

**THURSDAY'S ARTICLE: Headhunting**

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<p><b>Search</b></p> <p>Keywords:</p> <div style="border: 1px solid gray; padding: 2px; width: 50px; display: inline-block;">Search</div> <p><b>Polls</b></p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>Innovation</b> Do you consider your company to be an innovative company?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="radio"/> No</p> <div style="border: 1px solid gray; padding: 2px; width: 40px; display: inline-block;">Vote</div>	<p>Perceptions play an important role and can have a positive and often creative impact in our lives. It gives structure to our thoughts, opinions and experiences but we constantly need to be aware of how it shapes or hinders our personal growth. The danger of mistaken beliefs is that it limits our self-image and self-value and becomes a script that prevents us from attaining our goals.</p> <p>An example of the impact of an unfounded perception (in this case, the assumption that physically disabled people are "slower" or less intelligent) is confirmed in an online discussion forum where the following question was asked: "When have you dealt with the reality of how people perceive you due to your disability?" One user expresses his frustration with how he is being treated and ends his posting with the following words: "Why don't people just listen before they make up their minds either way. I suppose I am just sick to the stomach of fighting ignorance."</p> <p>In a country as diverse as South Africa, disability is just one of the areas where perceptions can distort personal and professional relationships. Any manager of a diverse group of people would appreciate the potential for misunderstandings between people from different cultures, gender and age groups. The reality is that a lot of these situations can be avoided if "people just listen before they make up their minds."</p> <p>Perceptions are shaped by one's background, culture, world view and self-image, and are reinforced by personal experiences. It is a common psychological phenomenon that people are drawn towards other people and situations that confirm their perceptions, thereby strengthening it and making it very difficult to question and revise these beliefs. Training programmes and transformation processes frequently fail because they only address the symptoms that manifest as a result of underlying perceptions, and not the perceptions themselves.</p> <p>It is difficult to underestimate the impact of perceptions – they are powerful forces that drive our actions and behaviour. In reality, they often fulfil negative and unproductive roles in our relationships, especially when they are incorrect or go unchecked. Categorising people based on false perceptions limits their potential as well as your own. These perceptions influence not only your ideas about others and their abilities, but also how you think others see you. For example, if it is your perception that your colleagues view you as unfriendly, you may start behaving accordingly. This happens because you</p>	

start believing that nothing you do would change their perception anyway. Exactly the same principle applies, for example, with regard to the differences between cultures and gender – a sure recipe for misunderstandings and conflict! Finally, perceptions can be a dangerous basis for self-value since they are formed by people, situations and experiences outside of ourselves. These are not necessarily aligned with the personal values that a specific person would like to ascribe to.

Since perceptions are shaped and reinforced over a long time, they are deeply entrenched in our lives. They therefore cannot be changed instantly, but rather through a gradual process over time. Such a process has to take place in a safe environment and needs to include the following steps:

- **Motivation:** Why do you need to look at your own perceptions? It is important to understand that possible changes are not primarily for the benefit of others, but for yourself;
- **Awareness:** How do you view your colleagues, your manager and yourself? How does that impact on your interaction with them and on your self-image?
- **Understanding:** What are the things that shaped your perceptions and why did you form them? How did your perceptions help or hinder you in the past?
- **Conversations:** Create a safe environment where different people can talk about their perceptions without the risk of being judged for their honesty;
- **Listening:** Provide an opportunity to really listen to one another without filtering what you hear through preconceived ideas;
- **Experience:** Perceptions are often based on what people hear or believe without any experience to back it. The facilitation of fresh experiences can be a very powerful tool to get people to think about the need to revise their ideas.

It is of critical importance to create the right environment where people can feel safe to deal with these issues. Respect, honesty and sensitivity are at the core of such a process. Without these values it is very difficult for people to trust one another enough to engage in conversations and experiences where perceptions can be openly discussed. Trusting relationships cannot be forced to develop in a limited period of time such as one- or two-day workshops. Rather, they need to take root over time and through sustained interaction.

In the context of diversity management it is important to determine the extent to which programmes address the issue of perceptions in a constructive manner. The steps described above can be useful guidelines to help with the assessment of products offered by different providers.

There is no quick fix for getting people to change their perceptions. But once it starts happening, it can impact profoundly throughout the entire business. From customer service and job performance to HR issues, team efforts, and business ethics – all of these areas stand to benefit from taking a good look at the perceptions of the people involved

**Carel Wandrag heads up Cross Cultural Conversations**  
[www.crossculturalconversations.co.za](http://www.crossculturalconversations.co.za)

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