

Perceptual Positions

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Perceptual Positions are a complex set of learned perspectives and skills that require changing mental habits and practicing various mental and emotional disciplines.

Five Perceptual Positions

A perceptual position is a perspective from which things can be viewed or considered. Perceptual positions, given that they are different perspectives, provide us with different information. Imagine viewing something from the north side, and then moving around to view it from the south side. Each of these two perceptual positions supplies us with distinct information. The more complex the situation we are viewing, the more value we receive from looking at it from the other side.

We gain little additional useful information by looking at a baseball from both the north and south side of it, but if we must traverse the backcountry of Yellowstone, then knowing the land from many perspectives, including birds-eye view (topographical) is quite useful. If we have viewed something from all four directions, as well as above and below, then we might say that we have a more encompassing understanding of it. Considering something from many perceptual positions contributes to such an encompassing understanding. This is a simple way of thinking about perceptual positions.

All of us use hundreds of various

perceptual positions intentionally and unconsciously every day of our lives. Some are more powerful than others in providing us with useful information. For example, when we are involved in situations that have much complexity and conflict, we tend to play out in our minds how each constituency would likely respond to certain ideas and actions. Our ability to do this gives us a fuller, a more encompassing, understanding of the whole of the situation. In fact, perceptual positions inform us; they provide us with information that allows us to arrive at a more considered position and to employ more skilled means. In this way, perceptual positions inform us toward wisdom.

There are five perceptual positions that are particularly useful in this way. Let's begin with these five basic perceptual positions: self, other, objective observer, contextual observer and personal observer.

First Position: Self

The simplest and most automatically used perceptual position is that of self. The motives of this position we call self-interest. The self's perceptual position is that of seeing through my own eyes, standing in my own

shoes, operating from my own motives, and assessing circumstances based on what they mean to me and how I am affected by them. It is in the self's position that we live most of our lives; from the self position we mentally and emotionally consider what is happening around us and more importantly, to us.

Second Position: Other

The second position is that of other. Considering ideas and actions from the perspective of other constituents is an example of using the perceptual position of other. Perhaps I have hurt someone's feelings. If I am able to be in his shoes and experience what has happened from his point of view, i.e., from his experience of the interaction, then I am employing the perceptual position of other. The other position is not, "How would I feel, what would I think, if I were him?" The other position is, "How does he feel? What does he think? How does it look from his vantage point?" Our ability to experience other is the basis of empathy, compassion, and self-sacrifice. This ability can extend beyond human compassion to compassion for other beings. The emotional basis of those who oppose hunting, for example, is found in the questions, "How would you like to be shot?" Here is an attempt to get the hunter into the skin of the hunted.

As regards face-to-face encounters, second position has a paradoxical effect. As I put myself in his shoes during an encounter, I see and hear myself relating to him. In first position I am in my own body actually seeing him. With a refined level of

skill, in the second position I am over in his body, seeing me, seeing my face and hearing my voice. Second position is not just a matter of compassion. Discussions, arguments, power conflicts and so forth – the stuff of business life – involve different substantive points of view. Our ability to get in others' shoes allows us to better understand the bases of agreement and disagreement from their points of view. In fact, the primary purpose of moving into second position is to gain information, not to achieve compassion. (Note: I must leave behind first position, step out of myself, or I contaminate second position with my own first position biases.) If I can successfully put myself in second position, my perception of situations should change dramatically. As I return to first position my behavior and manner should change, having been informed by what I learned in second position.

Third Position: Objective Observer

Third position, that of objective observer, exists above or outside of both first and second positions. From third position I am watching myself in interaction with others; I am seeing me and them involved in something together, perhaps a meeting, a sales process or maybe a performance review. I place myself as an entirely neutral observer, like the eye of a camera, so that I can notice and record what is happening. I take my perception out of my body and move it some distance from the interaction, observing the whole thing from a neutral distance. (Again, I must leave behind my biases or I have contami-

nated third position with my own first position.)

If I successfully step into third position, that of objective observer, then I'm watching a movie. I see, myself engaged with others. Now I can see the dynamics between the people, myself included, how what each says and does feeds the nature and quality of the interaction. From here, if I maintain a neutral observing stance, I can view dispassionately what is happening. Again, as I return to first position, I have gained an entirely different and additional source of valuable information. Change begins to happen, not because I invoke my will or some principle of behavior, but because I have more and fuller information. The change that I experience comes naturally to me because it is a reflection of what I now know, but didn't before.

Fourth Position: Contextual Observer

Fourth position, that of contextual observer, is outside of the first two, as is third position, but fourth position brings in a context. This is not just any two or more people randomly involved with each other, but people who have been brought together for both specific and general purposes. They know each other through some sort of context. From fourth position, I elevate my perspective to a higher plane; I examine what is happening through contextual filters. If I am looking at myself and my wife, then the higher planes (contexts) are marriage and family. If it's a work group, then the contexts are the company and business purposes, roles and responsibilities. As such, I assess my own (and our) behavior

through the multiple contexts of business purposes, goals, culture and so forth.

In third position I view myself and others from a neutral and objective camera eye position, and I only see the interaction of two people, period. From fourth position I bring in the question of how my own and our behavior is contributory or detrimental to the larger organization and the larger business purposes which we supposedly have come together to serve. We are not just two people interacting but we are two people who were brought together by a business in order to achieve business purposes. Whereas second position often brings us to rightfully and naturally respect others, fourth position often brings us to a rightful and natural consideration of broader purposes and principles, in other words, a respect for the purposeful context within which we are functioning. I consider my and our behavior from the larger picture of what brought us together. I might ask myself, "Am I building upon and contributing to those larger purposes, or am I destroying them? Is my behavior valuable when considered from these contexts or is it harmful?"

Fifth Position: Personal Observer

Fifth position is paradoxical in nature. It is both a personal, self-based view, but also has some distance to it, as do both third and fourth positions. In fifth position I continue to watch my life as in watching a movie, rather than being in my life as I am in first position. It is me watching me being involved in the content of my life; I consider myself and the content of my life, from

within my own skin and from a distance. I consider what I see from some of the higher order principles and perspectives that are important to me. It is from here that I view myself and the elements of my life (such as my marriage and family, my work, my health and recreation, my spiritual life and so forth), from the vantage point of broad personal meanings in life, and the broader roles that I play within this life that is mine. (What we refer to as mid-life crisis is a powerful fifth position shakedown. Considerations of what is ultimately meaningful come crashing in on us, often resulting a serious reordering of our lives. This happens because we have spent years pushing aside inconvenient but compelling fifth position questions.)

Fifth position is the place where I stay in contact with my deepest self, juxtaposing questions of personal meaning and value against what life offers. From fifth position I consider myself within the social order, the community, my country, my religion, my work, and all the other domains of meaning and participation that are available, not just to me, but to all of us. It is fifth position that has to do with doubt and belief, "what if" and commitment, questioning and asserting. It is here that we hold our deepest spiritual beliefs and meanings. It is here that we hold and honor our most important social and political values, as well as the broadly meaningful codes of behavior that hold the culture together. The saints live in constant touch with fifth position. The Gandhis and Mother Teresas of the world order their entire lives from fifth position considerations, and by and large they successfully bring their thoughts and

behavior into alignment with the highest order truths that they know. It is from fifth position that we consider whether we are being true to ourselves. It is here that we ask ourselves, "Is this what my life is supposed to look and feel like?" From fifth position, I check to see if my life looks and feels like an integrated whole, like something that makes personal sense to me, or at the other extreme, like a fragmented, boxy, conflicted and compromised disarray.

What is the value of being able to move fluidly between these five perceptual positions? The five positions provide rich information and begin to build an encompassing mind, a mind that takes in the whole of the situation and the whole of life, before acting. The five perceptual positions build wisdom because it's impossible to make enough rules to govern every situation; moving through these five positions gives us a much larger view. They help us to develop a living conscience, a generalizable ability, as opposed to a strictly rule-bound conscience. In fact, these five perceptual positions are central to learning a living conscience and a wise consciousness.

Let's use an easily understood homey example. Let's suppose that I fancy myself quite a cook, and one day I find myself in an argument with my wife over how she is making a salad. She chops everything up and tosses it in a bowl. I like things arranged, sliced and placed. I tell her there's no artistry to what she's doing. (This is the sort of thing that all of us get in fights over, by the way.) To the extent that we each stay in first position, to the extent that this is a running battle, and further, to the ex-

tent that it somehow represents a class of differences between us, we will have quite a hard time. It contains, in fact, the potential of producing a lot of emotional distance in our marriage.

Now let's imagine that somehow I get unstuck right in the middle of the argument, and put myself smack in her shoes. What might I see and hear? What might my insides, meaning hers, be going through? What might be motivating me (her)? Let's imagine that all of what's below is true, and that from second position I learn or discover the following:

- As I look out of her eyes and see him, I see a tightly pinched face and some gestures of irritation. I hear a loud and accusatory tone of voice. I hear someone attacking my motives: "You just chop them up because you just throw things together all the time."
- I see someone who is imposing and intrusive, trying to get me to do something in the way he says he would do it. I might notice that he is doing this even though the content of the situation is trivial.
- I see someone who attacks, then pours himself a drink and goes into the other room.
- I might even notice that he tends to be intrusive and bossy a lot in this way, always telling me how to do things and being irritated if I don't.
- He generally leaves the daily drudge of cooking to me, but when we have guests he takes over and demonstrates his skill. He "shows off" when someone's around and then ignores the more dreary stuff of routine cooking for the family.

- Although we both work full-time, I am expected to do the cooking and cleaning each night; I feel both responsible and resentful.

- I feel doubts and guilt that are hard for me to manage. I'm confused about being away from home so much; I should be a good cook and housekeeper; he's better than me. He hits me right where I'm vulnerable.

If I successfully put myself in second position, my perception of the situation changes dramatically. As I return to first position my behavior and manner should change. After all, there's a lot to apologize for; a change in tone and some apologies should open a door that could result in some mutual understanding and resolution. Let's take it further, however, and imagine that I also step into third position, that of objective observer. Now I'm watching a movie; I see the two people, myself and her, engaged in this fight with each other. Now I can see the dynamics between the two, how what each says and does feeds the downward spiral. From here, if I maintain a objective observing stance, I can view dispassionately what is happening. For one, I can see the utterly trivial nature of the surface content over which the two are fighting. Again, as I return to first position, I have gained an entirely different and additional source of valuable information.

From fourth position, this is not just any two people fighting over how to make a salad, or in general, how to prepare food. This is a married couple. I elevate my perspective to the contexts of marriage, family and parenting. I consider my and our behavior from the larger picture of

what we came together for in this marriage and family. I might ask myself, as I watch the two, "Am I building upon and contributing to our marriage and family or am I destroying them? Is my behavior valuable or is it harmful?" It's no longer just two people fighting, but rather it is two people whose behavior is considered from some shared commitments that they have made. By now it should be easy for me to see that what I am doing (fighting about making salads) is not helpful at all.

By the time I consider the fight over making salads from fifth position, if I have also gone through the other four positions, I may feel somewhat sheepish or embarrassed at some of the behavior I have displayed. Regardless, it is from fifth position that I ask myself very fundamental questions of two types: "Have I made the right choices for myself, and am I behaving in a way that is building the life I want to live?" In our example, it is from fifth position that we would ask ourselves whether or not we will maintain a commitment of marriage to this person. (This, by the way, is not a question that should be asked strictly from first position.) If the answer is yes, we further ask ourselves whether we are behaving in a way that builds the life we wish to live. It is from fifth position that I ask myself whether I am building a life that is meaningful to me.

Let's now briefly consider all the above from a business and leadership perspective. Those who behave with rare judgment share a well-developed ability to view matters at hand from at least these five distinct and clearly differentiated perspectives: self, other, objective observer,

contextual observer and personal observer. This ability may operate entirely unconsciously, but it is there. Conversely, when a leader is firmly rooted in only one of these perspectives, or vacillates between two of them, there are predictable limitations in that leader's ability.

Let's briefly touch on some extreme examples. If I am firmly rooted in first position, in a 'from the self' viewpoint, I see and act from how the world looks through my eyes only. The result is a rigid, closed, and generally authoritarian leader. If I am embedded in second position, like an empath, I tend to be rooted in how things look and feel to others, and I am overly concerned with the impact that events have on them. I have a sort of social worker's feeling of the world. If I am rooted only in third position, the camera's eye perspective, I see myself and everything else from a distance, and am emotionally disconnected from myself and others. While I may engineer things quite well, I am dissociated and tend to be distant, clinical and separate from the action (like a news reporter). If I am firmly rooted in fourth position, the contextual observer and disconnected from the other three perspectives, I tend to be an ideologue about certain things, demanding rigid adherence to contextual requirements, and ignoring the importance of other competing contexts. An example might be a boss who sees everything through the context of the business and job, demanding that employees subordinate everything else in their lives. If I am stuck in fifth position, and disconnected from the other four, I am head-in-the-clouds, grandiose in my thinking, generally nar-

cissistic, and with enormous blind spots. These last are often quite dangerous leaders, such as those prone to political and religious excesses, for example, Sadaam Hussein or Osama Bin Laden.

One with rare insight and judgment (wisdom), consciously or unconsciously, fluidly shifts through all these perceptual positions. In doing so he or she gathers and integrates the information that each perspective provides. The person's talk and action then reflect the holistic judgment, the encompassing mind, that is arrived at by considering matters at hand in such a broad and complete way. A lifetime of viewing matters from such varied perspectives builds up an experiential warehouse of information and decision-making that is drawn upon and applied in each new situation.

These five perspectives are the most basic ones, we could say the generic ones, but not the only ones. Obviously there are thousands of more refined and specific perspectives contained in the fourth and fifth positions that can be applied as needed in various circumstances. Within the fourth position there are many important contexts to consider: marriage and family, work, play, health, finances, politics – the list goes on. Finally, it is at the level of fifth position that we must consider these side by side, tested against our criteria for their relative value within our lives.

The five perceptual positions are fairly simple and easy to understand, and the practice of these perspectives yields immediately useful results. Practicing the five perspectives mentioned above is a distinct and learn-

able technique, although hard to master. The purpose of the five perspectives is to bring in more and higher quality information, to try to arrive at the totality of the situation.

These five perspectives deeply influence how we understand and assess the content of our lives. It is well known and accepted that whether we gain in wisdom is not a function of what happens to us; it is more a question of how what happens is experienced, understood, acted upon and integrated. The five perceptual positions are ways of understanding and acting on life's events in the deepest and broadest ways.