others.

2. **Anxious attachment**: Children who had loving but unreliable, inconsistently responsive, or neglectful caregivers grow up overly worried about rejection. Their clingy behavior tends to reinforce their feelings of distrust and rejection, as others turn away from them because of their neediness.

3. **Avoidant attachment**: Children whose caregivers were predictably and consistently unresponsive and neglectful do not trust others and are not interested in bonding with them.

**Secure people** are very easy to get along with. **Anxious people** have fluctuating self-esteem and tend to mistakenly assign erroneous meaning and significance to words that reinforce their opinions of themselves. Their focus is so strongly on themselves that every perception is seen through the filter of potential rejection. **Avoidant people** are very hard to reach and connect with, and are not drawn in by emotionality, intimacy, or warmth. In fact, those qualities drive them further away.

Recommendations for interacting effectively with anxious individuals include:

• Practicing empathy.
• Not taking things personally.
• Avoiding ambiguity.
• Being reliable.

Recommendations for interacting effectively with avoidant individuals include:

• Eliminating stress from the situation.
• Setting realistic expectations about the interaction.
• Being moderate in expressing warmth.

It is in childhood that we learn that people can—or can’t—be trusted to be there for us, and we carry those lessons with us into our homes and workplaces as adults.
It is important to remember that people can move in and out of the four lenses (promotion, prevention, anxious, and avoidant) throughout their lives. By having a better understanding of these influences and the techniques for managing them effectively, individuals can actually help others overcome some of the barriers that are holding them back.

**PART IV: BEING SEEN, AND SEEING OTHERS, MORE ACCURATELY**

**Correcting Bad Impressions and Overcoming Misunderstandings**

The key to getting other people to change their perceptions is to get them to move from Phase 1 thinking to Phase 2 thinking. In Phase 2, the perceiver is more likely to take an analytical approach to forming an opinion. Even though first impressions and misunderstandings can be long lasting, they can be changed with effort.

There are two basic ways to get people to change their views of an individual:

1. Bombard them with overwhelming evidence.
2. Make them want to revise their opinions.

While providing plentiful, repeated, and extreme evidence is fairly straightforward, there are several other strategies that can be used to make an individual want to change his or her opinion. These methods have to do with targeting the less conscious motivations people feel. The following strategies will help move individuals into Phase 2 thinking:

- Appeal to their inherent desire to be egalitarian, fair, and make unbiased judgements.
- Take advantage of times they feel out of control; they will employ Phase 2 thinking to regain a sense of control.
- Create interpersonal dependencies based on need or obligation.

Additionally, making a sincere, heartfelt, empathetic apology that considers the needs, desires, and feelings of the perceiver is a “special case” technique for changing someone’s view. In making an apology, it is very important to:

- Resist the urge to justify oneself.
- Be cognizant of the other person’s perspective on the situation, and how he or she was wronged.
- Acknowledge and affirm the other person’s feelings.
- Restore the feeling of “us” so as not to become a “them.”
- Know who the audience is and adjust the approach.

**Becoming a Better Judge of Others—and of Yourself**

Misunderstandings and misperceptions are two-way streets. People want to be perceived accurately by others, but they also have an obligation to return the favor and perceive others accurately. Self-awareness and a willingness to internalize feedback are important qualities in making this effort. Eliminating bias is one of the most important steps an individual can take to achieve objectivity. It can be accomplished by:

- Taking enough time to truly assess someone rather than rushing to judgement.
- Committing to being fair.
- Avoiding the trap of confirmation bias.

People can and do revise their opinions of others all the time, and although first impressions are important, it’s usually never too late to fix a negative one.
While perceiving people accurately, and being perceived accurately, takes effort and can be difficult, it is worth it. Ultimately, if individuals want to be seen accurately, they must make it easier for others to do so.

FEATURES OF THE BOOK

Estimated Reading Time: 4–5 hours, 224 pages

No One Understands You and What to Do About It is intended for people who want to ensure they are better understood by others. Heidi Grant Halvorson provides detailed explanations of the unconscious forces at work in the way people perceive one another, along with practical steps individuals can take to overcome misperceptions. The book features many real-life examples to help readers understand the key points. Most chapters close with a key takeaways section that summarizes the chapter's main themes. Charts are also included in several chapters. The book is best read cover to cover.

CONTENTS

Introduction: How They See You, How They Don’t

Part I: Why It’s So Hard to Understand Each Other
1. You Are Surprisingly Hard to Understand
2. Your Observers Are Cognitive Misers (and So Are You)
3. The Two Phases of Perceiving People

Part II: The Lenses That Shape Perception
4. The Trust Lens
5. The Power Lens
6. The Ego Lens

Part III: Lenses for Particular Personalities
7. Eager Reward-Seekers and Vigilant Risk-Mitigators
8. The Clingy, Anxious Perceiver and the Aloof, Avoidant Perceiver
9. Correcting Bad Impressions and Overcoming Misunderstandings

Conclusion: Becoming a Better Judge of Others—and of Yourself

Notes
Index
Acknowledgments
About the Author

FURTHER INFORMATION

Information about the author and subject:
www.heidigranthalvorson.com

Information about this book and other business titles:
hbr.org
CLICK HERE TO PURCHASE THE BOOK

Related summaries in the BBS Library:

**How to Deal with Difficult People**
*Smart Tactics for Overcoming the Problem People in Your Life*
By Gill Hasson

**How to Win Friends & Influence People**
*Special Anniversary Edition*
By Dale Carnegie

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Heidi Grant Halvorson, PhD**, is associate director of Columbia Business School’s Motivation Science Center and author of the international bestsellers *Nine Things Successful People Do Differently*, *Succeed: How We Can Reach Our Goals*, and *Focus: Use Different Ways of Seeing the World for Success and Influence*. She is a frequent contributor to *Harvard Business Review, Fast Company, 99U, The Atlantic*, and *Psychology Today*. Halvorson is also senior consultant at the NeuroLeadership Institute, where she works with organizations to develop strategies to break unconscious bias in decision making and to foster an organizational growth mind-set. She earned her PhD from Columbia University.