

Objectives:

This unit will help you to understand:

- The meaning and importance of perception
- The various sub-processes of perception
- The concept of perceptual selectivity
- The various factors influencing perception
- The characteristics of perceptual organization
- The factors that influence social perception
- The concept of impression management

Introduction

Employees working in an organization differ from each other in many ways such as in their height, complexion, cultural backgrounds, educational qualifications, etc. People also differ in their thought processes and the way they look at things. Every individual has his or her own perception of different situations. Again two individuals may not have the same perception about a similar situation. People also tend to believe what they perceive to be true irrespective of the objective truth. Perception thus is a major driving force in shaping the behavior of a person. Therefore, perception forms an important part of the study of OB.

Meaning and Significance of Perception

Perception is a cognitive process wherein an individual collects, organizes, and interprets data from the environment to obtain a meaning from it. In fact, perception differs from person to person for the same situation. Each person interprets the data in their own way and may come up with different meanings. For instance, when the boss comes to each employee's desk, one employee might think that he/she is trying to be friendly with the employees; another might think that the boss is keeping an eye on the employees.

It is also possible that people's perception of events or situations is nowhere close to reality. People react to situations based upon their perception of reality rather than the reality itself. Therefore, understanding the variations in the perceptions of individuals will help in understanding their organizational behavior better. Similarly, the perception of members in one organization differs from that of people in another organization. It is these differences in perception that make some organizations employ strict control over employees (as they believe that a disciplinarian environment will ensure success in business), while others encourage team culture and co-operation to enhance the performance of the organization.

Sensation vs. Perception

Often confusion arises over the relationship between sensation and perception. Behavioral theorists believe that individuals interpret situations based upon their senses and stimulation and that this was how they gained knowledge of the world. Individuals use their sensory organs to sense -- for instance, eyes to see, ears to hear, skin to feel, nose to smell, and tongue to taste. Therefore, sensation is the basic behavior of individuals caused by their physiological functions.

Perception, on the other hand, involves people's assimilation of raw data through their senses, after which they organize and modify the data with the help of cognitive thinking to form a coherent picture of the situation.

Sub-processes of Perception

The perceptual process of individuals passes through several sub-processes. They are stimulus or situation, registration, interpretation, feedback, behavior, and consequence.

Stimulus or situation is the first sub-process in the process of perception. Here people are confronted with an external or internal stimulus. As a result, they might experience an immediate sensual stimulation or the confrontation may take place with the entire physical and socio-cultural environment.

In Registration, the individuals record in their minds the stimulus they have received from the environment. Physiological mechanisms such as listening, hearing, etc. play an active role in the perception of individuals.

During Interpretation, people analyze the stimulus they have received. It is a cognitive process that is influenced by learning, motivation, and personality.

Feedback is the response individuals receive from the stimulus i.e. environmental situations. Feedback has an impact on the perception of individuals. For instance, if employees receive appreciation (feedback) from the manager for their work, then they perceive that the manager is satisfied with their performance. Registration, interpretation, and feedback occur within a person and are in response to a given stimulus from the external environment. These sub-processes lead to a certain behavior by the individual, which again leads to a certain consequence.

Figure 9.1 represents the sub-processes of perception and the relation between them.

Perceptual Selectivity

People are constantly exposed to various stimuli. However, sometimes the stimuli may be so understated that they may not even be aware of it. Individuals are prone to select only a few stimuli at a given time. For instance, while reading the newspaper, individuals who are interested in movies might read only the supplementary containing movie news. Perceptual selectivity is further dependent on factors such as external attention factors and internal set factors.

External Attention Factors

The external attention factors are:

Intensity

According to this principle, the intensity of the external stimulus decides the probability of its being perceived. For instance, a bright light is more likely to be noticed than a dim one.

Size

According to this principle, a large object is more likely to be noticed than a smaller one. For instance, a big super market is more easily noticed than a small grocery store.

Contrast

According to this principle, a stimulus that stands out against the expectations of people is bound to attract more attention. For instance, employees working at airports get so used to the noise that they may not notice the sounds made during the take off and landing of planes. However, if on any day there is some reduction in air traffic, they will notice the reduction in noise level. Figure 9.2 represents the contrast principle.

Repetition According to this principle, a stimulus is more likely to be noticed if it is repeated several times.

Motion

This principle states that individuals notice objects that are in motion more than those that are stationary.

Novelty and familiarity

According to this principle, new objects in a familiar situation and familiar objects in a new situation attract people's attention more.

Internal Set Factors

The internal set factors are:

Learning and Perception

The process of learning creates some expectations in individuals. As a result, they tend to perceive things in a particular way. What people see and hear is influenced by their expectations.

Perceptual set in the workplace: Employees working in an organization for a certain period tend to interpret situations and events in a similar way. They might use certain phrases that are unique to their department or organization to symbolize certain things.

However, in general, learning leads to substantial individual differences. Every employee interprets a particular situation based upon his/her perception. For example, it has been observed that in general, the perceptions of the trade union and the management regarding the prevailing working conditions in an organization differ.

Motivation and perception

Perceptual selectivity is also influenced by motivation. Primary motives such as hunger and thirst have an impact on the perception of individuals. For instance, while walking on the road a person who is very thirsty might pay more attention to a store selling soft drinks.

Secondary motives such as the need for power, affiliation, and achievement also have a major influence on perceptual selectivity. For instance, employees who feel that they have the need to attain power, affiliation, and achievement might be more attentive to the different situations in the organizations, as they are constantly on the look-out for opportunities. Perception may also have an influence on motivation. For instance, some employees who are dedicated to their work might not mind attending office even when sick as they perceive the work to be more important than their health.

Personality and perception

Differences in the personality of individuals due to variances in age, gender, experience, etc. also might influence the perception of individuals. For instance, young managers might complain that senior managers are resistant to change in technology, management practices, etc. Similarly senior managers might complain that young managers take hasty decisions and implement unnecessary changes.

Factors Influencing Perception

The factors that help in shaping perception are the perceiver, the target which is being perceived, and the situation in which perception occurs. Although these factors help in shaping the perception of individuals, they also sometimes distort their perceptions.

The Perceiver

People's personal characteristics play an important role in the way they perceive situations, events, objects, people, etc. The various personal characteristics can be a person's motives, attitudes, past experiences, interests, and expectations.

Those who have a positive attitude toward a particular thing or situation might view it in a completely different way from people having a negative attitude toward it. Studies conducted in the field of OB have also shown that people's perception is greatly influenced by their unfulfilled goals and needs.

It has been observed that people who are engrossed by their personal problems might not be able to concentrate on their work properly. This shows that personal interests of individuals also have an impact on perceptions.

People's perceptions might also be influenced by their past experiences. For instance, an employee who has been reprimanded in the past by his/her superior for a minor mistake might perceive that superior to be a strict official.

Expectation is another characteristic that has a major impact on the perception of individuals. For instance, people generally perceive the products sold by reputed companies to be of good quality. However, expectations might also lead to distortion of perception. For instance, policemen are perceived as fearless and authoritative, which might not be true in all cases.

The Target

The attributes of the target (stimulus) such as motion, sound, size, etc. also affect perception. For instance, people who are very tall get more attention in a crowd. Sometimes people might not perceive the target in isolation but associate it with some other aspects or events similar to it. In doing so, they might group unrelated objects. This grouping is largely done on the basis of physical proximity of the objects in consideration. It has also been observed that the tendency to group objects or events is more if individuals notice a greater proximity between them.

The Situation

Situational factors in the environment such as time, location, climate, a person's state of mind, and other factors play a vital role in shaping the perception of individuals. The factors influencing perceptions are summarized in Figure 9.3

Perceptual Organization

Perceptual organization emphasizes the activities that take place in the perceptual process subsequent to the stimulus being received.

Figure-Ground

Figure-ground is a type of perceptual organization. In this form of perception, perceived objects are separated from the general background by the perceivers. They tend to give more emphasis to the object in the figure than to the other objects in the background.

Perceptual Grouping

Under perceptual grouping, individuals attempt to group various stimuli together into an identifiable pattern. This type of perceptual organization may be based on closure, continuity, proximity, or similarity.

Closure

According to this principle, a person may sometimes perceive a whole where it does not exist and at times may not be able to perceive a whole although one exists.

Continuity

Continuity, unlike closure where the individual fills the missing stimulus, refers to the process wherein the individual perceives the extension of a missing stimulus. However, this is limited to obvious, continuous lines or patterns.

Proximity

According to this principle, people perceive stimuli that are physically close to each other as belonging to one group.

Similarity

According to this principle, stimuli that are similar are grouped together by the individual.

Perceptual Constancy

Perceptual constancy is one of the advanced forms of perceptual organization. According to this principle, individuals' perception of certain elements in objects like size, shape, color, brightness, and location is constant and does not change from person to person. For instance, even though the picture of an apple is printed in black and white, we still perceive the color of the fruit as red. Perceptual constancy is enhanced by learning. Learning helps individuals perceive certain patterns of cues in a similar way and this leads to perceptual constancy.

Perceptual Context

The context of the situation also plays a major role in shaping the perception of individuals. Different contexts convey different meanings to people. For example, if a manager pats his two-year-old son, it is considered a sign of love and affection. However, if he gives an employee a pat on the back, it is considered a sign of appreciation for the work done by the employee.

Perceptual Defense

When a particular stimulus clashes with the values or culture of individuals, or is threatening in nature to them, then they develop a defense mechanism against such a stimulus. Perceptual defense helps in understanding relationships that exist between union and management, superior and subordinate, etc.

Various researches and studies have also supported the existence of the perceptual defense mechanism. The following are the results from some of the relevant studies related to perceptual defense:

- People refuse to perceive information which they believe will disturb their emotions.
- People substitute the original perception caused by disturbing stimuli and information with favorable perceptions to cope with the situation.
- Although some information may actually arouse emotions in an individual, he/she may purposely distort and direct the emotion elsewhere.

Social Perception

Social perception is a cognitive process through which other individuals are perceived by the perceiver. Social perception also involves the study of how an individual gets to know other individuals. Research has indicated that social perception is influenced by the characteristics of both the perceiver and the perceived. Social perception is influenced by the:

- personality of the perceiver
- personal characteristics of the perceiver
- self-esteem of the perceiver
- fact that an individual perceives others depending upon many skills and not just one skill

The characteristics of the person being perceived that influence social perception:

- Status of the individual (of person being perceived)
- Role played by an individual in the organization.

The following factors help in understanding the social perceptual process in organizations better:

Attribution

Attribution is the way in which people explain the causes for their own or others' behavior. With the help of attribution, individuals try to understand the reasons behind the behavior of one another and also draw conclusions about the factors that influenced that behavior. There are two types of attributions. They are dispositional attribution and situational attribution. In dispositional attribution, people's behavior is explained with the help of internal factors such as their personality traits, their motivation, ability, etc. In situational attribution, people's behavior is attributed to the external factors in the environment. These could be the social influences they are subject to, equipment being handled, etc.

Stereotyping

Stereotyping refers to the generalization of the characteristics of all members belonging to a certain group. People judge others based on the perception they have about the group to which these individuals belong and do not consider the unique characteristics of the person in question. For instance, politicians are considered to be manipulative and corrupt. However, judging a person based upon the characteristics of a group is unfair because every individual is unique and different from others. In the organizational context, stereotyping often takes place based upon gender, race, ethnicity, etc.

The Halo Effect

In the halo effect, the perceiver tends to judge a person depending upon a dominant trait which can be either positive or negative. The various traits could be intelligence, sociability, aggressiveness, etc. The halo effect is generally found in performance appraisal. Often appraisers rate the performance of employees based on one particular trait rather than by taking all aspects into consideration.

Halo effect

- is a common error made in performance appraisals
- has two components viz. true and illusory
- emphasizes only a particular trait of an employee and does not take into account the overall picture.
- has negative consequences which have to be avoided.

Conditions under which halo effect might occur:

- when the perceiver is not familiar with certain traits or does not frequently encounter them.
- when the traits are ambiguous and cannot be clearly expressed in behavioral terms.
- when the traits have moral implications.

Impression Management

Impression management is also referred to as 'self-presentation.' It is a process by which people try to manage or control the perceptions formed by others about themselves. Individuals might adopt various management techniques to make an impact on others.

The Process of Impression Management

Earlier researchers attempted to study the relationship of impression management with respect to aggression, attitude change, attributions, social facilitation, and so on. However, in recent times, behavioral theorists have identified two components of impression management. They are impression motivation and impression construction.

Impression motivation: Impression motivation is usually applicable in organizations where employees try to control the perception of managers or superiors about themselves. Impression motivation is affected by the following factors:

- relevance that the impression has to the employees in attaining their goals.
- value of these goals to the employees.
- discrepancy between the desired image and the image which individuals believe others already have about them in their minds.

Impression construction: Impression construction refers to the methods and techniques adopted by the individual in order to create the desired image in the minds of other individuals. Studies conducted in this field have identified the following five factors which are considered to be relevant to the type of impression people want to create:

- the self-concept

- desired and undesired identity images
- role constraints
- value of the target
- current social image of the individual.

Impression Management Strategies Used by Employees

The following are some of the impression management strategies used by employees in organizations:

Demotion-preventative strategy Employees use this strategy to reduce their responsibilities for a negative outcome or to stay out of trouble. The characteristics of this strategy are:

Accounts: The employees try to explain a negative outcome by giving excuses.

Apologies: The employees might seek to apologize to the superior for the negative outcome.

Disassociation: The employees might disassociate themselves from the event, if they are not directly responsible for the outcome.

Promotion-enhancing Strategy

Employees use this strategy to increase their responsibility for a positive outcome and try to communicate it to their superiors.

The characteristics of this strategy are:

Entitlements: If the employees feel that they have not been given due credit for a particular outcome then they might communicate this to their superior through a formal or informal channel.

Enhancements: It is also possible that sometimes the employees feel that their contribution has led to a positive outcome that is much higher than the expectations of the management. Although the employees are rewarded for such an outcome they might still find the need for better recognition of their efforts. Thus, they might convey this to the management.

Obstacle disclosure: Sometimes employees might convey to their superiors the unavoidable obstacles (personal or organizational) that they had to overcome in order to achieve the outcome.

Association: Employees might make a deliberate attempt to be seen with the right people and in the right time in order to give an impression that they are associated with successful projects.

Summary

- Perception is a process wherein an individual selects, organizes, and interprets the data from the environment to form a coherent picture.
- The process of perception includes various sub-processes. They are stimulus or situation, registration, interpretation, feedback, behavior, and consequence.
- Perceptual selectivity is a psychological process by which individuals select only a few stimuli out of the several stimuli to which they are exposed. Perceptual selectivity is influenced by external attention factors and internal set factors.
- The personal characteristics of the perceiver such as attitudes, motives, interests, past experiences, and expectations also influence perception to a large extent.
- The characteristics of the target or stimulus such as size, motion, sound, etc. play a vital role in shaping the perception of the individual.
- Perceptual organization emphasizes the subsequent activities that take place in the perceptual process after the stimulus is received.

- Perceptual organization can take place in the various ways. They are figure-ground, perceptual grouping, perceptual constancy, and perceptual context.
- Social perception is the way an individual perceives other individuals. It can be in the form of attribution, stereotyping, and the halo effect.
- Impression management is the process by which people attempt to manage or control the perceptions formed by other people about themselves.