

Problems in Perception

Teachers background reading

Perhaps you have had an experience similar to the following. You have diligently prepared a presentation for a meeting. You believe your data, graphically displayed, to be incontrovertible. Your conclusions faithfully follow the data. And then you make your presentation.

Instead of a round of applause, you get questions that seemingly do not relate to the topic at hand. Then your conclusions are challenged with almost absurd (to you) logic. As your frustration grows you start to wonder, "What were they looking at? Didn't they see the data I put up on the easel?" No, they did not see the same data as you did. How could that happen?

Let me give you another example. You and a coworker are late going to lunch. When you get to the dessert end of the lunch counter, one piece of pumpkin pie rests by itself away from the others. Your friend, who likes pumpkin pie, suggests that you flip a coin for the one remaining piece, but you demur and decide to have the blueberry pie. The decision was easy to make. You both observed the same object (pumpkin pie), but the two of you saw two different pies. Your friend saw a pie that promised to be flavorful and pleasing to the pallet. You saw an ill tasting, odd colored product with an annoying texture. You both created your own "pie" from past experience, your mental database.

Your coworkers in the meeting created their own reality from your data by processing it together with their own mental databases. They were not looking at the "same" material that you looked at when you put your presentation together. They were each looking at their own pieces of "pumpkin pie."

Two people cannot view the same object in exactly the same way. For one thing our eyes of necessity are in a different place than the other viewer. Even when you look at something through a microscope, the sample has aged microscopically from one observation to the next. For many occasions these differences affect the outcome imperceptibly. The differences are still there, but they are small enough to be ignored. It's only when the listener cannot see your point of view when you know you made a cogent presentation, and the audience ends up somewhere other than where you believe they should, that it becomes frustrating. At this point, it behooves one to try to get a view of the listener's database, and try to restate one's own data in a way that relates to the listener's view of the world. Also allow for different physical, mental, and ethnic potentials, etc. Don't assume that everyone sees or likes "red", or anything else, the way you do.

To put it more simply, don't bake a pumpkin pie for someone who detests pumpkin pie and expect undying gratitude. Your expectations will not be met and you will have to deal with the disappointment.

The fact that you like pumpkin pie, or things colored “red,” does not count. The listeners’ data determines their response. Can you somehow glimpse the other person’s data base **before** you turn on the oven? Can you learn of your audience’s prejudices, fears, ethnic mores, etc? Even if your audience consists of one individual, or of hundreds, look for differences between their concept of the “world out there” and yours. Do you utilize the same vernacular as your audience? Do you utilize the same colloquial expressions? How can you make yourself more aware of your audience prior to beginning to speak to them? Can you avoid sounding condescending?

In the end, what you say and who you are, carries little weight. Your success resides in the perception(s) formed by the audience. In these lessons about perception, we want the students to begin to understand that we all perceive differently, and to make allowances for those differences. Further, we often perceive what we expect to see or hear rather than what exists ‘out there.’ One of the lessons directly addresses that potential source of confusion.