

# Are You Managing Perception?

**T**he definition of leadership, according to the Center for Creative Leadership, located in Greensboro, North Carolina, is as follows: "Leadership development is the expansion of a person's capacity to be effective in leadership roles and processes. Leadership roles and processes are those that enable groups of people to work together in productive and meaningful ways."

We are all leaders to one degree or another. What sets great leaders apart is their ability to manage perceptions. What people observe or assess as your ability to be a leader and your effectiveness becomes their perception, which in turn becomes reality. Perceptions that are not managed become rumors, then gossip, then backbiting, which leads to destruction. Unmanaged perceptions become a reality that was not intended.

Perception management requires asking questions and getting feedback from others. Most leaders typically do not receive feedback very often and, in many cases, when given it is usually not in the most constructive manner. However, effective feedback provides information that lets you know how you are doing. It involves giving and receiving, reinforces the changes you are making, and encourages you to continue. It is balanced and positive as well as constructive and corrective. It assumes that everyone is not out to get you. It recognizes that each person is doing his or her best and that although each of us is unique, we all have a great deal in common.

Most of us know that we need feedback but are unsure how to get it or use it. While attending a weeklong course

at the Center for Creative Leadership, the Leadership Development Model was presented. This model uses a process called assessment, challenge, and support (ACS). In the assessment phase you seek feedback from others. You look for people who are able to observe your behavior and have an interest in your effectiveness, people who are able to speak to you directly, honestly, and specifically. Once you have received feedback, it is important to take time to reflect on your experiences and evaluate the content of what was shared. During the challenge stage, we are reminded that challenging experiences stretch us and foster the development of new abilities. They force us to move out of our comfort zone and help us acquire skills and abilities that may have seemed beyond our current reality.

Mechanisms that provide a supportive environment include encouragement, advice, growth, and acceptance. These help create an atmosphere in which learning and growing are valued. They open people up to new learning possibilities and enable them to handle the challenges of development.

It is critical to maintain positive viewpoints and the motivation to develop. The three areas combined (assessment plus challenge plus support) add up to growth and development. The goal of the ACS process is to allow people to focus their attention and efforts on learning.

The benefit of receiving feedback is an increased understanding of our own strengths and weaknesses, and we are able to confer this benefit on others by giving feedback.

I can personally attest to the benefits of perception management. The civil and environmental engineering department at the University of Wisconsin at Madison was awarded, through the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT), a University Transportation Center. This center is designed to work with the state Department of Transportation in region 5 of the U.S. DOT, which includes the states of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, and Indiana.

Challenges, obstacles, and barriers were shared. By meeting with representatives from several other state DOTs, we learned that many states are of the opinion that universities are not interested in the needs of the state. They feel that engineering schools in particular are narrowly focused upon technical problems and are not concerned with the broader issues that state DOTs must deal with, such as social and policy issues. This knowledge has enabled us to focus our energy on overcoming these perceptions based upon the direct feedback we received.

Perception management is hard work; however, we can all grow and develop individually and as leaders as we work at giving and receiving feedback. The Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu said, "Knowing others is wisdom, knowing yourself is enlightenment." As leaders we need to go beyond knowing others, we need to understand our own strengths and weaknesses. This enlightenment will expand self-knowledge and enhance our self-confidence, which will enable us to work more effectively as leaders.

—JEFFREY S. RUSSELL