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## **UNIT 6 PERCEPTION**

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### **6.0 OBJECTIVES**

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After studying this unit, you should be able to:

- define the term Perception;
- analyse the determinants of Perception;
- describe process of Perception;
- identify uses of Perception in the field of human interaction;
- explain the reasons for biases in Perception; and
- identify ways to develop sound perceptual skills.

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### **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

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Individuals are exposed to varieties of stimuli of the environment. They process these stimuli and interpret them. The process of receiving information and making sense is known as perception. It refers to the way the world sounds, looks, feels, smells, tastes to the individual. The individual's behaviour is determined to a large extent by the way the environment is perceived by him/her. Therefore, the conducive organisational environment must be created for favourable perception. The persons who perceived the environment in a favourable way may contribute their best to the organisation. In this unit, you will learn the concept, process, the factors and barriers to the accurate perception. You will be exposed to the theory of attribution and the managerial uses of perception. You will be further familiarised with the process of developing perceptual skills.

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### **6.2 CONCEPT OF PERCEPTION**

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We have mainly five sensory organs viz. eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and skin. The basic five sense organs help us to collect information through their respective tasks. Through eyes we see, through ears we listen, through nose we can identify smell, through tongue we take taste, and through skin we touch. Through these sense organs, as an average human being, you collect several thousands of impressions everyday. However you pay selective attention to particular information collected by your sense organs. Let us have four situations.

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**Situation-one:** Remember one orchestra programme you had visited recently. You were listening attentively a favourite song of yours, and each word and tune was audible to you. Suddenly you listened your name pronounced through a familiar voice coming from backside. Lo! There was your fast friend, with whom you are meeting after a gap of few years. You joined him and both of you got lost in intimate nostalgic talk. The song of the orchestra was still on, but you were not listening! What happened? You were listening selectively. In first instance you were listening the song, and in the second instance, you were listening the words of your friend.

**Situation-two:** Remember when you were in the mid of your teen age, when most of you were interested in watching clouded sky. Do you remember, you used to perceive a particular shape (like, a football player, an elephant, map of a country or a state etc.) in the cloud, but your friend had witnessed some other shape?

**Situation-three:** Remember, one crucial football/cricket match you were playing sometime back. There was a garden close to playground. Do you remember, you could realize aggressive smell of manure in the garden only when the match was over, but not during the tense moment of the match?

**Situation-four:** Remember, some years back you had developed some misunderstanding with one of your close friends. Earlier you had completely confided in him, but no more thereafter. You saw him talking with your friend. You thought he was talking ill about you to your friend. Later on you found it was not so.

The situation-one depicts that we tend to listen what we choose to listen; situation-two depicts, we tend to see what we choose to see; situation-three depicts, we tend to smell what we choose to smell, and situation-four depicts, we tend to infer what we are inclined to infer.

All the four examples suggest that our mental focus captures only a portion of sensory stimuli present in the environment. This capturing depends on our preferences. Thus perception is more than the sum of all the sensory input supplied by our sense organs. Process of perception helps us to select, organise, and interpret sensory input to achieve a meaningful grasp of our surroundings. Perception yield final products that differ from raw, unprocessed sensations in important ways.

The dictionary meaning of the word 'perceive' is- to take in mentally, to become aware through the senses. In simple language Perception may be defined as the way a person sees the universe, he feels about certain elements in a situation. Baron defines Perception as the process through which we select, organise, and interpret input from our sensory receptors. Robbins defines Perception as a process by which individuals organise and interpret their sensory impressions in order to give meaning to their environment. Nord defines Perception as the manner in which a person organises, interprets, and processes various stimuli that are transmitted into a psychological experience. Each person gives meaning to stimuli, different individuals will see the same thing in different ways.

Reitz defines Perception as those processes by which an individual receives information about his environment- seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, and smelling. The study of these perceptual processes shows that their functioning is affected by three classes of variables- the objects or events being perceived, the environment in which perception occurs, and the individual does the perceiving.

## Importance and Uses of Perception

As a concept, perception has important place in the subject of Organisational Behaviour (OB). OB deals with human behaviour at work place, and perception is an important determinant of behaviour. People behave on the basis of their perception of the reality, not on the basis of the reality itself. We may say, the world does not appear to us as it is, but it appears as painted by our perception of the world. This statement establishes the importance and uses of perception on the one hand, and limitations of perception on the other. We shall first examine importance and uses of perception.

Perception helps us adapt to a complex and ever-changing environment through perceptual constancies. Constancies refer to our tendency to perceive physical objects as unchanging despite shifts in the pattern of sensations these objects induce. Perceptual constancies suggest that our perception of the world doesn't change as much as variations in the sensory information registered by our receptors might lead us to expect. Three types of constancies are more common: size constancy, shape constancy, and brightness constancy. The principle of size constancy relates to the fact that the perceived size of an object remains the same when the distance is varied, even though the size of the image it casts on the retina changes greatly. The principle of shape constancy refers to the fact that the perceived shape of an object does not alter as the image it casts on the retina changes. The principle of brightness constancy refers to the fact that we perceive objects as constant in brightness and colour even when viewed under different lighting conditions. These three principles suggest that the gap between sensations and the perceptions provided by the constancies is clearly beneficial.

## Limitations of Perception

Unfortunately, perception can provide false interpretations of sensory information. Incorrect perceptions are called illusions. Illusions may take place in two ways: due to physical processes (e.g. mirages), and due to cognitive processes. For our purpose illusions through cognitive processes are more relevant. Illusions through cognitive processes fall in two categories: illusions of size, and illusions of shape or area.

## Check Your Progress A

1) What is your understanding of the term Perception?

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2) What are uses and misuses of Perception?

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## 6.3 PROCESS OF PERCEPTION

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The model of process of perception describes four stages. The model has been shown in Figure 6.1, depicting the four stages. The model can be understood through input-throughput-output approach.

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**Stage 1:** It describes perceptual inputs. Perceptual inputs encompass all stimuli that exist in our environment including information, objects, events, people etc. The perceiver receives these inputs.

**Stage 2:** It describes perceptual mechanisms or throughputs. This is the transformation of perceptual inputs to outputs. It involves the three processes of selecting, organising, and interpreting the stimuli that are in the environment. Though all individuals go through the same three steps, while transforming the perceptual

inputs to outputs, they differ in how do they select, organise and interpret stimuli based on their own personality predispositions and biases.

### **Figure 6.1: A Model of Process of Perception**

Stage 1: Perceptual Inputs of Stimuli-  
Information, Objects, Events, People etc.

Stage 2: Perceptual Mechanisms-  
Selection, Organisation, Interpretation

Stage 3: Perceptual outputs-  
Attitudes, Opinions, Feelings, Values

Stage 4: Pattern of Behaviour

**Stage 3:** Perceptual outputs are derived through the processing of perceptual throughputs. These include one's attitudes, opinions, feelings, values, and actions. Perceptual errors may adversely affect the outputs. Hence, managers should enhance their perceptual skills.

**Stage 4:** Behaviour is a resultant factor. The perceiver's behaviour, in turn, generates responses and these reactions give rise to a new set of inputs.

Out of four stages of process of perception, stage 1 and stage 4 are simpler to comprehend which describe inputs and final outcomes respectively. You need to gain more insight with respect to stage 2, and stage 3 of the process. You shall understand stage 2, and stage 3 in better way after going through sections 6.3 and 6.4 respectively.

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## **6.4 FACTORS INFLUENCING PERCEPTION**

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Perception is influenced by mainly three sets of factors:

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- i) Factors in the perceiver (perceiver variables);
- ii) Factors in the target (subject characteristics);
- iii) Factors in the situation (situational variables).

Factors in the perceiver include following issues:

- Self-concept of the perceiver;
- Attitudes of the perceiver;
- Motives of the perceiver;
- Interests of the perceiver;
- Experience of the perceiver;
- Expectations of the perceiver.

Factors in the target include following issues:

- Physical appearance;
- Verbal and Nonverbal Communication;
- Status;
- Occupations;
- Personal characteristics;
- Novelty of the target;
- Motion of the target;
- Sounds of the target;
- Size of the target;
- Background of the target;
- Proximity of the target.

Factors in the situation include following issues:

- Social context;
- Organisational role;
- Work setting;
- Location of event;
- Time.

Collectively, these three sets of factors determine our perceptions about others.

### **Activity A**

In your living room, for a minute look for everything that is black in colour. Now stop reading this unit, just look for everything that is black in colour for a minute. After a minute of watching black things, write about few things those were black in colour.

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Now come out of your living room and write about those things in the living room, which were brown in colour.

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Congratulations for writing about something, which were brown. However if you got stuck, do not worry. It is a natural phenomenon. We tend to perceive anything according to our pre-decided preferences. However we should make attempt to come out of preconceived notion if we want to become more effective at work place.

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## 6.5 BARRIERS TO ACCURATE PERCEPTION

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The perceiver's own mindset and tendency to use shortcuts in judging others may become the barriers to accurate perception. Barriers to accurate perception create wider gap between 'what things actually are', and 'what you think the things are'. Hence you should be vigilant about such barriers. Some of the important barriers to accurate perception are following:

- **Stereotyping:** It is judging someone on the basis of one's perception of the group to which that person belongs. Though such generalisations help to simplify complex world, its overuse mostly leads to wrong conclusion.
- **Halo Effect:** This perceptual bias means, drawing a general impression about an individual on the basis of single characteristics.
- **Similar-to-me Effect or Projection:** It is another common type of perceptual bias, which involves the tendency for people to perceive more favourably others who are like themselves than those who are dissimilar.
- **Selective Perceptions:** It explains that people selectively interpret what they see on the basis of their interests, background, experience and attitudes.
- **Distortion:** It is distorting what we see (or even totally avoid seeing what actually exists) if we encounter data, which is threatening or incongruent to our self-concept.
- **Contrast Effects:** It is evaluations of a person's characteristics that are affected by comparisons with other people recently encountered who rank higher or lower on the same characteristics.

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## 6.6 THEORY OF ATTRIBUTION

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Attribution is an important concept for understanding perception, as it is related to judging the causes of others' behaviour. An inaccurate attribution may lead to inaccurate perception. Our perceptions of what is happening in the environment depend very much on the attributions we make.

Attribution theory describes that when individuals observe behaviour, they attempt to determine whether it is internally or externally caused. Internally caused behaviour is those that are believed to be under the personal control of the individual. Externally caused behaviour is seen as resulting from outside causes over which the individual has no control.

Kelly's Theory of Causal Attribution explains that in determining whether others' behaviour stems mainly from internal or external causes, we focus on three types of information: a) Distinctiveness; b) Consensus; and c) Consistency.

**Distinctiveness** is extent to which a person behaves in the same manner in other contexts. If one behaves the same way in other situations, distinctiveness is low; if one behaves differently, distinctiveness is high. If a particular behaviour is unusual, an observer is likely to give the behaviour an external attribution. If the action is not unusual, it will be perhaps judged as internal.

**Consensus** is the extent to which other people behave in the same manner as the person we are judging. If others do behave similarly, consensus is considered, high; if they do not, consensus is considered low. If consensus were high, you would be expected to give external attribution, and if consensus is low, you tend to give internal attribution.

**Consistency** is tendency to respond the same way over time. Consistency also may be high or low. The more consistent the behaviour, the more the observer is inclined to attribute it to internal causes and *vice-versa*.

When we make judgements about the behaviour of other people, we have tendency to underestimate the influence of external factors and overestimate the influence of internal factors, in case of less than optimum performance by the others. This is called the fundamental attribution error. There is also a tendency for individuals to attribute their own successes to internal factors such as ability or effort while putting the blame for failure on external factors such as luck. This is called the self-serving bias.

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## 6.7 MANAGERIAL USES OF PERCEPTION

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Perception is an important concept for managers or for any decision maker. There are many situations in which a proper understanding of perception and its various uses help a decision maker to take quality decision. Now we shall examine some important managerial activities where concept of perception can be applied.

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**Advertising:** Advertisers use the concept of perception to draw attention of the prospective customers. According to concept of perception, selective attention helps us to maximize information gain by reducing inference from irrelevant sensory sources. Therefore you find hoarding of advertisements are so designed with respect to shape, size, and brightness, that they should be able to attract attention of prospective customers.

**Maintaining Safety:** Concept of perception is used to draw proper attention towards message of warning, through proper design of content and proper display of the message. Message content should include: signal word, hazard statement, consequences, and instructions. Message characteristics should have characteristics such as: attention getting, comprehensible, concise, and durable.

**Managing Impression:** Everyone attempts to make favourable impression of self in the mind of others. This business of impression management becomes more important when you face employment interview. While facing an interview if you happen to create positive impression in the beginning, most likely you happen to establish an early lead. In the beginning, if you do not help experts to create a positive perception or impression for yourself, it becomes difficult to turn the table in later part of the interview. Hence during employment interview it is in your favour to create positive first impression. On the other hand, evidence indicates that interviewers make perceptual judgements that are often inaccurate. However, more matured experts or evaluators do not give undue importance to first impression.

Impression management is done in various other organisational activities. Whereas efforts at impression management may improve the quality of social functioning, overdoing of such actions may occur at the cost of information accuracy and high quality decision making.

**Building Corporate Image:** Not only individuals, but organisations as a whole also, attempt to manage positive impression. This is termed as corporate image. Organisations, just like individuals, stand to benefit by positive impressions.

**Managing Performance:** Theories suggest that people start behaving as you expect them to behave. The result is that the expectations become reality. Concept of Self-fulfilling Prophecy or Pygmalion Effect characterizes the fact that people's expectations determine their behaviour. Self-fulfilling Prophecy states that when one person inaccurately perceives a second person the resulting expectations cause the second person to behave in ways consistent with the original perception. The message is: if you want people to achieve high performance, do expect high performance of them, and let them know your level of expectations. Substandard perceptions tend to produce substandard performance.

**Evaluating Performance:** In organisations, performance is evaluated against both objective and subjective criteria. Perception particularly plays its role when performance is evaluated against subjective criteria. Future career of a manager depends considerably on performance evaluation, so perception plays important

role in advancing in career and getting right deployment. For you the point of caution is that if you are evaluating a person merely on your perception, challenge the base of your own perception, and ensure that your perception is as far as possible free of any bias.

**Judging Employees' Loyalty:** Whether an employee is ultra-loyal, just loyal, or sub-loyal, may depend on the perception of the perceiver. One may perceive a person who does not think beyond one's organisation as very loyal, but the other may think of the person as conformist. A whistle-blower (who reports unethical practices by their employer to outsiders) may be perceived as ethical and person of guts by one, but may be perceived as troublemaker by the other.

**Self-Assessment and Development:** Our values, attitude, and perception, influence each other. For development of self as a manager, you should have your correct self-assessment picture, intelligently verified through multiple sources. Some of the checks you should do for yourself are:

- Are you perceived as person having positive attitude or negative attitude?
- Are you perceived as aggressive, or as submissive, or as a balanced assertive?
- Are you perceived as a person who respects others' views?
- Are you perceived as a person having own pivot yet having required flexibility?
- Are you perceived as a person respecting high effort or as a happy-go-lucky?

Thus, concept of perception is a strong tool for self-development. If there is congruence between how you perceive yourself, and how others perceive you, it is an indication that you are going effective way, and *vice-versa*.

**Building Relationship:** Positive perception helps to build effective communication and trust, leading to high performing relationship within managerial group, within employees, and between managers and junior employees.

### Check Your Progress B

- 1) What are the five main characteristics of a person who can be called as matured perceiver?

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- 2) How can the concept of perception be gainfully used in managerial activities?

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## 6.8 DEVELOPING PERCEPTUAL SKILLS

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We have already observed that when our perceptions are distorted, our judgement of the objects, persons, or of the situations may go wrong. Therefore there is need to develop our perceptual skills, so that the gap between our perceptions and the actual facts may be minimized. Now, we shall discuss some of the techniques to enhance our perceptual skills.

**Giving Feedback and Receiving Feedback:** Perceptual skills can be improved by knowing about ourselves through receiving feedback, and let people know how do you feel about them through giving feedback. Joe Luft and Harry Ingham developed the technique of Johari Window (Johari representing the combination of their first names). The techniques explain that there are four aspects of the self:



- I know the self
- I do not know the self
- Others know the self (about me)
- Others do not know the self (about me).

Combining the four aspects differently produce four windows (areas) of the self:

- **Public Area:** The aspects of me which I know as well as others also know
- **Blind Area:** The aspects of me which I do not know but others know
- **Private Area:** The aspects of me which I know but others do not know
- **Dark Area:** The aspects of me that I do not know as well as others also do not know.

Public area does not create problem in perceptual process, but other three areas do, hence these should be reduced. Receiving feedback from others can reduce blind Area, and giving feedback and information about self to others can reduce Private area. Reducing dark area is concerned more with self-purification.

**Having Empathy:** Empathy is not sympathy. Sympathy to some extent is to feel pity about others, whereas empathy means rising above our perceptual frame and making an attempt to comprehend the issues from others' perspective.

**Having Positive Attitudes:** Positive attitudes create right perspective, and helps perceiver to perceive without distortion.

**Enhancing Self-Concept:** Enhancing self-concept and self-esteem help one to treat others with respect and with right perspective.

**Avoiding Common Biases:** A conscious effort to get rid of common biases helps to get rid of distorted perceptions.

**Communication:** Lack of communication is a common cause of distorted perception. Creating an atmosphere of open and authentic communication help to develop perceptual skills of individuals.

**Correct Use of Attribution:** Wrong attributions lead to distorted perception. Attributing success and failures correctly to internal or external factors, lead to right judgements for future course of action.

Thus, understanding the perceptual process and dealing with perceptual biases are essential aspects for taking right decision in any walk of life.

**Activity B**

List your own plan of actions for improving your perceptual skills. Suggest the activities those you would do and also suggest a timeframe for developing such skills. You may discuss this issue with one of your friends.

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## 6.9 LET US SUM UP

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Perception refers to the process by which individuals organise and interpret their sensory impressions in order to give meaning to their environment. It is an important determinant of human behaviour. The process of perception includes : perceptual inputs of stimuli, perceptual mechanisms, perceptual outputs and pattern of behaviour. Perception is influenced by mainly three sets of factors which are : factors in the perceiver, factors in the target and factors in the situation. As the perception facilitates the understanding of human

behaviour in the organisation; the perceiver's own mindset and tendency in judging others may become the barriers to accurate perception. Some of the important barriers to accurate perception are : stereotyping, halo effect, similar to me effect or projection, selective perceptions, distortion and contrast effects.

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Attribution is an important concept for understanding perception. The attribution theory describes that when individuals observe behaviour, they attempt to determine whether it is internally or externally caused. Perception is an important concept for managers. Some important managerial activities where concept of perception can be applied include : advertising, maintaining safety, managing impression, building corporate image, managing performance, evaluating performance, judging employee's loyalty, self assessment and development and building relationship. The techniques involved in enhancing perceptual skills are : giving feedback and receiving feedback, having empathy, having positive attitudes, enhancing self concept, avoiding common biases, communication and correct use of attribution.

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## 6.10 KEY WORDS

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**Attribution:** Judging the causes of others' behaviour- external and internal causes.

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**Consensus:** Extent to which other people behave in the same manner as the person we are judging.

**Consistency:** Tendency to respond the same way over time.

**Constancies:** Our tendency to perceive physical objects as unchanging despite shifts in the pattern of sensations these objects induce.

**Corporate Image:** Creating positive impression of an organisation.

**Distinctiveness:** Extent to which a person behaves in the same manner in other contexts.

**Fundamental Attribution Error:** Tendency to underestimate the influence of external factors and overestimate the influence of internal factors, in case of less than optimum performance by others.

**Illusions:** Incorrect perceptions.

**Managing Impression:** Attempts to make favourable impression of self in the mind of others.

**Perception:** The way a person feels about certain elements in a situation.

**Stereotyping:** Judging someone on the basis of one's perception of the group to which that person belongs.

**Self-fulfilling Prophecy:** People start behaving as you expect them to behave.

**Stimuli:** External triggers those exist in our environment including information, objects, events, people etc.

**Whistle Blowing:** Reporting unethical practices of employer to outsiders.

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## 6.11 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

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- 1) What do you mean by perception? What are the uses of studying about perception?
- 2) What are uses and misuses of perception?
- 3) Explain process of perception. What are the factors those influence perception?
- 4) What are the barriers to accurate perception? How those barriers can be removed?
- 5) Explain Theory of Attribution.
- 6) Describe managerial situations in which concept of perception can be applied.

7) Explain techniques for developing perceptual skills.

**Note :** These questions will help you to understand the unit better. Try to write answers for them. Do not submit your answers to the university for assessment. These are for your practice only.