



## **Overcoming Negative Impressions**

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### **Instructions**

Please download and read the text and complete the prepared test questions at the end. Reading the text and taking the test must take 1 hour in order to receive 1 clock hour credit. Please print out the finished test and payment method (the last two pages) and mail to Lakeshore Educational & Counseling Services. Once received, Lakeshore will grade the test and if passed, Lakeshore will e-mail you a certificate. The cost for one CEU is \$15.00. Tests will not be graded until payment is received.

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Thank you for your participation.

## Introduction

When someone has a poor impression of you the damage can quickly spread. Whether it's due to a misunderstanding or legitimate offense, it's important to address negative impressions before they affect your reputation, quality of care, and future relationships. Sometimes all it takes is a conversation to resolve issues. But, it's not always possible to sway someone's opinion and that case you need a game plan in how to respond. This course will explore how to gather feedback, assess perceptions, and communicate professionally.

## Educational Objectives

After taking this course, participants will learn how to:

1. Raise awareness of perceptions and how they're formed.
2. Respond to negative feedback without becoming defensive.
3. Investigate and promote strengths to repair a damaged reputation.

## Let's Get Started!

### My Mind is Made Up!

As a professional, you do all you can to make a good impression. But, what do you do when people have formed an unflattering opinion of you, either based on something you did or based on what others have said? The natural reaction is to dispute the unwanted perceptions by telling the people holding them that they're wrong. As you can imagine, most people don't like to be told they're wrong. In fact, they find it insulting. Since no one wants to appear stupid, any time a person is told he's wrong, he will counter attack by looking for more evidence to prove that he's right. So, disputing perceptions only serves to make people dig deeper into their assumptions, not change them.

Here's the reality check: *you can't change a made up mind*. Don't waste your time or energy. Accepting this fact can be hard, especially when you feel strongly that the person has the wrong idea about you. That may be true from your perspective, but it still won't change someone else's opinion. This doesn't mean you should throw your hands up in despair and assume you're stuck with an unwanted label that you can never shake, so why bother? What it does mean is that you need to go in another direction other than fighting a losing battle.

You'll always have that annoying nemesis who brings up the *one* time you made a big mistake. (Sometimes you're even related to that person!) He loves to repeat the story and tends to do it in front of an audience, "Hey, remember the time that you..." (Can you feel yourself cringing and getting mad already?) You do yourself no favors by getting angry. Resist the urge to "give in" and adopt the label you've been given by exhibiting more of the same behaviors. If it's not how you want to be known, you certainly don't want to offer more evidence that supports it.

Before you choose an alternative approach, you first need to assess the firmness of the person's perceptions. If they're still fresh and in the forming stages, nothing is set in stone. When you can't change what's there, you can add to it (in a flattering way), create a new non-competing message, or find a new audience with an open mind.

### **Perception is Reality**

Perception is the way a person thinks about or understands something. It's not about facts, but how you explain them. Therefore, a group of people could experience the same event and each person could have a completely different perception of what happened. It's amazing that we can communicate with one another at all! Whatever you perceive to be true is true for you. That's why your perception is your reality. Once you see a situation or person a certain way, you naturally look for evidence to support your story, and deny or ignore anything else to the contrary. Several factors influence perception including:

- Prior knowledge and experience
- Education
- Age
- Culture
- Gender
- Location
- Socio-economic status
- Mood
- Environment and other people present

Perception is like a pair of glasses that you put on each morning that filters how you will interpret and give meaning to events. And, every person is wearing a different pair of glasses.

### **Windows of Opportunity**

In challenging perceptions, timing matters. If you did something to create a bad impression, but you sincerely apologized immediately, and corrected your behavior, there's a good chance that over time you could turn the negative into a positive. Catching a bad impression before it has a chance to be repeated through gossip or social media is key. The more the story is repeated, the more concrete the impression. It becomes harder to consider other explanations for the same set of circumstances.

If you're guilty of making an embarrassing error, you may want to scream, "That's not me! I'm not normally like that!" The truth is, it was you at that moment and you can't deny that you're capable of behaving poorly. It's better to acknowledge your mistake than to expect people to forget it based on your previous track record. You'll stand a much better chance of turning around a potentially bad situation.

There are other cases where perceptions are set, and right or wrong, it's better to move in another direction. For example, childhood labels, repeated for years are tough to shake. You're not going to convince people you *weren't* something years later, so it's better to accept that their description is true for them and go about creating new perceptions.

### **Variations Of the Truth**

Before you can alter the way you're perceived, you first you need to acknowledge your current reputation. In a way, you need to start backwards. Instead of focusing on how you want to be known and convincing others of the same image, you need to start with how you're already known. It's harder to change minds than to work with what's already in place.

Step back and take a good, honest look at the big picture from the other person's point of view. You'll see that your actions are not the only ones that matter, but also how you stack up compared to other people. While it would be nice to be judged independent of other factors, that's not how the mind works. You have to consider the context in which your actions are being assessed. When it comes to perception management, majority opinion rules. If you ask ten people how they view your work ethic, and nine of them call you lazy – you're lazy in their eyes, no matter how hard you feel you work.

The next bit of homework is to understand why people perceive you the way they do. The only way to find out is to ask! You need to know specifically what you did or said that formed their impressions. Resist the temptation to correct people's impressions or explain what you meant. If you're going to ask, then *listen*. Afterwards, thank people for their honesty and let them know it's important to understand how they perceive you, especially if it's different than you intended.

### **Carving Out Your Niche**

Choosing the direction to go in next takes some thought. Here's where you need to assess your strengths, competition, and opportunities. What strengths do you possess that will make you shine? Will you be competing with anyone else to own your desired reputation? If so, how are you different? Rather than go head-to-head with someone else, you'll be more successful finding an area in which you can be unique. Finally, are there opportunities for you to demonstrate and receive recognition for your strengths? If you determine that people have positioned you in such a negative light that they're unwilling to see anything different, it may be time to cut ties in search of a new "audience." But, don't make this move until you've done all the pre-work! Otherwise, the same thing may happen to you again.

The classic example of carving out your own niche is a child with several siblings. Each kid strives to be his own person. Parents naturally compare, and sometimes siblings compete with one another for attention or accolades. Ultimately, each child finds his own place within the family system by being different, even though some family members still will use outdated labels. Some children will find their unique identity outside the family system, amongst friends, school, or work where they feel more accepted.

## Agree to Agree

As stated earlier, when you've been pigeonholed into an undesirable position, the natural instinct is to become defensive and fight back with statements like, "I am *not!*" Unfortunately, this retort has never changed anyone's mind. It usually has the opposite effect by convincing the other person he's right (otherwise, why would you be so defensive?). So, the first step is to find an area of agreement before transitioning into new territory. In other words, you're going to have to agree with something the person already thinks about you, because you're not going to convince him of anything else. When you've built that mutual foundation, then you can attempt to go in a new direction.

Right now, you're probably thinking, "But he's *wrong!* Why would I agree with him?" Be honest here. Is everything he's saying wrong? Was there a time when any portion of his perception was fairly accurate? Did you ever demonstrate certain behaviors that could have been interpreted negatively? It's not that you're supposed to agree with inaccurate or derogatory statements. Nor do you have to agree with everything the person says, only the portion that you honestly can. Think of a Venn diagram with two circles holding a set of facts, and they overlap each other with shared facts. The overlap may be small, but that's what you want to focus on.

Repositioning yourself is humbling, hard work. Perhaps in the past, you behaved in ways you regret. But, now you've changed and you want others to accept you for who you are today. If only it were that easy! The reality is that new ideas are learned within the context of current knowledge. It's not possible to wipe the slate clean and forget everything that occurred in the past. You have to acknowledge what's already there in order to have a chance to rebuild.

## How to Say It

Let's say that you've always been even-tempered, but one day in a work meeting, you blew up. From that point on, one influential person has consistently referred to you as a "hot head." Not only do you despise the label; it's hurting your reputation. Here's how you might *sincerely* agree (no sarcasm) first before repositioning yourself:

*"You're right. I did lose my temper in that one meeting. I realized I didn't speak up early enough like I had in all our past encounters. So, I agree with you that when I went against my instincts, it was a bad choice. I can understand why that day stood out to you as it was so different from my normal demeanor."*

As you can see with this example, you're not agreeing with anything that's not true. By agreeing versus defending, you relieve the person of having to repeat the negative label because you're not offering resistance.

## **Be First**

When you're trying to shake a negative label, a common response is to put your nose to the grindstone and just work harder than everyone else in hopes that your efforts will be recognized. While it's a good idea to make sure you're not doing anything detrimental, just working harder will *not* get you ahead of those who are already doing so. The key is to work harder on the right things, which is also known as working smarter. So, instead of trying to do the same thing as everyone else, only better, it's smarter to carve out a new reputation by being first in something.

### **Who's On First?**

What do you know about these people: Bert Hinkler, John Landy, and Buzz Aldrin? They all have something in common – they came in second. Do any of these names sound familiar? Charles Lindbergh was the first person to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean (Bert Hinkler was second). Roger Bannister was the first person to run a mile in under four minutes (John Landy was second). Neil Armstrong was the first man to walk on the moon (Buzz Aldrin was second). George Washington was the first U.S. president – who was the second?

Marketing gurus Al Ries and Jack Trout state in their classic book, *Positioning*, “The hard way to get into a person’s mind is second. Second is nowhere.” That’s why it’s more advantageous to be first than it is to be better. Obviously you want your “first” to be something positive! There are plenty of negative firsts that stick in people’s minds. How do you go about finding something to be first in? Start with unmet needs. Thousands of new products are launched everyday. Some are copycats, some are extensions of an already successful brand, but many are the answers to problems or complaints.

Assess your situation, environment, and the people involved. Search for opportunities to be the first to resolve a common problem. If everyone is trying to solve that common problem, focus on a smaller piece of it or another issue entirely. Evaluate the goals that everyone is competing to achieve and set different ones where it’s more likely you can be the first. Second place is forgettable, first is memorable.

### **Own Your Category**

When you can't be first in your current environment, change the category. For example, Amelia Earhart wasn't the first person to fly solo across the Atlantic. Charles Lindbergh already had a hold on that title. Earhart wasn't even the second person to do so; she was third. Why do you know her name? She was the first woman. Product marketers use this philosophy all the time when they can't win a category – they just create a new one. Hence, there are regular and diet sodas, luxury and economy cars, whitening or cavity prevention toothpastes, etc.

## You Can't Please Everyone

To find a category in which you can excel and therefore build a new reputation, you need to either think much smaller or more expansively. Since you can't be all things to all people, trying to please everyone will only dilute your image. Therefore, sometimes having a narrow, deep focus is a benefit. As long as you choose a category that highlights your strengths, you'll never be limited. Alternately, you may need to find a new category by expanding your horizons. If people or your current environment provides no room for you to go in a new direction, then it's time to find new territory.

It can be scary to either narrow or expand your focus. It seems easier and safer to stick with what you know, even if it's not working. Just remember, you can't change a made up mind. So, the riskiest option is to keep doing the same thing while you wait for other people to change.

## Build on Your Strengths

When rebuilding your reputation, make sure it's on the foundation of your strengths. In their book, *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, authors Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton define strengths as, "Consistent near perfect performance in an activity." Every single person has strengths, which are innate talents rather than competencies that you've acquired through practice. According to their research, strengths consist of three factors:

- *Talents*. These are your naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behaviors that have been present all your life.
- *Knowledge*. The sum of facts and lessons you've learned and apply to your talent.
- *Skills*. The steps of completing an activity within your talents. These can be improved through feedback, practice, and opportunity.

Developed strengths are your natural inclinations that have been improved with hard work and effort. You have the desire to improve because deep down, you know you're capable.

## Why It's Easy to Overlook Strengths

There are many reasons why people have yet to recognize or appreciate their strengths. First, you may not have had the right environment to develop your raw talents. It can come down to timing, money, location, and meeting the right people. So, strengths can take years to emerge even though the raw talent has always been present.

People often underplay their strengths because they don't appreciate them as anything special. Since they're based on talents that come easily to you, it's incorrectly assumed that everyone can do it. This false belief sends people in the wrong direction, focusing on becoming "well-rounded" in a general sense, but outstanding in nothing. Just because you can learn to be competent at several things doesn't mean that's what you should be doing. You will never shine next to someone who

is naturally gifted and passionate where you're merely competent. The only way to stand out is to recognize and invest in your own talents, and then capitalize on them.

### **Talent Quest**

Hopefully, you're already aware of your talents and have developed them into reliable, predictable strengths. If you're still not sure what your dominant talents might be (or, if you're still not convinced that you have any talents) use these questions to help unveil the real you:

- What activities can you pick up quickly after being shown just a few times?
- What activities have you taught yourself how to do out of curiosity?
- What activities are easy for you to skip steps or improvise because you can "see" or understand where it's going?
- What activities absorb your attention to the point of losing track of time?
- What activities do you find energizing?
- What seems to come easily to you, but not always to others?
- What have others consistently told you that you're good at doing?

If these questions still don't spark a theme for you, then think about your younger self. What did you used to love to do as a child? How would you spend your free time if you could do anything? What made you different from other kids? How did you decorate your room? What were your hobbies?

Another way to learn about your talents is to pay attention to daily activities and energy levels. Each day, document your activities and how much you like or dislike them. Liking an activity means that it's enjoyable and you can imagine yourself doing it for the rest of your life. You feel inspired and energized when engaged in the activity and even dream about doing it when you're involved in something less enjoyable. Anything else you do that's merely "okay" or neutral goes on the "no" list. Note anything that you dread doing because it's draining, so you procrastinate. These activities definitely don't expose your dominant talents, even if you're competent at doing them.

Keep trying different activities until you start to figure out what resonates. This might mean you try new things that you've never done before. It's better to be a late bloomer than to never bloom at all!

### **Manage Your Weakness**

One of the reasons people get distracted from recognizing their strengths is because they've grown up with the belief that it's best to concentrate on improving "weaknesses." So, if you're excellent in analysis, but not so great at public speaking, it's often suggested that it's better to spend your time improving your presentation skills. But, the reality is, you'll never be outstanding at public speaking if it's not your talent, no matter how hard you try. You can improve for sure, but you won't shine. On the other hand, if you love analysis, pick it up quickly, and would be energized

by learning more, attending a workshop on improving analytical skills would give you the knowledge to develop your strength. (And, you'd love it, not dread it!)

Authors Buckingham and Clifton describe a weakness as anything that prevents you from using your strengths. In this definition, a weakness is not necessarily something you're supposed to spend years conquering and studying so you can compete on the same level as someone who owns the same characteristic as a strength. You just need to address these areas enough so that they don't block you from fully using your strengths. Efforts are so misguided in the area of weaknesses that there's a good chance your image flub happened because you were trying to be something you're not. The only correction to make is to focus on strengths and merely manage weaknesses.

### **Areas of Opportunity**

Every work performance review includes "areas of opportunity." That's code for: here's what you don't do very well. Most likely, these are your weaknesses. Employees are told that working on weaknesses is an opportunity for growth. Don't be fooled! Accept that your growth will be limited. Your true areas of growth are your strengths because they're based on your innate talents, where there are endless opportunities (and motivation) to learn. This doesn't mean you should totally ignore your weaknesses. If they distract others from recognizing your strengths, do what you have to in order to minimize them. But, don't expect to excel in areas that are not your strengths. Put more of your energy into improving strengths and some of your "weaknesses" will dissipate.

### **Change Hearts, Not Minds**

Facts are not persuasive without an emotional connection. If your goal is to change your public image or someone's perception of who you are, you have to believe it yourself first. A campaign based on examples of why you're *not* who people think you are will fall on deaf ears. If you're angry about being misunderstood or fearful of recognizing your strengths, then you'll block everyone else from connecting with your desired message. What opens the door of possibility is passion. It's contagious!

Your passion must be authentic and based on growing your strengths. When you're excited about things you're learning and applying you naturally have positive stories to share. Your enthusiasm will effortlessly blossom from the inside out. This is very different from trying to "prove" to people who you are versus living life in a way that they can't help but notice. You'll be far more convincing as the best version of you.

Focus on your emotions when engaged in activities that use your strengths. You should feel energized, inspired, and excited. Even if you're only able to explore your strengths on the weekends or through hobbies, it's a start that will soon overflow into the rest of your life. Your confidence will grow by being proactive versus reactive. In the end, if you can't change your image with the current people in your life, you will soon attract others who are open to the message you're living.

## **In Conclusion**

Negative impressions can damage your reputation, quality of care, and future relationships. That's why it's important to gather feedback and respond professionally. You can't control what others think of you, but you do control what you show them and how you communicate. It can be difficult to acknowledge negative impressions others may have of you – especially when you think they're wrong. But, denial never changed anybody's mind. You may not be able to turn around every bad impression, but you can certainly improve your reputation by focusing on building and promoting your strengths.

**TEST**

**Overcoming Negative Impressions**

Complete the test below and follow the instructions provided on page 1 to receive your certificate. Remember to include the Payment Method form when you mail the test in. Please complete the information below to serve as the sign in form. Please PRINT clearly.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: (            ) \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail Address: \_\_\_\_\_

**Circle the correct answer:**

1. Perceptions can be influenced by:
  - a) Mood, environment, prior knowledge and experiences.
  - b) Education, gender, age, and culture.
  - c) All of the above.
  
2. It's possible to change a negative impression by:
  - a) Addressing it quickly and apologizing if appropriate.
  - b) Explaining to people why their impressions are wrong.
  - c) Ignoring it.
  
3. If someone refuses to change a negative impression, it's best to:
  - a) Give them positive examples of your past.
  - b) Build your reputation in a new category based on unique talents.
  - c) Work harder than everyone else.
  
4. "Agree to agree" means:
  - a) Convincing other people to say "yes."
  - b) Agreeing with everything other people say to avoid conflict.
  - c) Agreeing with truthful statements to build common ground.
  
5. A good way to avoid making future social errors is by perfecting weaknesses.
  - a) T
  - b) F

I read and completed the test questions for 1 hour of credit.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

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