

The Reality of Perception

What's the problem, and who cares?

by Capt Benjamin A. Skarzynski

Mismanaged perception can derail unit effectiveness. Controlling for all other factors, if two platoons are given the same task, but one perceives it negatively and one positively embraces it, the product will be significantly different—it could mean varying levels of success, even life or death. As leaders, we are obliged to study and better ourselves. Perception of the task or attitude of the command has a disproportionate impact on effectiveness. Leaders are the windows of perception as command flows down and control up. The ability of leadership to decipher perception, how perceptions are formed, why they exist, and how to mitigate negative effects, will increase effectiveness. What is the difference between a good leader

>Capt Skarzynski is the XO, Weapons Company, 2d Bn, 2d Marines.

and a bad leader in terms of how you are perceived? With a good leader, you want to do the things he tells you. With a bad leader, you resent him for the things he makes you do.

Although the issue of perception spans all levels of command, I will focus on company-level leadership and below. Drawing from psychology and business, as well as Marine Corps doctrine, I seek to identify and define the issue to leaders, discuss existing leadership strategies, apply strategies of interaction

and persuasion, and provide practical suggestions. Mitigating negative perceptions across, between, and among your unit will increase individual and unit satisfaction and pride, which will ultimately reflect in performance.

Perception

Every level of command has an opinion and perspective of those above and below it. As you experience friction and things invariably go wrong, you find ways to rationalize whose fault it is or who should have done something different. If higher headquarters had only planned better, they would have foreseen this problem, and we wouldn't be waiting here. If those Marines had only done their job, they never would have allowed this to happen.

The human mind can rationalize anything. When faced with issues, the primary outlet is to focus on an external source. To leadership at every level, perception *is* reality. What your commanding officer and Marines think of you *is* who you are to them. It is how you are evaluated and how you receive tasking and treatment. You cannot stop perception; you can only shape it.

What is perception? We receive stimuli from the world around us through our senses. This raw information forms our perception of the world. It is influenced by several factors: social norms, customs, past experiences, and personal biases. Applied to leadership, perception is how you view your role and tasks. Your immediate thought when you receive a task, or think of the logistics shop, is telling of your perception. Ok, so who cares, and what does this have to do with leadership? Human beings



If things go wrong or you experience friction, the first reaction will be to rationalize whose fault is it, what went wrong, and why. (Photo by Sgt Rebecca Floto.)

are fundamentally biased—nothing is perceived without the filter of your perception. Marines especially tend to be strong-willed individuals. This makes us prone to some traditional biases in perception.

Without being unnecessarily scientific, fundamental attribution error¹ is the tendency to focus on internal as opposed to external factors to explain behavior: “the Marines in the admin shop are stupid, and that is why they messed my package up. That’s their only job!” as opposed to, “They process hundreds of items each day, and the information that I gave them was incomplete.” In self-serving bias,² individuals associate success with internal factors and failure with external factors. Think about your immediate reaction to feedback and evaluations. Do you immediately attempt to explain your faults or do you think of ways to correct them?

This is not to say that all Marines are blindly arrogant and egotistical but consider our inclination to biases in perception. Even as an introspective person, it takes conscious self-thought to consider my biases in perception. I know that I have personally experienced both of these biases in my perception. This feeds an adversarial climate and reduces efficiency. If I think that the logistics shop is inadequate and equate success to myself, I am less likely to enlist their help. Not only do I lose capability, but I open myself to increased friction. Take that a step further to consider the potential effect on perception and command climate. If I think like that, it probably exists across the battalion staff. An infantry battalion is functionally organized to provide capabilities. To intentionally shut out functional areas limits our combined capabilities, either as a MAGTF or battalion, all because of biases in perception.

Ownership

According to leadership principles, we should all seek responsibility and take responsibility for our actions. To foster a cohesive unit and positive command climate, ownership must be broadly applied. When a command decision is issued, it is owned by all Marines in that command. It is the

subordinate leader’s imperative to ensure his Marines understand the decision, and to vest interest and responsibility. This increases ownership by subordinate leaders.

Under high stress and operational tempo, perception becomes disproportionately important to effectiveness. Undermanned, overtasked, and faced with the loss of several key leaders in the triangle of death in Iraq in 2005–06, members of one of the most elite Army units, the 101st Airborne Division, committed unspeakable atrocities by raping a young girl and murdering her and her family. Pervasive throughout the personal accounts in the book is the issue of

your perspective and set the tone for those you lead.

Negotiation

Perception is largely transferred through the chain of command in the form of orders, direction, and guidance. How you perceive your task and your company commander depends, in large part, on how he interacts with you. The same applies to the Marines under your charge; the manner in which we interact with Marines matters. You can convey the same content several different ways and elicit a wide variety of responses, perceptions, and, most importantly, results.

Perception is largely transferred through the chain of command in the form of orders, direction, and guidance.

perception. Had the chain of command in *Black Hearts*³ conveyed a greater sense of ownership to that platoon, it may have changed the platoon’s attitude toward the Iraqis and other units in the battalion. Though in retrospect we seek to justify, the sense of isolation and ostracism is tangible and the ramifications are chilling. Would they still have committed those atrocities? It is impossible to say. Establishing causality is beyond the scope of this article, but certainly a correlation exists. Take a good look at your own unit and deep inside your own leadership style. The scary thing is that those same issues of perception are universal.

We are asked to accomplish a wide variety of tasks. Maybe some are seemingly meaningless, or the output is not apparent. That is when it is most important for a leader to be aware of and manage perception. Negative perception, regardless of task or situation, is infectious, especially from leadership. There is a time and place for venting frustrations, but it is among peers. When faced with an issue, you can be a part of the problem or part of the solution. When you own everything and are solution-oriented, you correct

In *Getting More*, Stuart Diamond asserts that there is no difference between negotiation, persuasion, communications, and selling.⁴ The nature of our work as Marines often results in undesirable tasks. Someone has to tell the Marines to do it, which will invariably be accompanied by their perception of the task through the lens of your tasking, whether it is digging a hole and living out of it or producing signed rosters validating our ability to safely operate motor vehicles and water craft. Orders, guidance, and direction all function as a negotiation, though often one sided. Clausewitz describes war as an interactive social process.⁵ Leadership, too, is an interactive social process; the way that we convey orders and guidance is received and perceived by the human being on the other end of it. Diamond describes the spectrum of negotiation:

- Forcing people to do what you will them to do.
- Getting people to think what you want them to think.
- Getting people to perceive what you want them to perceive.
- Getting people to feel what you want them to feel.⁶

If I want to stay in the field an extra day to remediate training, but my platoon sergeant wants to head back to rest the Marines, our interaction is a negotiation. We both have things that we want and employ strategies in their pursuit. As a leadership team, the way that we reach that decision is going to affect the perception of my platoon sergeant and the Marines who undoubtedly have physical hardship in their future. Consider the above processes. First is coercion. “Staff Sergeant, we’re going to stay in the field another day, good to go?” I am leveraging rank and authority in order to force my point. Though commonly associated with the military in general, this is the weakest form of persuasion. Perhaps, “we came out to accomplish this task. According to the definition of the task in the T&R manual [training and readiness], we have not accomplished the task.

Part of being a leader is evaluating your own effectiveness. It is imperative to continually strive to improve yourself and ensure efficiency in leadership and operations—you owe that to your Marines.

Therefore, we must stay another day in order to be successful.” Getting people to think what you want them to think is logic-based. Or, even stronger, “SSgt, we’re both invested in the success of the platoon. Neither of us want to perform poorly at our assigned tasks, so in order to accomplish this, we need to stay.” Aligning goals can be a powerful tool, especially when you both perceive the problem in the same way. The only more powerful form is to employ emotions, to get him to want what you want, and feel how you feel—evoke *esprit de corps* and pride in proficiency.

The argument is not that we need to start making emotionally-based cases for everything. The manner in which you convey your guidance, however, is going to affect how it is perceived by your Marines. If it is raining, and we have been working hard for several days

with little sleep, perception is critical to the success of training. If the perception becomes negative, then effort will cease and training value will dramatically decrease. Authority and the T&R manual may not sufficiently motivate a cold, wet, and tired Marine.

Measures of Success and the First Step Forward

Part of being a leader is evaluating your own effectiveness. It is imperative to continually strive to improve yourself and ensure efficiency in leadership and operations—you owe that to your Marines. Once you identify perception as an issue, the next step is to figure out where you stand. There needs to be feedback or measures of success as a leader. How do you know how you are being perceived as a leader, and how can you avoid self-deceit and self-serving bias?

Command climate surveys are a good existing measure to help determine perception in the command, although they are only required at the battalion level. It provides bottom-up refinement and serves a tool to gauge perception within the command. When given the opportunity to anonymously offer opinions, leaders will divulge their perceptions. Frustrations will exist, but to prevent the survey from being every Marine’s opportunity to complain, word the prompts in such a way that they discuss legitimate issues and elicit constructive feedback. How would you rate the proficiency and effectiveness of the operations shop? In what ways could they better support companies? We use after-action reviews to learn from training, why not incorporate more frequent reviews of leadership at lower levels? The same model can apply at the platoon level. Evaluate the effectiveness of the

training schedule. In what ways can we better accomplish our goals?

If you demand constructive criticism then ensure that you invite it upon yourself. “360 degree performance reviews” allow subordinates to anonymously evaluate their leaders. If you care about the perception of your subordinates, ask for it. It is functionally similar to a command climate survey, offering anonymous input. Using the formal medium of performance evaluation simultaneously humbles the leader and empowers the subordinate, providing invaluable feedback to the leader.

The problem of perception is that, without realizing its impact on unit effectiveness, it will fester and ultimately diminish unit capabilities. Leaders at every level are obligated to own and address these issues to maximize the unit capabilities and effectiveness. Applying existing strategies of ownership, considering how you are relaying orders and guidance, and institutionalizing feedback and perception analysis within your unit marginalizes its negative impact on you and your unit’s performance.

Notes

1. Dr. Christopher L. Heffner, “Our View of Self and Others,” AllPsych (blog), Chapter 8, Section 2, accessed at <http://allpsych.com>.
2. Ibid.
3. Jim Frederick, *Black Hearts: One Platoon’s Descent into Madness in the Triangle of Death*, (New York: Broadway Books, 2011).
4. Stuart Diamond, *Getting More: How to Negotiate to Succeed in Work and Life*, (New York: Three Rivers, 2010), 12.
5. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: 1997), 3.
6. Diamond, 6–9.

