

Perceptual Positions – The New Behaviour and ‘Map of Reality’ Generators in Business Communication

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Abstract

The paper concentrates on recognizing different perceptual positions in many business communications. First, it explores how the main perceptual positions can expand our level of awareness when dealing with difficult interlocutors to set and achieve ambitious goals. Second, it aims to illustrate the importance of perceptual positions in reaching mutually beneficial agreements through business applications and functions as well as case studies and useful phrases.

The results emphasize that the ability of business people to shift wisely from one position to another can create a better sense of rapport both from a behavioural and linguistic perspective.

Key words: applications and functions, business communication, case studies, perceptual positions

J.E.L. classification: Z13

1. Introduction

If maximizing the potential of the people we work with is a valuable asset, then recognizing different perceptual positions is another valuable skill in many business communications. Exploring the main perceptual positions can be significantly helpful when we deal with difficult interlocutors to set and achieve ambitious goals in a negotiating, selling or meeting process, experience a situation from different perspectives, or move into different perceptual positions to get a different viewpoint on a complex sensitive issue.

By acting as if *we are someone else*, we open up new ways of thinking and start making better decisions and choices.

To this end, practical examples of business applications alongside the case studies and useful linguistic expressions will be provided in the next sections to make it easier to adapt to the interlocutors’ mode of perception and relational experiences. They will highlight the necessity to harmonize one’s language and gestures with the interlocutors’ word signals and expressions.

Thus, the focus will be on the understanding of the contradictory polarities inside and outside the communication loop.

2. Theoretical background

John Grinder and Judith DeLozier focused on the first three positions in their book *Turtles All the Way Down* (1987), which they called *perceptual positions*. Further on, Robert Dilts added the fourth position in *Article of the Month* (1998). In “Encyclopedia of Systemic Neuro-Linguistic Programming and NLP New Coding” (2000), Robert Dilts and Judith DeLozier talked about the triple description (the first/second/third position) as a ‘dance of multiple perspectives’. The development of perceptual positions reached a yet higher level 6 years later when David Molden and Pat Hutchinson (2006) put forward a threefold metaphorical description by viewing a situation from three different angles, i.e. first position (*You*), second position (*the other person’s shoes*), third position (*fly on the wall*). However, it is worth noticing that Dilts and DeLozier’s (2000) practicing on perceptual positions leads the scientific literature in this very particular field.

3. Research methodology

This research has aimed to make business communicators aware of the importance of taking multiple perspectives as an essential skill for mediation and negotiation, customer service, organizational change and leadership.

The research methodology has concentrated on the extent to which perceptual positions expand our level of awareness and help us gain a broader perspective from three different angles.

At this stage, I have identified the differences encountered when assuming various roles and experiencing mental states (*associated, disassociated, meta position*) which promote the idea of contributing to the understanding of the flow of events within the communication loop, by moving wisely from one position to another.

In this case, the objective of the paper has been to describe the technique of shifting perceptual positions to get a clearer picture of someone else’s behaviour, beliefs, values, representations or ‘map of reality’.

Therefore, research has shown that, when rapport is low in the workplace, it can be enhanced by using the technique of perceptual positions which provides us the opportunity to see, hear and feel things from others’ perspectives, in any given situation, from three main angles (first, second, third)

The first position (*You*) means experiencing the situation through your own map of reality (your eyes → visual, ears → auditory and feelings → kinesthetic). What you most care about is the outcome you want to achieve, and how to assert yourself and influence others or lead by example.

The second position (*the other person’s shoes*) presupposes stepping into the shoes of the other person, sometimes even physically, or making an imaginary leap to understand their beliefs, values, attitudes, experiences (sights, sounds, feelings) to the best of your knowledge. From this position, we increase our chances of building better rapport during a sensitive stage/phase of a tense, adversarial negotiation, for example. O’Connor (2001) comes up with the specification that there may be two types of second position: “*Emotional second position* is understanding the other person’s emotions [...] *Intellectual second position* is the ability to understand how another person thinks, the kinds of ideas they have and the sort of opinions and outcomes they hold” (O’Connor, 2001, p. 33).

The third position (*fly on the wall*) is when you stand away or step outside your viewpoint and the other person’s view, become an independent observer, *detached* and *dissociated*. The benefit you gain is by observing everything from a logical, rational and objective perspective, as if watching the sequence of words, gestures and expressions as a resourceful third person.

Later on, Robert Dilts added the fourth position in *Article of the Month* (1998). The fourth position holds the perspective from the system you belong to, i.e. a team, work or community system. This position is used within a business to understand group dynamics and your role (i.e. leader) in the group. It is about ecology, and checking the impact of your decisions.

4. Findings

The paper can be structured around two integrated communication axes, i.e. *business applications and functions*, on the one hand, and *case studies*, plus useful *linguistic expressions*, on the other hand.

Perceptual positions are crucial to reaching agreements in meetings, customer care, selling, negotiating, or giving presentations. Thinking in terms of ‘seeing things *my/your/their* way’ is very useful because our first task is to map the reality as perceived by others, or, as Dilts and DeLozier (2000) metaphorically express it, to build a systemic loop between ourselves and the outside world.

Therefore, perceptual positions are basic to business applications, including: *negotiation, customer service, communicating change, selling, labour relations*.

4.1. Negotiation

Negotiation opens the door to understanding conflicting views. When analysing a business problem, one has to look at the perspectives of different stakeholders (customers, senior management, middle managers, strategic partners, suppliers and competitors). Aiming for a

common point between two parties requires the ability to step or project yourself into the other person's map of reality (assume 'second position') as well as look at various issues from your own perspective (take 'first position'), by regularly checking out priorities, preferences, or feelings of apprehension and doubt. In psychological terms, adopting different positions will always lay the foundations for either peaceful or deadlocked negotiations.

Case study and useful phrases:

A profitable consumer goods multinational has been in operation since 2013. Its strong performance has been due to high-value-added products pushed into foreign markets every year. Nevertheless, managers currently disagree on some aspects of company policy which led to a recent decline in profit. Shareholders are locked in discussions over budget adjustments and cuts. Some of them have frozen plans to launch new products and recommended reducing spending by 15%, while others have encouraged recruitment to avoid layoffs.

► Put forward the advantages of finding common ground:

e.g. *If we can get our point across, I'm exceedingly optimistic about the contract.*

► Signal that you are near to reaching an agreement:

e.g. *Look, we've approved the plan by a large majority. We're close to an agreement. We just need a bit more understanding agreeing budgets and reallocations to achieve a 15% reduction in total operating costs.*

► Ask questions to find out what the other side wants:

e.g. *What's your main interest? Why do you want to concentrate on consolidating current brands? Do you think the plan could be hit by possible budget cuts?*

4.2. Customer service

Effective customer service is based on specific tools and techniques which are used in response to each customer's needs, expectations and feelings. Smart employees always know the proper tools that adapt to the most diverse situations, from the basic ones to the very exciting and challenging interactions. In every business situation one needs to connect to their customers and discover what strategy/phrase corresponds to one response. Thus, different tools match different situations whether we address a happy or an angry and upset customer. According to Bacal (2005), "In real life it is not always easy to determine whether a 'perfect phrase' is part of one customer strategy or another, because some phrases can actually fit more than one response and because some of the strategies overlap" (Bacal, 2005, p. 17).

► Acknowledge customer's needs (involves using confirmation type expressions)

e.g. *I understand that you are looking for the best value for your money.*

► Active listening (involves using the checking understanding strategy)

e.g. *So, you're telling me that you want to report some missing parts from the product and would like complete refunding. Is that right?*

► Assurances of effort (are statements that help handle difficult customers with confidence and put them at ease)

e.g. *I can see you're hastened to leave but I assure you I'll wrap up the present in a jiffy.*

► Empathy statements (are specific defusing techniques whose purpose is to calm down nervous, hostile customers and switch their negative mindset to a positive mindset by improving rapport)

e.g. *It seems the delay has quite upset you.*

I know it can be annoying/irritating to fill in these forms from top to bottom.

You must have felt tricked/fooled to discover that the product was defective.

In the above empathy statements, naming the emotion (*anger, frustration/irritation, hoax*) and associating the source of emotion (*the delay, the forms, the product fault*) may hold the key to understanding the client's needs and dealing with their complaints.

► Offering choices (involves focusing interest on each side, generating options to customers, showing respect for their wishes, responding with an option rather than disagreeing with the offer of the other party)

e.g. *What if we included service in the price? Would that help you?*

Here's another idea. We could renegotiate the repayment term in case of delay.

Conditional phrases like *what if, in case...* as well as the modal verb *could* are used to express an opinion about the best course of action. Since negotiating is about playing a game of conditions and concessions, it is worth mentioning that approaches to bargaining may vary according to the attitude of the customer service representatives to bargaining and the language (functions) they use when interacting. Thus, when putting forward a proposal tentatively (e.g. *we could renegotiate*), modal verbs are specifically used to introduce new options in a gentle, non-threatening way.

4.3. Communicating change

When managers have to introduce change, good communication is very important. ‘Adapt or die’ is a common saying in business. The question ‘How do you bring people into the change process?’ describes a business situation where company executives are about to announce a restructuring process, including job losses, while their positions are secure.

Let us now take a look at management meetings which are held for staff to discuss advantages and disadvantages of proposed changes affecting the workplace. Different examples include:

- ▶ making organizational changes;
- ▶ merging divisions or businesses;
- ▶ announcing a restructuring wave;
- ▶ making people redundant in a new department after a merger (job losses);
- ▶ keeping your job after a merger, but being in a less powerful position.

Case study and useful phrases:

Percy Barnevik, one of the most respected managers in the world, has shown that he is prepared to take some tough decisions when it comes to downsizing (Evans, 2000, p. 22).

a) Technique used – First position

e.g. *I detest* the macho view of some Americans who rank managers by their toughness. *I see it* as a bloodbath. Whether *I call it* restructuring or firing people, *I think* it’s a serious human problem.

◆ *Analysis:*

First person implication is rendered by expressions such as *I detest, I see it..., I call it..., I think...* . *First position* is associated with your own point of view, beliefs and assumptions (Dilts and DeLozier, 2000, pp. 949-950). First person language is used when talking about yourself: *I detest, I see it, I call it, I think*.

b) Technique used – Second position

e.g. To downsize effectively, *you have to have empathy* with the people who are losing their jobs. *You feel you have to take time*, handle them with honesty and respect. What *you say to them* has a lot to do with the attitude of the survivors; *Do you spend* much time imagining what it’s like for them, whether they see the company as a money machine or keep their respect and trust for it? (an adapted version of Evans –”Barnevik and Attitude”, *Powerhouse*, 2000. p. 22).

◆ *Analysis:*

Second person implication is rendered by expressions like *you have to have empathy, you feel you have to take time, you say to them, Do you spend...?*

Second position is associated with another person’s point of view, seeing the external world through his or her eyes (Dilts and DeLozier, 2000, pp. 949-950). Second person language is used when talking about yourself in first position: *you feel, you say, Do you spend...?*

c) Technique used – Third position

e.g. *He says he is* very worried about handling the bad news in this way, because *he says* the situation can take out of control. *He welcomes* the changes, and *he is sure* that downsizing helps them cut their payroll, but at the same time, people’s morale reaches rock bottom. Thus, if *they are* patient and persevere, pay-offs will come on-stream and staff will eventually wonder how it was possible to cope before the changes were implemented.

◆ *Analysis:*

The use of third person pronoun: *He says he is..., He welcomes..., he is sure..., they are...*

Third position is associated with a point of view outside of the relationship between yourself and the other person with the beliefs and assumptions from both first and second position (Dilts and

DeLozier, 2000, p. 950). Third person language is used when talking about yourself in first position or the other person (second position): *He says, He welcomes, he is sure, they are.*

4.4. Selling

Selling involves getting inside the customer's mind or what Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) calls their mental 'map', where the key to success lies. However, many customers find themselves faced with a lot of product features that they don't need or understand. Hence, establishing a loyal customer base depends on market research and the questionnaires technique.

Case study and useful phrases:

Middle-aged customers who want a mobile phone for emergency purposes may not be interested in high-performance displays and mp3 features. The selling department should have a clear picture of the prospects' needs and perceptions and then search for specific tailor-made solutions. Listening to the buying signals sent out by the prospective customers will generally help sales managers shape their linguistic profile and know exactly what tasks they have to assign the sales team to make their products attractive.

a) Technique used – First position

e.g. *My project will involve* updating the design for our mobile phone model. *I suggest* that the engineering department starts by looking at ways of improving picture and sound quality. Meanwhile, to help increase our sales of 700 m units a year, *I want* the designers to come up with new colours and designs. *I also want* the marketing team to get feedback on the prototype when it's ready. *Probably the best way to do this* is to organize focus groups or questionnaires. From what *I've seen lately*, there are different niche markets: some want to dispose of more functions like multitasking, a completely revamped touch keyboard, high-speed internet access on trains and email in cars, or extended coverage on planes; others feel comfortable with a standard mobile phone keypad and are not so happy about having special browsers or interactive mobile multimedia technology. So, *we'll* have to attract those customers as well if *we don't* want to see our market share shrink in the future.

◆ *Analysis:*

First position is rendered by the use of first person pronouns / possessive adjectives both in the singular and plural: *my project, I suggest, I (also) want, I've seen..., we'll have to..., we don't want to...*

The use of the adverb of modality expressing probability (i.e. *probably*) is a marker of first position. The associated state (first position) involves experiencing the situation or event from your own perspective. The sense of self or "I" is fully associated in your map of the world: e.g. *my project will involve, I suggest, I want, I've seen.*

b) Technique used – Second position

e.g. *Entrepreneurs like you* have no limit when it comes to the march of the mobiles. *You think* this will give a boost to the number of mobile phone users. Indeed, with sales of 700 m units a year, *you can expect* to find new original strategies to increase revenues. *Being on the crest of the wave makes you* frantically *look for* new sources of growth. Even so, *you may become* a victim of *your own success*. *You lead* an army of 1,500 technologists and researchers who have come up with plans to do exactly what *you want*. *A useful advice to you is:* keep on *testing the water* since there are still so many people who are only content with having low priced mobile phones with standard keypads to the detriment of high-tech products.

◆ *Analysis:*

Second position is reflected in expressions such as *Entrepreneurs like you, you think, you can expect, you may become [...] your own success, you lead.*

The use of the metaphors *on the crest of the wave makes you[...] look for...* (meaning: very successful or popular), *keep on testing the water* (meaning: try to find out what people think about an idea or situation before taking action) is another indicator of second position.

The disassociated experience (second position) refers to being able to assume another person's perspective within the interaction, i.e. you see, hear, and feel what the communication loop is like from that person's point of view. In other words, "you address your 'first position' self as *you*, using 'second person' language" (Dilts and DeLozier, 2000, p. 941).

c) *Technique used – Third position*

e.g. *His view is* that the market survey should be modelled on the questionnaires used for *their last market research*. Now, while *he is waiting* for those answers, *he suggests* that the marketing department starts by preparing product descriptions before adding further unique selling features and functions. *He is bound to* bring suitable models for both those people who cannot conceive their life outside web-browsing, email messaging, wireless or multi-platform services in their mobile phones and their opposites who lead a more simple, less demanding lifestyle, not deeply affected by technological changes, and for whom these devices are used as a means and not as a purpose in life. So, preparing briefing sessions targeted at getting feedback on prototype *put him into perspective* and *that experience will help him* learn about the market over there.

◆ *Analysis:*

Third position is rendered by third person pronouns / possessive adjectives both in the singular and plural: *his* view, *their* last market research, *he* suggests..., *he* is bound to..., *he* is waiting for..., *put him* into perspective, *that experience will help him*.

The disassociated experience also involves a meta position or neutral perspective (third position) focused on witnessing the interaction between the first and second positions; thus, the 'observer' position is typically a point of view outside of the communication loop, "a basic and powerful perspective for effective modelling" (Dilts and DeLozier, 2000, p. 941), which uses 'third person' language, such as *he is, him, that person*. Disassociation in our previous example of third position is also facilitated by verbal patterns presupposing distance in either time or space, such as *that experience* and *over there*.

The results emphasize that one of the greatest challenges to salespeople is to discover their customers' buying motives by understanding what shapes their decisions socially and psychologically.

4.5. Labour relations

In labour relations, the emphasis is on building trust and relationships with people, getting along with workers, having leadership skills, helping others to be motivated, mastering interpersonal communication and conflict resolution. This will give a boost to workplace relationships, make work experience less stressful and more enjoyable and guarantee a close bond between union and management.

Case study and useful phrases:

An organisation that takes into account the thoughts, needs and expectations of its workforce will support initiatives more effectively, gain more cooperation and productivity, and prevent serious disruption to output. This may lead to a two-way joint relationship between managers and workers; in this scenario, managers sit at a table and focus on what is in everyone's mutual interests. Here is how we will use the same *triple description* technique to show the importance of maximizing workers' productivity and attracting an adequately qualified workforce.

a) *Technique used – First position*

e.g. In *my job I set* clear work objectives for a specified period. *I usually try* to offer a salary plus small merit bonuses to stimulate teamwork and individual contribution. *I now intend* to link performance-related pay to appraisals schemes. *I hold* fortnightly meetings to monitor everybody's progress closely and finally *I carry out* performance appraisals to evaluate work up-to-date. Obviously, whenever *I find* that employees are troubled with working to deadlines under pressure and things get more frantic due to factors *beyond my control*, *I urgently extend* schedules to allow for more reasonable time spans. By doing so *I feel in control, connected* with *my employees's* work and *have a hand* in all my goals. *My staff* are aware that *I like* to push wise decisions to the front line and they always come to *me* for advice if they encounter challenges.

(an adapted and improved version of Trappe's and Tullis's *Intelligent Business. Coursebook – Intermediate*, Unit 2 - Leadership – Audioscripts, 2005, p. 162)

◆ *Analysis:*

Specifically, in *first position*, the participant in the loop uses words like: *my job, my employees' work, my staff* (possessive adjectives); *beyond my control* (prepositional phrase), *I set objectives, I carry out appraisals, I extend schedules, I have a hand* (collocations preceded by 1st personal pronoun *I*); *feel in control, feel connected with* (kinesthetic phrases).

b) Technique used – Second position

e.g. *You shape* the daily schedule for the tasks and activities of each team member, and *you've been overseeing* the department's activities successfully like this for many years. *You know* that it proves helpful to people to count on a strong, visionary leader. They undertake day-to-day tasks, but sound decisions should come from a cool head and *it's you* who has the final say in how the activities are run. In *your view*, learning to delegate is a useful management tool. Once you've done that, it is very important that *you make people feel motivated* and *give them the credit* for their own work. What's more, you also *need to* provide your employees with a sense of space so you *can encourage* initiative and new ideas. If *you've chosen* the most dedicated people to put you in a leading position then *you should let* them know that they will make a difference to the company's future.

(an adapted and improved version of Trappe's and Tullis's *Intelligent Business. Coursebook – Intermediate*, Unit 2 - Leadership – Audioscripts, 2005, p. 162)

◆ *Analysis:*

In *second position*, the participant is disassociated, and is temporarily taking another person's position, addressing *first position self* as "you" (as opposed to *I, me, my*): *you shape, you know, you make, you need* (verbs in the present tense simple); *you've chosen, you've been overseeing* (verbs in the present perfect simple/continuous); *you should let, you can encourage* (modal verbs); *in your view* (prepositional phrase); *you give them the credit for* (collocation).

c) Technique used – Third position

e.g. *He is keen to* reach objectives or goals set out for them, because *he knows* that when workers are appraised or evaluated they'll get their bonuses or increases in salaries based on whether they met those goals. *His belief* is that getting work done through others requires open and productive relationships with workers. Rather than creating a climate of fear, *he prefers* giving clear instructions and realistic deadlines and taking care not to upset employees. *He works towards* creating a positive working environment where employees feel valued and trusted. *He feels* it is essential to maintain the balance of power, not lose his authority even when certain subordinate members take control of projects. *His idea* is to ensure that *he is in tune with* his workforce needs and wants and engage workers via meaningful work and productivity.

◆ *Analysis:*

In the *meta position*, the witness to the interaction receives information about the balance of behaviours in the loop. This position assists in improving the quality of someone's state and relationship within the communication loop. The observer / director position uses language such as *she, he, they* with reference to the persons you are observing: *he is keen to..., he knows, he prefers, he works, he feels, his belief, his idea, he is in tune with...*

In my opinion, the *shifting* of perceptual positions, from one perspective to another, contributes to the ability to understand the flow of events that occur within the communication loop. According to Dilts and DeLozier (2000): "The idea of triple description is that out of this dance of multiple perspectives, wisdom may begin to unfold. The ability to move from my personal map to an understanding of your personal map, and then to an objective position of the relationship between our maps, creates a basis for wisdom" (Dilts and DeLozier, 2000, pp. 1480-1481).

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the ability of business people to observe and move into the different perceptual positions of the individuals they are interacting with is essential in building better rapport, as well as pacing and leading those individuals. Moreover, it is highly necessary for reaching goals which include coming to an agreement in customer care, leading a meeting, putting forward and approving proposals, conducting a negotiation, giving a presentation.

In addition, the benefit we gain is by detecting the interlocutors’ word signals, gestures, expressions, and then harmonize one’s language with them. Once we discover *how* our business partners are thinking, it becomes much easier to adapt to their mode of perception, learn and incorporate their vocabulary into one’s own vocabulary to create a better sense of rapport.

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