

Perceptual Positions for Communications By Scott Arbuthnot (edited by Peter Howie)

When was the last time you contributed to a discussion and you just weren't heard? How many times have you noticed people talking at each other without ever really hearing each other? Demanding they be listened to without really listening and really hearing the other person except to bolster their own argument or position?

It happens all too frequently. It's no wonder poor communication is one of the greatest ills of modern organisational and family life. This column introduces an elegant and respectful set of tools to improve your interpersonal communications skills.

Your reference point, or the mental position from which you perceive things, is a powerful influence over your ability to understand others. The mental position from which you perceive things is also an indication of your intention to understand others. Your perceptual positions are the mental reference points from which you collect and test information, infer meaning and relate to what you experience. You already unconsciously use the 3 perceptual positions. Becoming aware of how you use these perceptual positions puts you more in charge of how you deal with the world.

If you think taking different perceptual position is a strange thing please consider these regular uses we all make of different perceptual positioning. Considering the future, the present and the past are three very different ways of perceiving and thinking about life. We are all able to do this with ease. There are numerous examples of where we are able consciously to change our stance, our ways of seeing the world. These next ones are to do with communication and how we interact.

1st Position. I and Me

The self-absorbed position. All your energy and attention is focused on yourself in 1st position. You collect information from yourself and generally about yourself in 1st position. All external stimuli are referred to yourself to determine how you are feeling and what your needs and judgments are. You are completely absorbed by how you are experiencing the world. In 1st position you almost don't notice there are other people attempting to interact with you.

Its as if what you are thinking, experiencing or preparing to say is far more important than any external stimuli, such as another person, could possibly be. "Just wait until they hear what I have to say!" From 1st position you might say, "Outside stimuli will only get my attention if it's obviously about ME. Just someone ask something about me." Someone feeling threatened or insecure and unsafe will most often unconsciously and instantaneously shift their reference to 1st position to make fight or flight or other decisions. Negative emotional states take us back into 1st position where we cannot notice or care easily about the needs of others.

If another person says, "I didn't sleep well last night", a basic 1st position response is "I slept well" or "let me tell you about how badly I slept". The person making this 1st position response will probably not even

remember the other's statement. In a formal meeting a participant in 1st position will be aware of how they are feeling and what they are wanting to say and achieve. Some dysfunctional meetings both in organisations and families are a series of 1st position statements where participants take turns to state their views without hearing other views or constructively engaging other people in conversation. It is like people speaking into the centre of the meeting and it all gets lost in a black hole – nothing comes back.

End of the day conversations in families often suffer from overuse of this perceptual position. Both parties begin in a positive frame and ready to chat about their day and unfortunately when both want this there is no one to actually listen. Damn!

2nd Position. You

The aware-of-others position. Taking 2nd position adds an awareness of others. You can now notice how other people are behaving, using their dialogue, voice tonality and non-verbal expression. This new information helps you sense peoples' intentions, moods and feelings. At this point this sensing is still unchecked and must be held with some tentativeness.

Empathy begins to be possible from 2nd position. Empathising with others is a wonderful support to your understanding their communications. Listening to people from 2nd position includes your intention to understand THEM. Some basic internal- questions from 2nd position are, "How are you?" and "What do you mean?" Someone who is able to constructively add to another's statement or accurately perceive physical and emotional states is probably in 2nd position.

Parents and carers of infants are often in 2nd position for long periods as they pay attention to the needs of the infant, interpreting their non-verbal cues and verbalised noises. Being in 2nd position does not mean you have to disassociate yourself or prohibit your simultaneous use of the 1st position. Parents and carers do well to remain aware of their own needs as well as their infant's.

If another person says, "I didn't sleep well last night" a basic 2nd position response is "I imagine that you feel quite tired now". The person receiving this 2nd position response will probably feel heard and understood. The person making this 2nd position response will probably remember the other's condition. 2nd perceptual position is of most value when it is acted upon in the form of checking of assumptions. It is of even more value when your assumptions are confirmed or otherwise if you are able to take your assumptions to the next level. Such as, with the above conversation: "You must be looking forward to a very difficult day ahead of you?" This lets the other person get to know that you are not only perceiving accurately but are actually considering them and their situation in a real manner. It is this aspect of 2nd perceptual position that is so potent as a relationship building process.

In a formal meeting or group discussion the person in 2nd position will be aware of themselves AND how other people are behaving, looking, sounding and what they might be wanting to achieve. Being in 2nd position means you are seeking to understand other people. It also means that you are able to take them into account in the moment and consider their thinking, feeling and actions in such a way that they make sense. If they don't make sense then enquiry is needed.

A 2nd position report is often based on observed evidence, offers an inferred meaning and asks a question seeking clarification of meaning from the other party. A constructive 2nd position report and question to another participant in a discussion might be, "You physically straightened up and nodded a lot while the last point was made. Is there something you'd like to say or add to what was said?"

In family situations, especially where parties have known one another over many years, the possibility to really do this well, is enhanced. However the reluctance to do it is also enhanced. Which is why family members can often have types of conversations with strangers and colleagues that they are almost unable to have with other family members. However the pay off of one party doing 2nd perceptual position with the other person, even when the other party is discussing them and their behaviour, has payoffs that can last for years. Few people experience deep intimacy on a regular basis. Doing 2nd perceptual position is one structure form that enables a deep intimacy to develop. By its nature it presents a support and bolstering of the other person. Remember, that doing 2nd perceptual position does not mean agreement with the other's argument or position. It means that you have seen it and heard it and understood it from their point of view. Understanding another, by its very nature, will change your thinking about them.

3rd Position. We and Us

The aware-of-context position. This is a fly-on-the-wall reference point from where you can see yourself, the people you are interacting with and the dynamic nature of the relationships between you and others. You are aware of the communications context your relationships create.

From 3rd position you are not just aware of what is being said, you also notice HOW it is being said within the larger context of what's happening around you. A basic internal-question from 3rd position is, "How are we relating?"

You can see yourself from outside yourself from 3rd position. When you take this view with reduced 1st and 2nd position awareness you suspend judgment and feelings about your participation in the relationship. Your 3rd position reference might show how your or someone else's participation is destructive to the relationship and, instead of judging this as bad or wrong, you simply become aware of the changing relationship of the parties you're observing. Even though you are one of the parties, you can partly remove yourself from the situation imaginatively when using 3rd position. Rather than only grasping at your position, you are grasping your position and that of the other parties.

A person in 3rd position during a formal meeting or discussion will be aware of themselves, aware of others AND how the group is interacting and relating. The person in 3rd position will notice group dynamics, group energy and participation levels and patterns.

If another person says, "I didn't sleep well last night" a basic 3rd position response is "We seem to be working together OK even though you might be tired". The person making this 3rd position response will probably continue to monitor the working relationship and how the possible influence of fatigue can be compensated for.

A constructive 3rd position report and question to a meeting might be, "We seem to be energetic and noisy as a group and there are a few of us who don't appear to be being heard through the noise. How can we operate better as a group?"

In an informal or family type situation we might notice that the discussion does not seem to be progressing or maybe is heating up more than required. We might say: "Well we seem to be going around in circles and this seems to be making us quite emotional."

A very useful way of communicating using 3rd perceptual position is through metaphor. A metaphor can capture a great deal of data into a usable form to communicate what is being seen or experienced. Statement like "Stuck in the mid" or "going round in circles" are all metaphorical ways to present a 3rd perceptual position.

Examples Of Using Perceptual Positions

Business meetings and discussions will generally benefit from a greater complimentary use of 2nd and 3rd positions. People repeatedly arguing their own point of view and simply not hearing other views are often stuck in 1st position. You can help them shift into 2nd position so they can begin to notice other views by:

- 1) reducing or removing any perceived threats
- 2) taking your own 2nd position and making sure they feel heard
- 3) asking them to elaborate on someone else's view without judgment. You are really asking them to speak from the other person's point of view without judging if they right, wrong or in agreement.

Giving people positive and constructive feedback is best done from 2nd position. Begin with a 2nd position report and add evidence to your positive feedback and seek clarification for constructive feedback.

Note this style of feedback does not include instruction. Respectful feedback is based on evidence about past events and is not a set of commands about future events. Combining these feedback ideas can sound like, "You made your point very clearly and asked if everyone understood. This really helped the meeting get started. Thank you. You then interrupted two of the people who tried to make alternative points. I imagine you felt criticized by the response. Is that correct? How do you suggest we make sure these views are heard?"

No matter what your background or current roles may be, perceptual positions are some of the most powerful and inherently respectful interpersonal communications tools.

Start with noticing the perceptual positions you're already using and build your confidence to deliberately assume the optimum positions for specific circumstances. Your use of these tools may not be seamless and glamorous to begin with but, as your skills build, you will soon add enormous value to your own and other peoples' communications.

Fluidity between perceptual positions

The main value of perceptual positions is how they are used in interactions. Shifting your perceptual position within yourself is a start. It is the fluidity that is important for a leader.

Moving from 1st to 3rd can free up some thinking space to consider how the group is functioning. Moving from 1st to 2nd can allow you to see another's view point and develop some compassion or understanding for their arguments or responses. However you need to develop actions and behaviours that make use of what you perceive.

Valences or preferences in perceptual positions

Most people have a preferred perceptual position both in how they think internally and how they act and this has a lot to do with their comfort zone. Which is another way of saying – they have a habit of mind. A person with a preference for 1st perceptual position will be most comfortable in presenting themselves, their ideas and why the world works best when it works their way. A person with a preference for 2nd will be most comfortable to have others talking about themselves and getting to understand others. A person with a preference for 3rd will be most comfortable talking about the system or situation and the people in it. A leader needs to be able to act and use all three positions because there will be times when they are needed which means stepping beyond their comfort zone.