

ALFRED KORZYBSKI MEMORIAL LECTURE 1989

People-Managers Need Accurate Self-Maps

by

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INTRODUCTION

When I originally read *Science and Sanity* in the late 40's I was struck by a number of insights – not the least of which was the notion that the MAP IS NOT THE TERRITORY. Moreover, if one is to behave as intelligently as possible he or she must continuously strive to make one's maps as similar as possible to the territories they represent.

I recall with admiration and gratitude and fondness how my mentor at Northwestern University, Irving J. Lee, repeatedly stressed that admonition – MAKE THE MAP FIT THE TERRITORY.

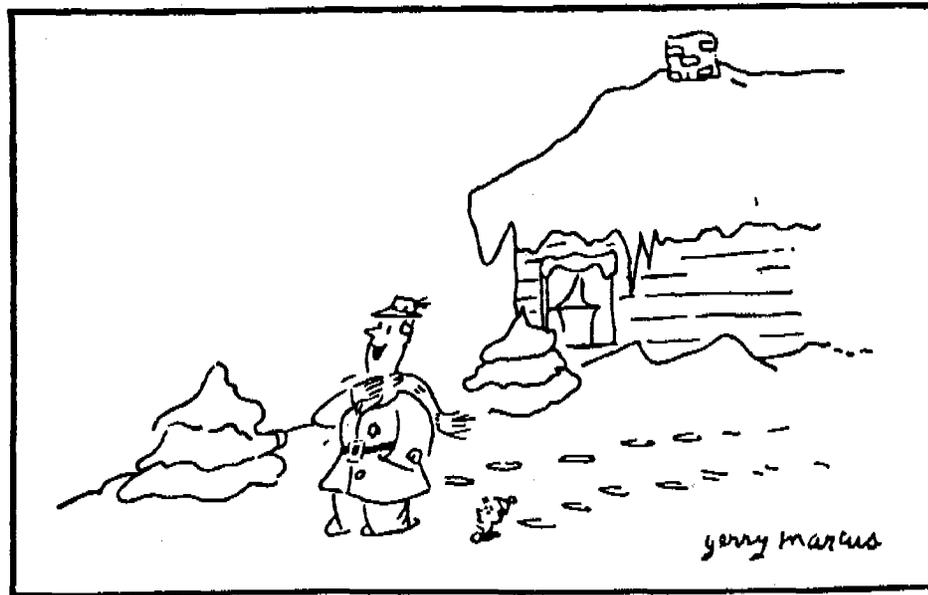
The phrase, MAKE THE MAP FIT THE TERRITORY, has been the main thrust of my teaching for the past thirty-six years.

For four years at DePaul University, for twelve years at Northwestern's Graduate School of Management, and for twenty years with executive groups around the world, I have been working with people who were preparing to be – or who already were – managers of people.

Now, what do people-managers do? They supervise other people. They communicate to and with them; they delegate jobs to them; they train them and instruct them; they give them orders; they lead them; they motivate them; etc. And in the process they (the managers) are held accountable for those people. They (the managers) are evaluated and rewarded, sometimes punished, for the performance of other people.

It occurred to me from the outset that to do a superlative or even adequate job of managing others one had to understand one's own people extraordinarily well ... and to have a very realistic map of their goals and needs, their values and aspirations, their fears and inadequacies. But before one can form accurate maps of others one must have a very realistic map of oneself. Or, to use some of today's clichés one must have a very authentic self-picture or self-concept or self-image. Here's my rationale. I'll use different labels but my debt to Korzybski's Structural Differential will be obvious.

[Editor's Note: Following the above introduction Dr. Haney spoke extemporaneously. He based his remarks on material from Chapter 3, "Perception and Communication 1: The Process of Perception" from William V. Haney, *Communication and Interpersonal Relations*, 5th edition, (Homewood, IL: Richard D. Irwin, Inc., 1986). Used with special permission. The GSB editorial staff has excerpted what follows from that chapter.]



"This is nothing. When I was your age the snow was so deep it came up to my chin!"
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Dad is right, of course – as he sees it. And in this seemingly innocuous self-deception lies one of the most interesting and awesome aspects of human experience: We never really come into direct contact with reality. Everything we experience is a manufacture of our nervous systems.

Although there is never a perfect match between reality** and one's perception of it, the range of disparity between reality and perception is considerable. When engineers are measuring, analyzing, testing, and the like, usually with the aid of precise gauges and instruments, their perceptions may be an extremely close approximation of reality. This is basically why bridges, tunnels and skyscrapers not only get built but generally stay built.

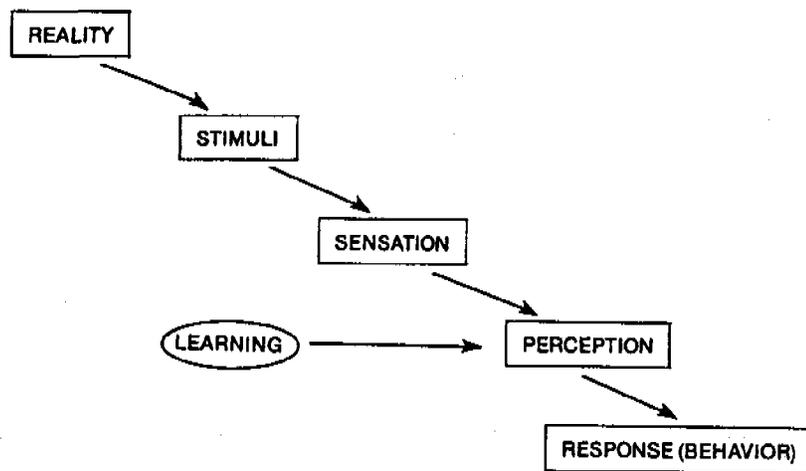
But when engineers, or anyone else, are relating to and communicating with other human beings – when they are operating in a world of feelings, attitudes, motives, values, aspirations, ideals, and emotions – they are playing in a very different league, and the match between reality and perceptions may be far from exact.

PERCEPTUAL MODEL

The role of perception in the practice of Communication is critical, so let's examine the perceptual process more closely. (...)

** The reader is requested to visualize all occurrences of the term 'reality' to be enclosed in single quote marks. (Ed.)

The perceptual model looks like this:



The above model is simple^{***} but valid in that it depicts human response as only an *indirect* reaction to reality. That premise may be disquieting enough but there is more to come. Because there are multiple stages between reality and response, there are also multiple opportunities for us to differ from each other as we go from step to step.

Differing Responses

To illustrate the latter proposition, consider a social unit – say, an industrial organization. Just as relevantly we could have selected other units – such as your college, your sorority, or fraternity, or club, or even your family. But back to the industrial firm – just what is it? In addition to its physical and financial resources, the firm is basically a collection of individual human beings. Now let us consider how these individuals might differ among themselves as they move through the perceptual process.

Differing Stimuli. Immediately, at the stimuli level, differences can occur. In fact, we decree them. We create elaborate organization charts with all sorts of boxes and layers and lines (solid and dotted) whereby we divide the reality. We say to various groups (and individuals):

“You people are in R&D, so you’ll deal with this hunk of reality (these stimuli).”

“You’re in our industrial engineering department, so here’s your province (another set of stimuli).”

“You’re in PR, so here’s what you’ll cope with (still other stimuli).”

“You’re responsible for cost accounting so we want you to focus on these stimuli.”

And on and on and on.

^{***} For a more complex model of the perceptual process, consult an earlier edition of Dr. Haney’s book: *Communications and Interpersonal Relations*, 4th ed. (Homewood, IL: Richard D. Irwin, Inc., 1979) pp. 56-65.

And this is one of the key dilemmas of organizations – task specialization and isolation. To be fair, it isn't really feasible for General Motors to employ 100,000 individual artisans – each of whom generates the requisite capital, designs a unique car, purchases or manufactures the parts for it, assembles them, tests and sells the cars, and arranges for customer financing. Parenthetically, there is some tendency to put the job back together again (or at least to enlarge it), but it is difficult to imagine an advanced economy without specialization. Unfortunately, specialization divides people, requires them to deal with particular stimuli, and the net results, too often, are sizable abysses between people who supposedly work in the same organization.

Without mentioning any names I can report that I have seen great gulfs between major functions in some companies. Here's a recent candid conversation:

- Me** I don't mean to be offensive but I get the impression that you folks here in the shop producing this product don't really work in quite the same firm as those people out there in the field who are selling it and servicing it and otherwise dealing with the customer.
- Them** Well, that's right. We don't really appreciate their embarrassment and tension when we fail to deliver on their promises. But at the same time, they don't really see what happens here – our pressures and frustrations and deadlines.

Differing Sensations. Let's be optimistic and say that the members of our mythical firm are "even", so far. That is, they have all been exposed to the same stimuli. Still they could sense them differently. There could be sensory variations among them. Suppose they all look at the cover of this book. If the group is typical, most of them will have normal color vision. Even so, will any two of them share an identical color experience? This is ultimately a subjective, inside-the-head experience and we simply do not know. Now add the more obvious sensory differences such as those that emanate from various forms of color "blindness" and from disease and injury. In my case, for example, I get different color experiences depending upon which eye I'm using. One eye was banged up in what Archie Bunker lovingly calls WW II. And from it I get – not different colors – but much greyer, dimmer hues than from my good eye.

There is a fun way to demonstrate differing sensory equipment. Sometimes I will give each member of a class or seminar a small bit of paper. Each person is to chew it up and register any taste sensations. Typically, about 20 percent of the group will start looking for water, coffee, a Coke, – anything to wash away a distinct bitter taste. Others will be puzzled by this, because for them the paper will be sweet. Still others find the paper to be sour and a small percentage taste it as salty. And for about half the group, the paper is tasteless. So what is happening? The paper is impregnated with a chemical – phenylthiocarbamide (PTC) – which geneticists use to trace hereditary traits. Their contention: We may inherit varying sensory equipment, at least when it comes to tasting PTC.

There are indeed sensory variations among us but they probably aren't too pertinent for most of us unless, for example, one happens to be operating a restaurant, or an art gallery, or a perfumery.

Differing Perceptions. In a sanguine mood, let us suppose that all of the members of our hypothetical organization have not only received the same stimuli – the same chunk of reality – but have similarly sensed them. However, they have one more hurdle and it is a formidable one – the very act of perceiving – of imputing meaning to experience. We have already considered some of the factors, under the comprehensive heading of learning, which can influence how one perceives. If the learning had differed, the perceiving is likely to differ as well.

For example, superiors and subordinates in organizations usually learn to perceive themselves and each other quite differently. A person looking downward in an organization may perceive very differently from a person below looking up. Rensis Likert of the Institute for Social Research (University of Michigan) reported that 85 percent of a sampling of foremen estimated that their employees felt very free to chat about important aspects concerning the job with the boss. However, only 51 percent of their men shared this view. Seventy-three percent of the foremen felt that they "always or almost always" solicited subordinates' thoughts regarding solution of job problems. Only 16 percent of their subordinates agreed with this appraisal. Ninety-five percent of the foremen said they understood their men's problems, but only 34 percent of the men felt they did. (...)

Unacknowledged Differences

So far we have two disturbing premises: 1) We never respond directly to reality and, consequently, 2) we can differ from each other at one or more of the steps (stimuli-sensation-perception) between reality and our response to it. This is why two or more people can respond differently to the same situation. Now, add a third element – lack of awareness and/or acceptance of these two propositions – and we have a truly explosive potential for interpersonal relations.

DEFENSIVENESS

So it is the failure to *acknowledge* these differences (differences between reality and one's perception of it...and differences of perceptions from person to person) that induces so much defensiveness within organizations and elsewhere. The prevailing, albeit largely unconscious, assumption is that "the world is as I see it." One who harbors this notion will find life continuously threatening, for there are many others who share this notion but not the *same world!* Such people find it perpetually necessary to protect their *worlds* and to deny or attack the other person's.

Admittedly, the premise that one deals only indirectly and often unreliably with reality can be upsetting. To those who crave a certain, definite, and dependable world (and that includes all of us in varying degrees), the admission that we respond only to what a thing appears to be rather than what it is necessarily lessens our ability to predict about the real world. Even those who intellectually accept the perception model and the roles that stimuli, sensation, learning, and so on play in determining responses may still have difficulty converting the concept into performance. A good test of the extent to which we have truly internalized such awareness occurs when we become emotionally involved with others.

For instance, suppose that you and I work in the same organization and that we observe Joe, one of our colleagues, taking home such company supplies as paper pads, paper clips, and pencils, not in large quantities, but more than he will need for official purposes. He will let the children have them, use them for his private affairs, and so on.

Now, let us say that you are the product of a rigorous, religious upbringing. You may regard Joe as dishonest. But suppose that I have none of your training and that the only part of my background that is particularly relevant is the three years I spent in the Army in World War II. There I discovered a code that was unwritten but very pervasive. It was, in effect, "You may rob the Army blind! – but you must not steal a nickel from another serviceman." I might regard Joe as honest and could readily consider his acquisitions as normal perquisites.

Let us examine the communication issue. (Permit me to disregard the moral issue without denying that there is one.) Consider the tremendous difficulty that you and I would have in discussing Joe if in our increasingly vehement statements, "Joe's dishonest!" "No, he's not!" we failed to realize that neither of us was talking about Joe. We were talking about *you* and *me*, and our respective inside-the-skin experiences. Our respective worlds were different from the outset, and there was no reason to expect them to be identical – and no rational reason to have to protect them. Why, then, did we defend them so ardently?

Let us begin with an assertion: Most reasonably mature people can tolerate fairly well differences in value judgments, opinions, attitudes, points of view – as long as they can recognize them as such. If I can realize that your *reality* is not the same as mine, then your statement about *your* reality is no threat to *mine*.

But no one can tolerate differences on matters of objectivity – matters that can be submitted to corroborative measurement and are capable of general agreement. To illustrate, suppose that you and I have a mutual superior who comes to us and says: "This may sound silly, but I'm serious. I want you two to estimate the length of that two-by-four over there (about 20 feet away) on the ground. You have to estimate because you can't use any kind of measuring device and you can't get any closer to it than you are now. Now, I want a good estimate and only one between you, so get to it!"

Now suppose that the piece of lumber is actually seven feet long but that neither of us knows this. So we start sizing up the situation, and you say, "Looks about 6-1/2 or 7 feet." And I say, "No, no – you're way short – that's a lot closer to 14 feet." Unless you have admirable constraint you would probably blurt out, "You're crazy!"

Now, why were you moved to feel that I was crazy?

Was it not partly because my statement was at least a slight threat to your sense of reality and therefore, your sanity? In other words, if I were indeed right – that is, if the board actually were 14 feet and everything were twice as big as you perceive it – would you not begin to have serious misgivings about your contact with reality? Thus, "You're crazy!" is your understandable if impulsive way of defending yourself against an attack on your sanity.

Actually, we are unlikely to have such a disparity (unless one or both of us were indeed losing touch with reality) because our perceptual lessons, when we initially learned to perceive the inch, the foot, and the yard, were likely to be very similar, regardless of where or when we learned them. And even if we were to disagree on such matters as distance, speed, and weight, we could resolve our differences by using standardized measuring devices.

But when we encounter Cézanne and Grandma Moses, Ernest Hemingway and Barbara Cartland, Mozart and John Lennon, Enrico Caruso and Michael Jackson, we are unlikely to have had identical learning experiences, and where are the standardized measuring devices? Will someone resolve a controversy with "Why, that Van Gogh is 87 percent beautiful"? Even professional critics are unable to provide universally acceptable and applicable criteria.

The point is that not only can we not tolerate differences in matters of objectivity (but what differences there may be are generally minor or resolvable by objective measurement), but we cannot accept differences on matters of subjectivity (value judgments, opinions, and so on) if we unconsciously treat them as matters of objectivity. Many important aspects of our lives, such as art, music, architecture, religion, politics,

morals, fashions, food and economic and political theory, 1) are not taught to us in standardized lessons and 2) are not, by and large, measurable by standardized scales or gauges. It is in such areas that we find it easiest to threaten one another. And when we are threatened we tend, if we do not run, to fight back – the threatener is now threatened, and the stage is set for an escalation of conflict.

Defensiveness is enormously pervasive and potentially destructive to organizational communication and interpersonal relationships. (...)

SUMMARY

We have depicted human behavior as most immediately determined by the individual's programmed perception of experience. Behavior, then, is only indirectly a response to reality. One who cannot tolerate this basic uncertainty of life and who assumes that his world is the only real world may find that "world" in almost constant jeopardy. Closed and defensive, one may respond to the threats with irrational attack and/or flight.

We have conceded that many organizations are populated to some extent with more or less defensive (and thus often aggressive) people. Therefore, the challenge to anyone who aspires to be an effective leader or member of an organization (or more broadly, wishes to live an emotionally mature and deeply satisfying life) might be phrased as follows:

1. Can one come to accept the fact that his/her and everyone else's "reality" is subjective, incomplete, unique, and to some extent, distorted? Can one, therefore, muster the courage to become open and nondefensive – to permit even contrary cues to reach one and to begin to revise, update, and make more valid one's concept of reality?
2. Having clarified one's own perceptions, can one learn to assess accurately the worlds of others? Can the manager, for example, realize the simple but profound truth that his/her subordinates' worlds have him/her in it as a boss, whereas the manager's world does not?