

# Increase your influencing power through perceptual positions

When you're trying to influence someone, there are times when the message seems to arrive easily with the target and times when 'they' just don't seem to understand.

Perceptual positions is a technical and effective way to discuss something we all know is important in influencing – how to understand someone else's 'point of view' in a given situation.

By understanding the other person's preferred point of view you can:

- build rapport more easily with different people
- frame your own interests in a way that appeals to them
- anticipate possible objections, and possibly answer them

## Get into position

'Perceptual positions' is the term for the basic ways that we can experience – or replay – any situation. There are three main perceptual positions to be aware of:

**Position 1:** this is the way you experience the world – the perspective you have on any given situation regardless of others' views and opinions. *Position 1* is where you hold your values, beliefs, experiences – and prejudices. At best, by being clear about *Position 1* you can understand what it is that you want in any situation and be assertive about your needs. At its worst, a perspective wholly based on *Position 1* is self-centred and selfish, taking no account of anyone else's point of view.

**Position 2:** this is about understanding the way someone else experiences the world – 'stepping into their shoes'. From *Position 2* you can gain an insight into the other person's perspective – their needs, wants, experiences and desires. You can go into *Position 2* to help you understand why you're not 'connecting' satisfactorily, or why that person doesn't share your interests. But you need to be careful. A total immersion in *Position 2* can lead you to identify too strongly with the other person, losing your sense of self and your interests.

**Position 3:** this is about stepping out from an internal perspective and observing the interaction of both parties from outside. This position is sometimes described as the objective perspective – “the balcony”. This detached position lets you weigh up both points of view and decide which has the stronger merit. Unfortunately, such detachment can also mean being unable to decide either way or seeming too distant from the situation.

None of the positions is inherently better than the others. But it’s important to know that individuals tend to have a preference for dealing with situations in one of the three positions – some people frame everything in terms of their own point of view; some people constantly talk about how others perceive them; and some people talk about their experience as though it was a movie they were watching in which they and other are participants.

You can improve your influencing skills by being flexible and using all three positions – if necessary even in a single interaction. The simple example below illustrates this at work.

### **Example**

John is Edie’s manager. Edie started being late for work, gradually extending to five mornings in a row. John needed Edie to change her behaviour.

John took her into his office and sat her down. “Edie, don’t you feel bad about coming into work late every day?” He expected her to be embarrassed and hoped she would be contrite. Instead she was apparently merely puzzled and said “No.” Clearly approaching the challenge through *Position 1* wasn’t going to have the desired effect. So John changed track.

“Edie, how do you think I feel when I get into work early with a full schedule, and then make excuses for you being late?” Again John hoped for some awareness of his feelings. But again there was genuine puzzlement. Edie didn’t do *Position 2* either.

John had one final try. “Edie, imagine Claire (a close friend and respected colleague) was listening to us having this conversation. What would she say?” There was a pause – a sudden dawning realisation. “Well,” said Edie, “she might say that it wasn’t fair that you have to take my calls.” John had to get Edie into Position 3 – the objective observer – to get her to understand the challenge.

And it’s not just colleagues that we can use this technique with – we often need to do the same thing with customers, donors and partners on a daily basis.

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## Ready, aim, fire

Here is another example to help explain how perceptual positions works in more detail in a fundraising setting. *WaterforLife* is a fictional charity. Let's assume *WaterforLife* works in Africa helping people gain access to water through wells. In doing this it helps release young people from the hardship of collecting water. The *WaterforLife* fundraiser needs to convince a sceptical donor of the importance of this work. So they begin in *Position 1*:

*"We'd like you as a well established and generous donor to contribute to our village water pump programme. This will help young people collect water for their families more easily and so they have more time for school and play. We hope that as a parent yourself, you will feel it's important to help our programme – and feel a sense of pride in helping us to do important work in Africa for young people."*

If this ask doesn't work our fundraiser can try to encourage the donor into *Position 2*. They do this so the donor can appreciate how important their donation is to the people directly affected, as opposed to appealing to their own values and perspective in position 1. Our fundraiser tries again:

*"Imagine you are 10 year old Sagita. Every morning you rise at 5am to walk 3 miles along a dusty track to the nearest pump in the next village. There you fill two 5-gallon jerry cans with water. You balance one on your head and carry the other. Stopping frequently to change hands, you walk the 3 miles back to your house. Only then can you wash and make some hot tea for breakfast. You do the same in the evening after school – even though you are frightened of the dark road and are worried you might be attacked as you walk to the well."*

*"How do you imagine Sagita feels about spending up to four hours each day collecting water? If you were Sagita wouldn't it be great to have time to play and to see your friends?"*

The fundraiser, in this example, is asking the donor to step into *Position 2* to experience what it's like to be Sagita. Once she's there, if the donor with has a preference for *Position 2* might be more inclined to give – and to engage in the cause and give generously.

But some donors find it very hard to view the world from *Position 2*.

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Let's say our *WaterforLife* fundraiser knows the donor she's meeting with struggles to be 'inside' a situation in another person's shoes. So she takes a slightly different approach- *Position 3* or the outside observer:

*"Sagita is 10 years old. Imagine you had a webcam in her village and could watch her rise at 5am to walk 3 miles along a dusty track to the nearest pump in the next village. There you see her fill two 5-gallon jerry cans with water. She balances one on her head and carries the other. You watch as she stops frequently to change hands as she walks back to her house. Imagine at the end of school you hear her tell her friend she's too busy to play since she has to help her mother by collecting more water."*

*"What could you say to Sagita to explain why she can't have access to a well? What sort of child would you be looking at if collecting water was a simple matter of walking to the end of the village? Imagine that you could be the director in this movie and could change the script to give Sagita back her childhood. Would you change the script to allow her to spend time playing with her friends like a every other child?"*

In this case the fundraiser is asking the donor to step into *Position 3* to observe Sagita – to look into her world from 'outside'.

The learning here is *simple* but not *easy* and takes practice. Next time you're talking to a donor, stakeholder or colleague and notice how they talk about their experiences and if they describe it mostly through positions 1, 2 or 3. A simple way to do this is to ask them to tell you about some activity or event they've taken part in recently – 'tell me about your holiday' or 'how was the party?' You'll discover that they will often have a preference for talking about their experience in one of the three positions. When you've spotted this preference try and frame your 'ask' in that position they prefer and you'll discover that your ability to influence will increase.

## **Need more help?**

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