Perception Can Be Reality When It Comes to Your Career

Career Development

The television show *The Affair* just ended its five-season run on Showtime. What made *The Affair* special was its use of point of view (POV) to tell its stories. Viewers were shown one character's viewpoint at a time. Sometimes the same conversation was shown through the eyes and

ears of two characters. Often, the differences between the points of view were nuanced. At times, it was pronounced. *The Affair* was intriguing because it made clear how important perception is. This is true in life, but also in your career.

Think about your own upcoming holiday plans. Will everyone you celebrate with remember the holiday the same exact way you do? Of course not. Each person will remember his or her perception of the day's occurrences.

This month's column will explore how perception can be reality when it comes to your career. This includes both others' perceptions of you and your perception of yourself.

Others' perceptions of you

You've probably heard people talk about "optics" in the workplace. I once had a coworker tell me that she didn't like the concept of optics, didn't care about them, and wouldn't change her behavior just to please other people.

I understand the importance of being authentic, but being aware of optics can be important to your career success. After all, people's perceptions are a product of optics.

For example, imagine a Monday when you arrive at work at 7 am and work until 3 pm. You leave early for a personal obligation and work from home for a few more hours that evening. The next morning, you arrive at work early again and work a long day. Now, consider these two scenarios:

- Scenario one — When you leave early on Monday, you take the long way to exit the building out the front door passing numerous coworkers and visitors as you exit; or
- Scenario two — When you leave early on Monday, you leave via the side door close to your office passing your team and perhaps a couple of coworkers, if any.

If you go with scenario one, more people see you make a show out of exiting and the optics are that you left early on a Monday. Some coworkers' perception of you may be that you don't work hard. Is it fair? No. Is it a realistic and possible scenario given human nature? Yes.

If you choose scenario two, fewer people see you leave. The optics are that you worked all day and you look like the dedicated employee that you are.

Being mindful of optics is not about being fake or manipulative. It is about ensuring that you don't inadvertently undermine yourself by allowing people to form a false view of who you are.

Your perception of yourself

It's not just others' viewpoints that can affect you. Your perception of yourself can also be reality when it comes to your career.

This often comes in two varieties: those who are too hard on themselves and those who are not hard enough on themselves. Those who are too hard on themselves may undervalue themselves.

For example, perhaps you're a junior attorney at your company and the role of senior attorney becomes available. If your perception of yourself does not match reality, you may not think you're

good enough to apply for the role. You may work hard and do a good job, but you may still view yourself as a junior attorney.

The trick is to try to see yourself through objective eyes. If you are your toughest critic, allow that trait to motivate you, not derail you. If you've earned and deserve a promotion, go for it.

The other manifestation of your perception of yourself affecting your career is not being hard enough on yourself. Perhaps you work too fast and make basic mistakes. Perhaps you don't put in enough hours of work in a day to truly be as productive as you can be.

There are many examples of not doing your best. If you're not honest with yourself about the type of worker you are, this can hurt your career. For example, you may be bitter that you didn't get a promotion you think you deserve when, perhaps, the reality is that you didn't deserve it.

It is imperative that we are honest with ourselves about the quality of our work and other skills and traits, so that we don't set ourselves up for career roadblocks. If it's hard for you to impartially judge yourself, it may help to talk to someone you trust about what you do well and areas in which you could improve.

Of course, the most important career goal should be to work hard, treat others the way you want to be treated, and do your best. However, don't make the mistake of wasting that effort by allowing others (and yourself) to see you as anything other than who you truly are.

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