

Perceptions Cannot Be Trusted

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Abstract

Most people enjoy watching “magicians,” performing their “magic acts” and doing seemingly the impossible. Of course, in many of these, the slight of hands, trickery, and special tools are used. There are, however, other occasions that the perception of the audience is called upon to see something differently. This is based on certain tendencies in people that relates to their expectations and prior experience. One of these tendencies is “perceptual readiness,” the tendency for people to see what they expect or want to see. This concept can be taught with a simple game.

Planning Details

This is a very simple game beneficial to all who teach organizational behavior, or any course in management that deals with interpersonal relationships that invariably involves perception.

There is no set minimum or maximum for the number of participants in this session (demonstration). It involves one person demonstration, the instructor, who demonstrates how perceptions could mislead us. The audience has a minor role. Only a couple of participants are actively involved in the exercise by selecting cards and placing them in the card deck. The rest of participants are passive observers. It takes about 5-10 minutes. The actual time of playing the card game is less. It takes a few minutes of introduction to prepare the audience for the game.

The introduction is less to do with the actual game than to build a context within which the game could be successfully played. An explanation of the perception process follows the game as a debriefing, to drive home the fact that our perception is not necessarily the actual reality. All of this is explained in the “Session Description.”

Theoretical Grounding

The theory behind the game is the characteristics of perception, one of which is perceptual readiness. The fact that we tend to see what we want or need to see. Please, refer to Session Description for literature references on this.

Session Description

Perceptions Cannot Be Trusted

Games are fun. People like them, and students enjoy them. If something can be learned by playing a game, the learning will remain with the learner almost forever. The problem is that most games require more preparation with which most of us are not willing to put up. Therefore, often, simpler games are preferred. Also, people enjoy being surprised in pleasant way, in a way that does not cause any harm. For the same reason, not only games are popular but acts of magic are popular.

Most people enjoy watching “magicians,” performing their “magic acts” and doing seemingly the impossible. They are all awed at how these acts are preformed. While they are fully aware that no super natural powers are involved, they still wonder how these strange acts can be performed by a mere mortal person! Of course, in many of these acts, the sleight of hands, trickery, and special tools are used. However, there are other occasions that the audience is a willing participant in getting “fooled” into “seeing” the apparent impossibilities.

In these cases, characteristics of “perception,” their perception, are called upon by the “magician,” the actor, the performer. We know that perception is selectively organized and directly influences our beliefs and opinions (e.g. Luthons, 1977: 255-279). We also know that perception can be influenced/managed/manipulated (e.g. De Meuse, 1987). The characteristics of selectivity and organization can be used to make people see something that is not there, or make

them see things differently. The act of seeing something where there is none, or see something differently is based on certain tendencies in people that is related to their expectations and prior experience. One of these tendencies is “perceptual readiness,” the tendency for people to see what they expect or want to see. A simple game can be used to teach this concept.

I have developed a very simple game for demonstrating the concept of “perceptual readiness” that helps students to understand the topic and remember the idea easily. The audience observing the game unfold in front of their eyes, may consider it a magic. While this game is more specifically related to a unique aspect of the perception process, it is applicable to the whole perception process in general.

The demonstration involves a simple act that when properly performed creates a very pleasant and fun experience that would be remembered long after. It requires no equipment, no mastery of creating an illusion, and no slight of hands. Just a deck of cards is needed to play this game. In this game, the audience is a partner which helps making it more interesting.

The demonstration starts with a brief introduction that borders on a satire, with a touch of seriousness enough to make the audience wonder if they should believe in what they hear. I claim to have special power that enables me, without looking at objects, just by feeling them with the tip of my fingers, to identify them. In this case, I claim that the prints on the card are detected by rubbing my finger tips on them. While this introduction is going on, I carefully toy with a deck of playing cards in my hands in a manner that all could see it is going to be used in my demonstration. The top four cards in the deck have been arranged in a specific order. This order is very important in what follows and is the main reason for giving the impression that I have a special power. The four cards are in a sequence as follows: ten of Spade, nine of Clubs, and nine of Clubs, and ten of Spade, or ten of Hearts and nine of Diamonds, and nine of Hearts

and Ten of Diamonds. Nine and ten cards are selected because the lower cards are easier for the audience to identify and remember, and the face of high cards are more crowded and easily confused for one another. The choice of suite of the similar color, red or black, adds to the apparent similarity, causing people to confuse them for one another.

When I am comfortable that I have captured the attention of the students, and have created sufficient curiosity in them, I end the introduction and prepare for the main effect. The top two cards are taken out of the deck, shown to the students, and given to a couple of persons in the front row to place them anywhere in the deck. After the insertion of these two cards in the deck, the cards are carefully shuffled such that the other two cards remain on top. During the shuffling, again I repeat the claim of having magical power and able to detect the prints on these cards with the tip of my fingers and without looking at the cards. Then, back toward the wall and facing the students, the deck is taken behind me. With both hands holding the deck, I play with the deck such that it gives the impression I am trying to locate the cards. Then, the top two cards (nine and ten of same color but different suits) are removed and briefly shown to the class. Up to this point, almost always, no one has detected the difference in suits. Everyone had paid attention only to the color and the numbers of nine and ten, without associating the numbers with the suits. The apparent success of identifying and pulling out of the deck the two original cards - the cards that were placed randomly in the deck - appears to be an act of magic.

At this point, to show the students' misperception, I search through the deck and locate the two cards that were originally placed in the deck. I show to the class all four cards, the original two cards, along with the two that I had claimed to have pulled out of the deck and presented to the class. With all four cards on display, I emphasize that this is a demonstration that people see what they expect to see or want to see, and the past perceptual history of people

affect their present perceptual processes. In this game, they are told, that they were unknowingly the willing participants in tricking them to accept an ersatz act for the real one. If there is a simple conclusion to draw from this demonstration it is that perception cannot be fully trusted.

While most games require some preparation, this game requires almost none. It is very simple, and the process is very easily remembered by anyone interested in utilizing it. Also, care should be taken that in shuffling the cards, the two cards on the top not to get mixed with others and remain on the top of the deck.

Application to Conference Theme

This exercise (game) is related to the “roots of OBTC”.

References

De Meuse, K. P. (1987). A view of the effect of nonverbal cues on the performance appraisal process. *Journal of Occupational Psychology*, 60: 207-226.

Luthons, F. (1977). *Organizational Behavior*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company.