
UNIT 5 PERCEPTION

Objectives

After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- identify the main features of the process of perception
- distinguish between the bottom-up processing of sensory information and the top-down interpretation of that information
- understand the nature and implications of selective attention (perceptual selectivity) and perceptual organisation
- understand how behaviour is influenced by our perceptions
- explain and illustrate the main processes and problems in person perception including false attributions, halo effects and stereotyping.

Structure

- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Perceptual Selectivity and Perceptual Organisation
- 5.3 Perceptual Sets and Perceptual Worlds
- 5.4 Halo Effect and Stereotyping
- 5.5 Attributions
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5.1 INTRODUCTION

We humans seem to attach meanings, interpretations, values and aims to our actions. What we do in the world depends on how we understand our place in it, depends on how we perceive ourselves and our social and physical environment, depends on how we perceive our circumstances. We explain behaviour with terms like 'reason', 'motive', 'intention', 'purpose', 'desire' and so on.

Therefore, the issue is - each one of us perceive the world around us in different ways. It is our personal perception of that reality which shapes and directs our behaviour, and some 'objective' understanding of external reality. For example, if one person on a hillside perceives that it is cold, he will reach for his sweater. On the other hand, if the person standing next to him perceives that it is warm, he will remove his sweater. These contrasting behaviours can be witnessed happening at the same time, regardless of the actual ambient temperature as measured by a thermometer. Another example would be the universal assumption made by managers that subordinates always want promotion when, in-fact, many subordinates really psychologically forced to accept a promotion. Managers seldom attempt to find out and sometimes subordinates themselves do not know, whether promotion should be offered. In other words, the perceptual world of the manager is quite different from the perceptual world of the subordinates and both may be different from reality.. Thus, it is clear that human behaviour is a function of the way in which we perceive the world around us, and how we perceive other people and-events in that world.

We often find ourselves unable to understand other people's behaviour. To understand each other's behaviour, we need to be able to understand each other's perceptions. First of all, we need to be able to understand why we perceive things differently.

Activity 1

Choose a film that you have seen recently and which you particularly enjoyed. Now, find a friend or colleague who has seen the same film and hated it. Share your views of that film. What factors (age, sex, background, education, interests, values and beliefs, political views, past experience, etc.) can you identify that explain the differences in perception between you and your friend or colleague?

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5.2 PERCEPTUAL SELECTIVITY AND PERCEPTUAL ORGANISATION

We process and interpret the incoming raw data in the light of our experiences, in terms of our current needs and interests, in terms of our knowledge, expectations, beliefs and motives. **Perception** may be defined as the dynamic psychological process responsible for attending to, organising and interpreting sensory data. The main elements in the perceptual process are illustrated in Figure 1.

From a psychological point of view, the process of sensation, on the one hand, and perception, on the other, work together through what are termed respectively **'bottom-up'** and **'top-down'** processing.

The bottom-up phase concerns the way in which we process the raw data received by our sensory apparatus. One of the key characteristics of bottom-up processing concerns the need for selectivity. We are simply not able to process all of the sensory information available to us at any given time. Bottom-up processing screens or filters out redundant and less relevant information so that we can focus on what is important.

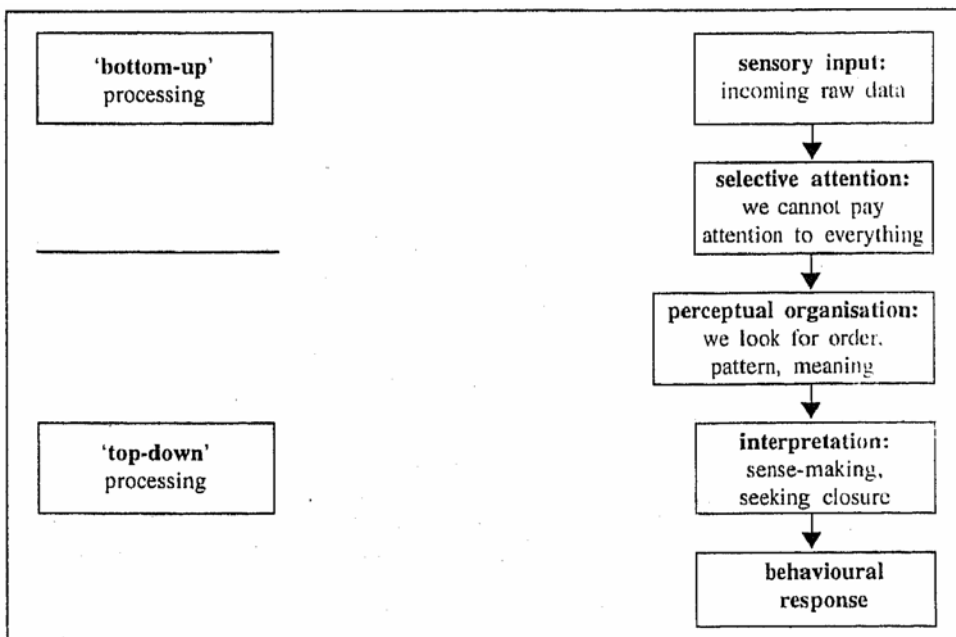


Figure 1: The Process of Perception



On the other hand, 'top-down' phase concerns the mental processing that allows us to order, interpret and make sense of the world around us. One of the key characteristics of top-down processing concerns our need to make sense of our environment and our search for meaning.

This distinction between sensation (bottom-up) and perception (top-down) can be illustrated in our ability to make sense of incomplete or even incorrect sensory information. For example, the missing letter or comma, or the incorrectly spelled term, does not normally interfere with the comprehension of the human reader:

This sentnce us incorrect, bit yoo wull stell bi abl to understa d it

In the above example, our top-down conceptual processing ability means that we are able to fill in the gaps and correct the mistakes and thus make sense of 'imperfect' incoming raw data.

All of us have a similar nervous system and share more or less common sensory equipment. However, we have different social and physical backgrounds which give us different values, interests and expectations and therefore different perceptions. We do not behave in, and in response to, the world 'as it really is'. This idea of the 'real world' is somewhat arbitrary. In fact, we have, and in response to, the world as we perceive it. We each live in our own perceptual world.

Perception is a dynamic process because it involves ordering and attaching meaning to raw sensory data. Our sensory apparatus is bombarded with vast amounts of information. We are not 'passive recorders' of this sensory data. We are constantly sifting and sorting this stream of information, making sense of it and interpreting it. Therefore, it can be said that perception is an information-processing activity. This information processing concerns the phenomena of selective attention (perceptual selectivity) and perceptual organisation.

Selective attention is the ability, often exercised unconsciously, to choose from the stream of sensory data to concentrate on particular elements and to ignore others. The internal and external factors which affect selective attention are illustrated in Figure 2.

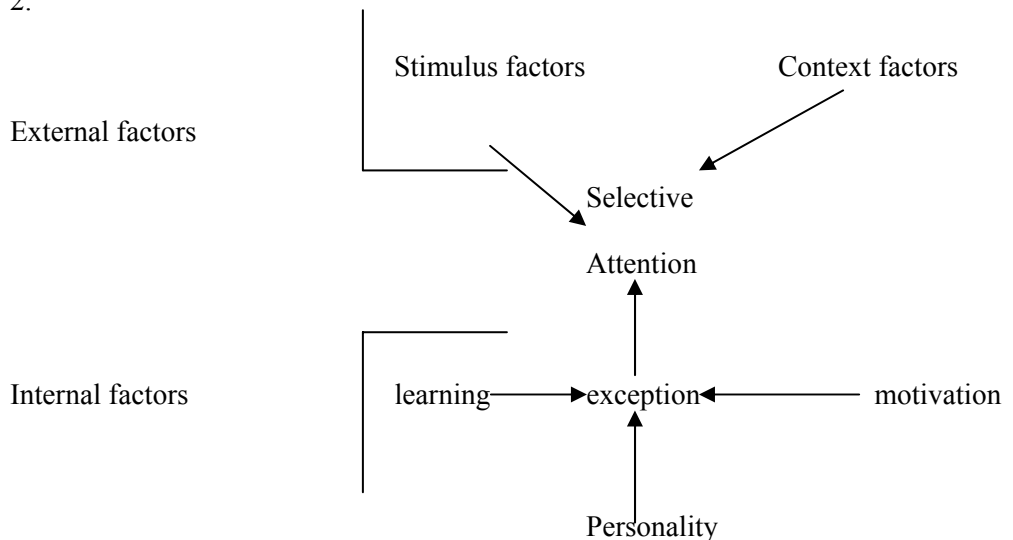


Figure 2: External and Internal Factors Influencing Selective attention

The external factors affecting selective attention concern stimulus factors and context factors. With respect to the stimulus factors, for example, our attention is drawn more readily which are described in Table 1.

Table 1

Large		small
bright		dull
Loud	rather than	quiet
strong		weak
Unfamiliar		familiar
Moving		stationary

However, it may be noted that we do not merely respond to single feature rather we respond to the pattern of stimuli available to us.

Activity 2

Identify examples of the ways in which advertisements creatively use stimulus factors to attract our attention in newspapers and magazines and on billboards and television.

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Our attention is also influenced by context Factors. For example, the naval commander on the ship's bridge and the cook in the kitchen may both have occasion to shout "fire", but these identical utterances will mean quite different things to those within earshot and will lead to radically different forms of behaviour (involving the taking and the saving of lives respectively). Thus, it is clear that knowledge of the context also affect our attention.

The internal factors affecting perception are:

- **Learning:** Our past experience leads to the development of perceptual expectations or perceptual sets which give us predispositions to perceive and to pay attention to some stimuli and to ignore other information.
- **Personality:** Our personality traits also predispose us to perceive the world in particular ways, to pay attention to some issues and events and human characteristics and not others.
- **Motivation:** We are more likely to perceive as important, and thus to respond to, stimuli that find motivating.

Much of perception can be described as classification or categorisation. We categorise people as male or female, lazy or energetic, extrovert or shy. We classify objects as cars, buildings, furniture, crockery and so on and we refine our classification schemes further under these headings. It may be noted here that these categories are learned. They are social constructs. What we learn is often culture-bound or culture-specific. For example, the British revulsion at the thought of eating dog (classified as pet), the Hindu revulsion at the thought of eating beef (classified as sacred) and the Islamic aversion to alcohol (classified as proscribed by the Koran) are all culturally transmitted emotions based on learned values.

However, different people within the same culture have different experiences and develop different expectations. The internal factors - our past experience and what we have learned, our personalities, our motivations - contribute to the development of our expectations of the world around us, what we want from it, what will happen in it and what should happen. We tend to select information that fits our expectations and pay less attention to information that does not.



Our categorisation process and the search for meaning and pattern are key characteristics of perception. This perceptual work is captured by the concept of perceptual organisation. Perceptual organisation is the process through which incoming stimuli are organised or patterned in systematic and meaningful ways.

Max Wertheimer first identified the principles by which the process of perceptual organisation operates. The 'proximity principle' states that we tend to group together or to classify stimuli that are physically close to each other and which thus appear to 'belong' together. For example, note how you 'see' three pairs rather than six blobs here:



The 'similarity principle' states that we classify or group together stimuli that resemble each other in appearance in some respect. For example, note how you 'see' four pairs here, not eight objects:



The fact that we are able to make use of incomplete and ambiguous information by 'filling in the gaps' from our own knowledge and past experience is known as the 'principle of closure'.

5.3 PERCEPTUAL SETS AND PERCEPTUAL WORLDS

In this unit, you have seen how the perceptual process selects incoming stimuli and organises them into meaningful patterns. It has also been shown that this processing is influenced by learning, motivation and personality -factors which give rise to expectations. These expectations, in turn, make us more ready to respond to certain stimuli in certain ways and less ready to respond to others. This readiness to respond is called the individual's **perceptual set**.

A perceptual set is an individual's predisposition to respond to events in a particular manner. A perceptual set is also known as a **mental set**. As we tend to perceive what we expect to perceive, this can also be called our perceptual expectations. We must accept the fact that two people can observe the 'same' thing but perceive it in quite different ways. Many organisational problems, and particularly communication problems are created by failure to appreciate this feature of the perceptual process. For example, top management of an organisation may perceive that junior employees are overreacting to trivial issues and may dismiss their complaints lightly. On the other hand, the junior employees may perceive that their grievances are genuine and that the top management are simply not taking them seriously. In a situation like this, it makes little sense to ask whose perceptions are correct. The starting point for resolving issues such as this must lie with the recognition that different people hold different, but equally legitimate, views of the same set of circumstances.

Another common example is the differences in perception that occur between the union and management. Some researchers believe that perceptual differences are a major explanation for industrial disputes. The same "facts" in a dispute are perceived quite differently by union members and by management. For example, union members may perceive that they are underpaid whereas management perceives that they are overpaid for the amount of work they do. In reality, pay may have nothing to do with the ensuing dispute, It might be due to the workers not having control over their own jobs and getting any recognition and they are reacting by perceiving that they are underpaid.

We each have a **perceptual world** that is selective and partial which concentrates on features of particular interest and importance to us. The individual's perceptual world

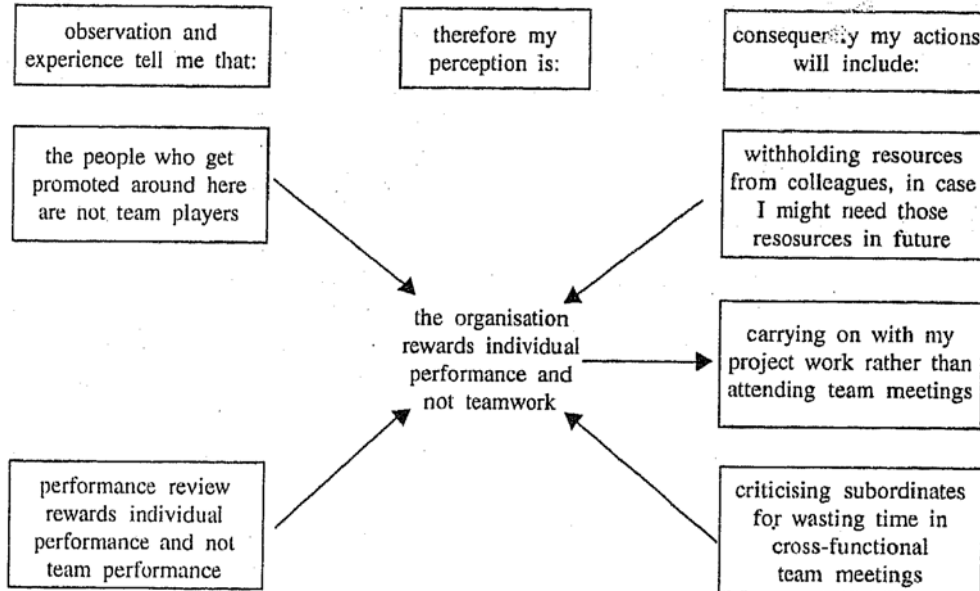


Figure 3: The information-perception-action link

is their personal internal image, map or picture of their social, physical and organisational environment. Through the processes of learning, motivation and personality development, we each have different expectations and different degrees of readiness to respond to objects, people and events in different ways.

It may be noted here that our perceptions, that is the meanings that we attach to the information available to us, shape our actions. Behaviour in an organisation context can usually be understood once we understand the way in which the individual perceives that context. Figure 3 illustrates the links between available information based on observation and experience, the perception based on that information and outcomes in terms of decisions with respect to actions.

Cultural factors also play a significant role in determining how we interpret available information and experience. Perceptual learning and development take place in the context of socio-cultural environment. It therefore, expected that the socio-cultural background of the individual will influence his/her perceptions. Accordingly, the nature of perceptual organisations will vary.

For example, one well-known piece of research compared the pace of life in six countries (Britain, Italy, Indonesia, Japan, Taiwan and the United States) by measuring:

- the accuracy of clocks in city bank branches,
- the speed at which city pedestrians walked, and
- the length of time it took to buy a postage stamp.

The research revealed that Japanese cities had the most accurate clocks, the fastest pedestrians and the most efficient post office clerks. Indonesian cities, in contrast, had the least accurate clocks and the slowest pedestrians. Italy had the slowest post office clerks.

Therefore, it is clear that to understand an individual's behaviour, we need to know something of the elements in their perceptual world and the pattern of information and other cultural influences that have shaped that world. To change an individual's behaviour, therefore, we first have to consider changing their perceptions through the information and experiences available to them.



5.4 HALO EFFECT AND STEREOTYPING

The concept of perceptual set or perceptual expectation applies to the ways in which we see other people, events and objects. To understand the nature of perception is to understand, at least in part, the sources and nature of many organisational problems. There are two related and prominent features of the process of people perception: the **halo effect and stereotyping**.

The term 'halo effect' was first used by the psychologist Edward Thorndike in 1920. A halo effect is a judgement based on a single striking characteristic such as an aspect of dress, speech, posture or nationality. Haloes can be positive or negative. This phenomenon applies to our perception of people. For example, it is a natural human response on meeting a stranger, to make judgements about the kind of person they are and whether we will like them or not. We do this to others on a first encounter, they do this to us.

It may be noted here that the halo effect is an error at the selective attention stage (see figure 1). Since we cannot pay attention to so much new information about someone, we are forced to be selective with respect to the available information. The halo effect can work in both directions. For example, if our judgement about someone based on a single striking characteristic is favourable, we give the other person a positive halo. If our judgement, on the other hand, is not favourable, we give the other person a negative halo.

A recent comprehensive review of the performance appraisal literature found that the halo effect was the dependent variable in over a one third of the studies and was found to be a major problem affecting appraisal accuracy. Examples of the halo effect are the extremely attractive woman secretary who is perceived by her male boss as being an intelligent, good performer when, in fact, she is a poor typist and quite dense and the good typist who is also very bright but who is perceived by her male boss as a "secretary", not as a potential manager with the ability to cope with important responsibilities.

One classic research study noted three conditions under which the halo effect is most marked:

- (i) when the traits to be perceived are unclear in behavioural expressions
- (ii) when the traits are not frequently encountered by the perceiver, and
- (iii) when the traits have moral implications.

Thus, the halo effect can act as an early screen that filters out later information which is not consistent with our earlier judgement. We also tend to give more favourable judgements to people who have characteristics in common with us. It may be mentioned here that the halo effect can apply to things as well as to people.

The concept of perceptual organisation also applies to person perception. The term '**stereotyping**' was first used by typographers to make blocks of type and was first used to describe bias in person perception by Walter Lip Mann in 1922. The concept refers simply to the way in which we group together people who seem to us to share similar characteristics. Lip Mann saw stereotypes as 'pictures in the head', as simple, mental images of groups and their behaviour. So, when we meet an accountant, a nurse, a lecturer, an engineer, a poet or an actor, we attribute certain personality traits to them because they are accountants, or engineers or whatever. There is a consensus about the traits possessed by the members of these categories. Yet in reality, there is often a discrepancy between the agreed-upon traits of each category and the actual traits of the members. In other words, not all engineers carry calculators and are coldly rational, nor are all personnel managers do gooders who are trying to keep



workers happy. On the contrary, there are individual differences and a great deal of variability among members of these groups. In spite of this, other organisation members commonly make blanket perceptions and behave accordingly. In terms of the model of the perceptual process in figure 1, stereotyping is an error at the perceptual organisation stage.

Activity 3

Explore your own stereotypes by completing each of the following sentences with four terms that you think describe most or all members of the category concerned:

university lecturers are

engineers are

trainee nurses are.....

airline pilots are

politicians are

poets are

You may find it interesting to share your stereotypes with those of colleagues, particularly if some of them have friends or close relatives who are pilots, nurses, engineers ...

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Thus, it is clear that stereotypes are overgeneralisations and are bound to be radically inaccurate on occasion. However, they can be convenient. We may be able to 'shortcut our evaluation process and make quicker and more reliable predictions of behaviour by adopting a stereotyped perspective. But, we can have problems with those who fall into more than one category with conflicting stereotypes. For example, an engineer who writes poetry.

5.5 ATTRIBUTIONS

Attribution is the process by which we make sense of our environment through our perceptions of causality. An attribution, therefore, is a belief about the cause or causes of an event or an action. Fritz Heider and Harold Kelley developed attribution theory during the 1950s and 1960s. They stated that our understanding of our social world is based on our continual attempts at causal analysis based on how we interpret our experience.

Why is that person so successful? Why did that project fail? If we understand the causes of success, failure and conflict, we may be able to adjust our behaviour and other factors accordingly. Attribution is simply the process of attaching or attributing causes or reasons to the actions and events we see. Causality is usually described in terms of internal causality and external causality. For example, we may explain a particular individual's success or promotion with reference to his/her superior skills and knowledge (internal causality) or with reference to luck, 'friends in high places' and coincidence (external causality).

In recent years, attribution theories have been playing an increasingly important role in work motivation, performance appraisal and leadership but are also recognised to influence perceptions. Attributions have been found to strongly affect evaluations of



others' performance, to determine the manner in which supervisors behave towards subordinates and to influence personal satisfaction with one's work. For example, what the manager perceives as the cause of a subordinate's behaviour will affect the manager's perception of and resulting behaviour toward the subordinate.

Research has revealed patterns in our attributions. For instance, when we are explaining our personal achievements, we point to our capabilities. But, when we are explaining our lack of success, we blame our circumstances. On the other hand, when speaking about others, we tend to attribute success and failure to personality features. In psychology, this tendency to exaggerate the influence of personality when explaining the behaviour of others and to overlook the effect of contextual factors is known as the fundamental attribution error.

5.6 PERCEPTION: ERRORS AND REMEDIES

The main sources of errors in perception include the following:

- (i) Not collecting enough information about other people.
- (ii) Basing our judgements on information that is irrelevant or insignificant.
- (iii) Seeing what we expect to see and what we want to see and not investigating further.
- (iv) Allowing early information about someone to affect our judgement despite later and contradictory information.
- (v) Accepting stereotypes uncritically.
- (vi) Allowing our own characteristics to affect what we see in others and how we judge them.
- (vii) Attempting to decode non-verbal behaviour outside the context in which it appears.
- (viii) Basing attributions on flimsy and potentially irrelevant evidence.

Thus, it is clear that errors in perception can be overcome by:

- (i) Taking more time and avoiding instant or 'snap' judgements about others.
- (ii) Collecting and consciously using more information about other people.
- (iii) Developing self-awareness and an understanding of how our personal biases and preferences affect our perceptions and judgements of other people.
- (iv) Checking our attributions - particularly the links we make between aspects of personality and appearance on the one hand and behaviour on the other.

Therefore, it can be said that if we are to improve our understanding of others, we must first have a well-developed knowledge of ourselves -- our strengths, our preferences, our weaknesses and our biases. The development of self-knowledge can be an uncomfortable process. In organisational settings, we are often constrained in the expression of our feelings (positive and negative) about other people due to social or cultural norms and to the communication barriers erected by status and power differentials. This may in part explain the enduring emphasis in recent years on training courses in social and interpersonal skills, self-awareness and personal growth.

Adrian Furnham (1997) argues that the process of making evaluations, judgements or ratings of the performance of employees is subject to a number of systematic perception errors. This is particularly problematic in a performance appraisal context. These are:



- **Central tendency:** Appraising everyone at the middle of the rating scale.
- **Contrast error:** Basing an appraisal on comparison with other employees rather than on established performance criteria.
- **Different from me:** Giving a poor appraisal because the person has qualities or characteristics not possessed by the appraiser.
- **Halo effect:** Appraising an employee undeservedly on one quality (performance, for example) because s/he is perceived highly by the appraiser on another quality (attractiveness).
- **Horn effect:** The opposite of the halo effect. Giving someone a poor appraisal on one quality (attractiveness) influences poor rating on other qualities. (performance).
- **Initial impression:** Basing an appraisal on first impressions rather than on how the person has behaved throughout the period to which appraisal relates.
- **Latest behaviour:** Basing an appraisal on the person's recent behaviour.
- **Lenient or generous rating:** Perhaps the most common error, being consistently generous in appraisal mostly to avoid conflict.
- **Performance dimension error:** Giving someone a similar appraisal on two distinct but similar qualities, because they happen to follow each other on the appraisal form.
- **Same as me:** Giving a good appraisal because the person has qualities or characteristics possessed by the appraiser. **Spillover effect:** Basing this appraisal, good or bad, on the results of the previous appraisal rather than on how the person has behaved during the appraisal period.
- **Status effect:** Giving those in higher level positions consistently better appraisals than those in lower level jobs.
- **Strict rating:** Being consistently harsh in appraising performance.

5.7 INTERPERSONAL PERCEPTION

Interpersonal perception begins with the perception of another person, an awareness and appraisal of his attitudes, attributes, intentions and their likely reactions to one's actions. Research was conducted by Zalking and Costello for better understanding of interpersonal perception. The specific characteristics of the perceiver, according to them are:

- 1) Knowing oneself makes it easier to see other accurately.
- 2) One's own characteristics affect the characteristics he is likely to see in others.
- 3) The person who accepts himself is more likely to be able to see favourable aspects of other people.
- 4) Accuracy in perceiving others is not a single skill.

Similarly the characteristics of the person who is being perceived are:

- 1) The status of the person perceived will greatly influence other's perception of him.
- 2) The person being perceived is usually placed into categories to simply the viewer's perceptual activities. Two common categories are status and role.
- 3) The visible traits of the person will greatly influence the perception of him.

In order to develop perceptual skills one has to avoid perceptual distortion, make accurate self-perception, put oneself in another person's place and create good impression about oneself.



5.8 PERCEPTION AND ITS APPLICATION IN ORGANISATIONS

People in organisations are always assessing others. Managers must appraise their subordinate's performance, evaluate how co-workers are working. When a new person joins a department he or she is immediately assessed by the other persons. These have important effect on the organisation.

Employment Interview: Interviewers make perceptual judgments that are often inaccurate. Different interviewers see different things in the same candidate and arrive at different conclusions about the applicant. Employment interview is an important input into the hiring decision, and perceptual factors influence who is hired and vis-à-vis the Quality of an organisation's labour force.

Performance Appraisals: An employee's performance appraisal is very much dependent on the perceptual process. An employee's future is closely tied to his or her appraisal - promotions, increments and continuation of employment are among the common outcomes. The performance appraisal represents an assessment of an employee's work. While this may be objective most jobs are evaluated in subjective terms. Subjective measures are judgmental. The evaluator forms a general impression of an employee's work, to the degree that managers use subjective measures in appraising employee's the evaluator perceives to be 'good or bad' employee characteristics/behaviours will significantly influence the appraisal outcome.

Assessing Level of Effort: In many organisations, the level of an employee's effort is given high importance. Assessment of an individual's effort is a subjective judgment susceptible to perceptual distortions and bias.

Assessing Loyalty: Another important judgment that managers decide about employees is whether they are loyal to the organisation.

Implications of Perception on Performance and Satisfaction

Productivity: What individuals perceive from their work situation will influence their productivity. More than the situation itself than whether a job is actually interesting or challenging is not relevant. How a manager successfully plans and organises the work of his subordinates and actually helps them in structuring their work is far less important than how his subordinates perceive his efforts.

Therefore, to be able to influence productivity, it is necessary to assess how workers perceive their jobs.

Absenteeism and Turnover: Absence and Turnover are some of the reactions to the individuals perception. Managers must understand how each individual interprets his job and where there is a significant difference between what is seen and what exists and try to eliminate the distortions. Failure to deal with the differences when individuals perceive the job in negative terms will result in increased absenteeism and turnover.

Job Satisfaction: Job satisfaction is a highly subjective, and feeling of the benefits that derive from the job. Clearly his variable is critically linked to perception. If job satisfaction is to be improved, the worker's perception of the job characteristics, supervision and the organisation as a whole must be positive.

Understanding the process of perception is important because (1) It is unlikely that any person's definition of reality will be identical to an objective assessment of reality. (2) It is unlikely that two different person's definition of reality will be exactly the same. (3) Individual perceptions directly influences the behaviour exhibited in a given situation.

The important fact is that people who work together often see things differently, and this difference can create problems in their ability to work together effectively.

In order to decrease the errors involved in perception, one has to keep in mind the way the perceptual process works. By understanding the process one can do a better job at minimizing their negative effect. Secondly, one can compare one's perception with other people, if they are representing different backgrounds, cultures or training. This may lead to agreements or otherwise, communications can help to sort out the differences. Thirdly, one should understand other person's point of view, it may help to know when one is wrong. The point is that one should listen and understand the other person rather than try to convince him or her that one is right. Fourthly, one should be willing to change, when one comes across new information. Finally, one should view the world in dynamic terms, because one's behaviour can alter the phenomenon that is the basis for one's perceptions, so, one must notice the impact of one's own behaviour.

In short, it can be said that perceptual skills can be enhanced by:

- 1) Knowing and perceiving oneself accurately.
- 2) Being emphatic i.e. to see a situation as it is experienced by others.
- 3) Having positive attitudes, which helps in reduction of perceptual distortions.
- 4) Enhancing one's self-concept, which helps in perceiving more accurately.
- 5) Making a conscious effort to avoid the possible common biases in perception.
- 6) Communicating with employees to erase incorrect perceptions.
- 7) Avoiding attributions.

Perception is an important process in an organisation. It plays a vital **role** in forming the basis of one's behaviour by which one formulates a view of the world.

5.9 SUMMARY

The unit deals with the importance of perceptual process. The perceptual process impacts on many key decisions that affect employees e.g.: interviews, performance appraisals, assessment of effort and loyalty and attributing causes to specific behaviours. Perceptual errors can lead to lower employees performance, low morale and an overall reduction in the organisations effectiveness.

5.10 SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. What is perception? What are its main features?
2. How does an understanding of someone's perceptual world help us to understand their behaviour?
3. Explain and illustrate the main processes and problems in person perception including halo effects, stereotyping and false attributions.
4. What are the common errors in perception? How would you overcome these?



5.11 FURTHER READINGS

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