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Impression Management: Self Communication in Leadership/Follower
Interactions
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Expanding the knowledge of the quality of the human condition through critical thinking about human nature and how people view and affect one another from the communication standpoint is the subject of this paper. Leaders use communication as a tool to accomplish their goals through linking, envisioning, and regulating, according to Hackman and Johnson (1991). Linking consists of processing cues from the environment--current events, activities in other organizations, their own organizational culture, maintaining peer group relationships, and building effective work teams via a cooperative, trusting atmosphere. Envisioning involves converting these links into a future agenda. Regulating involves influencing others through developing "perceptions of credibility," using power bases effectively, and making "effective use of verbal and nonverbal influence clues" (p. 49).

This last part is where impression management comes in--using influence clues as well as *perceptions* of credibility. Leaders monitor their communication behaviors to create impressions in the minds of others. Ethical leaders meet group needs and goals so as to achieve high group goals, while unethical leaders satisfy personal or selfish goals. How do we know the true feelings and beliefs of leaders? Are they playing a role of sincerity of purpose? Is impression management a role? When leaders adjust to variable situations and concomitantly adjust their leadership style, are they misusing impression management? Moreover, do followers use impression management as they complete periodic reviews with evaluators, for example, or when they assign blame for failure?

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In this article, we'll look at the human nature parts of perceiving credibility and influencing others through communication, from the standpoints of followers, as well as leaders. Are we sure about the importance of perceptions and influence in leadership? The American Management Association seems to think so. Training magazine recently reported on leadership development programs used by U.S. corporations by executing a survey of AMA's corporate membership which employs one fourth of the U.S. workforce. The skills important to organizations are in this list:

Ethical behavior	Implementing plans	Building networks	Creative thinking
Self confidence	Gaining trust	Communication	Strategic leadership
Quantitative skills	Use of resources	Resolving conflict	Transforming processes
Taking initiative	Working in teams	Strategic vision	Managing change
Analytical thinking	Relationship skills	Listening actively	Developing employees

Results showed competency levels were high for ethical behavior, self confidence, and quantitative skills. Weakest competencies levels were communication, developing employees, and managing change--skills involving credibility and influence.

Edgar Schein (1999) reinforces the importance of human relationships is his depiction of organizational culture. External survival issues include mission, strategy, and goals, as well as organizational structure and processes. Internal integration issues include groups, authority relationships, rewards and status. Deeper underlying assumptions include the "nature of human nature," the "nature of human relationships," and the "nature of reality and truth." (p. 30) These assumptions are the beginnings of impression management. In order to plumb the depths of credibility perception and influencing others, we need to look at how social learning takes place.

Albert Bandura (Sims & Lorenzi, 1992) posited a new paradigm for how managers and their subordinates think and act in organizations by distinguishing between behavioral concerns and cognitive concerns. His social cognitive theory holds that people are active in the mutual influence process, that the mental concept each of us has, plus our goals, and our perceptions of the environment determine our behavior.

Person	
Behavior	Environment

The perception of oneself, a self schema, is made up of generalizations about oneself based on past experiences and the present situation. The self schema can influence behavior through a self-fulfilling prophecy, which is a perception of self as adequate in the current reality, inadequate, or overqualified, depending on the accuracy of the schema. An important part of self schema is the idea of self efficacy, a type of self schema applied to a particular task, which informs an individual as to whether s/he can complete the task. Where do schemas come from? Largely through experiences with specific instances. As we mature and gather experiences, our schemas become more complex and more organized.

We use preexisting schemas in our interactions in organizations. Categorization is the mental process of labeling a person or object according to preexisting schemas. When, for example, we interview job candidates, we have in mind a preexisting cognitive schema or prototype of an ideal candidate for the particular position. The advantage of categorization is its efficiency: we can process overwhelming amounts of information quickly and bring order out of chaos. A disadvantage of categorization, however, is in describing individuals, we may be consulting

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our preexisting schemas for information rather than examining the true characteristics of these individuals through a process known as gap filling. We may actually have only a few cues, but we supply details from our schemas, which can lead to false impressions.

Another problem with categorization is that humans pay attention to information that supports our prototypes and discount disconfirming evidence. Even if persons or behaviors or situations contradict our prototypes, we hold that this evidence as an exception to the rule. These judgments persist over time. Why? Consulting existing schemas is effortless because we're consulting preexistent knowledge structures. If we engage in problem solving, we apply effort and conscious processing of information.

Another concept of schema and categorization is an emotion-based one called affect, a generic term for mood, feeling, or emotion. Important to our study is a perception called schema-triggered affect. When a person "matches" our category with strong affective overtones, we make judgments based not on the target person, but on the affect attached to our schema. What we are doing is associating a person with our previously formed category, not making a judgment based on an attribute-by-attribute consideration—a much slower, more laborious cognitive process. Note also that we are not focusing on the target person; we are, instead, using our own category, which has affective overtones, to make a judgment. Thus, an interviewer in a bad mood may select negative information about a candidate, while a happier interviewer may notice good aspects and rate more favorably.

What does all this have to do with leadership and impression management? John Gardner in "Leaders and Followers" writes:

The two-way conversation between leaders and followers is deeply influenced by the expectations of followers. . . . A loyal constituency is won when people consciously or unconsciously judge the leader to be capable of solving their problems and meeting their needs, when the leader is seen as symbolizing their norms, and when their image of the leader (whether or not it corresponds to reality) is congruent with their inner environment of myth and legend. . . . Effective leaders deal with . . . that partly conscious, partly buried world of needs and hopes, ideals and symbols. They serve as models; they symbolize the group's unity and identity; they retell the stories that carry shared meanings (1987, pp. 187-188).

From our look at Bandura's work, we realize that self schemas are the "partly conscious, partly buried world" Gardner conceptualized. Followers make generalizations from their past experiences; they use categorization to judge leaders and employ gap filling if necessary; and they pay attention to information that supports a leader, rather than to disconfirming evidence. And again we ask, "Why?"

This answer comes from Dennis Gioia's work with sensemaking in organizations (1989). "In any organizational experience, a person's most pressing cognitive task (whether explicit and conscious or tacit and unconscious) is to make sense of the situation, to account for it, or to understand it in meaningful terms" (p. 221). Gioia goes on to say that in order to construct meaning, individuals compare organizational information with their own values and attitudes through self communication. In this process, what matters is not the experience, but the *interpretation* of the experience, according to the meaning ascribed to it. When organizational experiences occur, individuals "frame" these in terms of their perceptions of their own performances, trying to make sense of their organizational experiences *and* maintain a positive concept of themselves and their competencies—a self-serving bias. Gioia continues:

. . . What often appears to be a conscious strategy of overt impression management is not impression management in the usual sense; rather it is better described as an implicit form of impression management, wherein employees are unconsciously trying to make consistent

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personal sense of organizational situations in accordance with their personal interpretive schemes" (p.221).

Perception and interpretation define reality in organizations, then, and this tacit process involves using schematized knowledge which people use to understand and act.

A look at self-serving bias starts with the concept of self enhancement. "Most often, most people think quite highly of themselves," according to Brehm and Kassin (1990). People rationalize to protect their self esteem, taking credit for success while attributing failure to external causes, anything outside themselves. Do we rationalize our shortcomings for our own sakes or is the main purpose to save face in front of others?

Most of us are concerned to some extent about the images we present to others. Erving Goffman, an early sociologist, maintained that we all assume a certain social identity or face, and others help us maintain that face. Social psychologists call this self presentation: the process we use to try to shape what others think of us as well as what we think of ourselves. Strategic self presentation occurs when we try to shape others' perceptions in order to gain power or influence or approval. We want to be liked by others and we want their approval and respect for our competence. So we "put our best feet forward," flatter people, and try to impress others with our knowledge or our status. Self verification is an effort to get others to perceive us as we perceive ourselves.

Self presentation is something we all do, but some people are more conscious of their public image than others. A personality trait we all share is that of self monitoring--regulating our behavior to meet the demands of social situations. Those high in self monitoring stand ready to modify their behavior as situations change, and they may appear to have a variety of "selves" from which to draw. Those low in self monitoring tend to be self verifiers, who vary little from situation to situation in order to show what for them is their true selves. High self monitors could describe themselves as pragmatic, flexible, adaptable, while others may see them as fickle opportunists or chameleon-like. Low self monitors may describe themselves as principled, without pretense, clear in purpose, while others may see them as rigid, stubborn, and unwilling to compromise.

A distinction between conscious cognitive processing in order to actively manipulate information, and more implicit, unconscious self-serving biases people engage in their sense-making attempts are the crux of impression management. People generally use the tacit, positive nature of their self concept to make sense in organizations. When overt, conscious self-serving tactics are engaged, we recognize explicit forms of impression management. The sense-making perspective helps us distinguish between the two. We are using tacit impression management when we rationalize our performances to ourselves in an effort to bolster or maintain our self esteem. We are using explicit impression management when, aware of the importance of public perceptions, we make a conscious, purposeful effort to construct reality in our favor. Either way, this information-processing perspective is used by leaders and followers, with the aim of bolstering existing personal schemas.

". . . tendencies to provide self-serving explanations for performance are not necessarily the result of deceitful attempts to manage . . . impressions. Rather, it is typically part of a personal strategy for constructing and maintaining a workable sense of self and experience within the organization. Self-serving bias unfortunately results in something that effectively looks in all its essential features like conscious impression management, when it is usually something considerably less pejorative, duplicitous, and Machiavellian" (Gioia, p. 229).

Kouzes and Posner (1995) state, "Leadership is an art--a performing art--and the instrument is the self" (p. 336). In describing leadership as self development, the authors posit that "any

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leadership practice can become destructive", but they take special exception to hubris in leaders.

All evil leaders have been infected with the disease of hubris, becoming bloated with an exaggerated sense of self. They've used the gifts of leadership to pursue their own sinister ends. Leadership practices per se are amoral. But leaders-the men and women who use the practices-are moral and immoral. There's an ethical dimension to this discussion of leadership that neither leaders nor constituents should take lightly. (p. 338)

Thus we've come full circle in considering impression management as a part of communicating credibility and influencing others. We've said that the beginnings of leadership communication were in the nature of human relationships, the nature of reality and truth, and the nature of human nature. In this process we've included Bandura's mutual influence process, concluding the mental concepts and perceptions each of us has determine behavior. We've examined perception from the aspects of self schemas, categorization, gap filling, and affect and concluded that all of these concepts affect our views of one another. These thoughts lend credence to Gardner's explanation that the *expectations* of followers weigh heavily in their choices of leaders.

Finally, Gioia tells us that perception and interpretation define reality in organization.

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