

Are You Deceiving Yourself?

By Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2016, distributed December 7, 2016

Make no mistake. You ARE deceived. And YOU are the major contributor, because you determine the meaning of all input that comes to you! As a human being, you can't avoid being deceived. Your emotional brain leads you perpetually on a "feel good" quest, not on a "truth" quest.

You move in the direction of that which satisfies and pleases you, and you unwittingly and automatically move away from anything that generates anguish or pain, emotional or otherwise.

As a leader, you either undershoot or overshoot the truth about the effect you have on the people around you. What you think about your performance is often quite different from what people say about your behaviors to each other. I'm not suggesting others are more (or less) accurate--only that you probably don't comprehend how the many people you influence perceive you.

You'd expect competent leaders to have corresponding confidence. However, self-deception influences confidence, sometimes artificially raising it, sometimes dramatically lowering it.

Are you a leader whose confidence exceeds your capabilities? People may experience you as prideful, condescending, or judgmental. Humility is a trait you may neither understand nor value.

Conversely, are you a skilled leader who lacks appropriate confidence? Do you intentionally bypass or otherwise fail to pursue opportunities to productively serve, perhaps when "stretch" is involved? Failure to contribute your unique capabilities hurts your team and your team's customers.

As we humans engage the world, we do what we think is right and/or believe will accomplish our objectives. The experience of others as they engage with us, however, is often surprisingly different. We can see that distinction occasionally when we are a third-party observer of others. However, that discrepancy is almost impossible to recognize when I am (or you are) the action figure.

Still not convinced that you are deceived and contributing to your own deception? On youtube.com, find Cortney Warren's TEDx presentation entitled "Honest Liar--The Psychology of Self-Deception." Within ten minutes, you'll shake your head and wonder if you EVER tell yourself the truth!

If self-deception is so prevalent and "normal," you may wonder why you should even be concerned. Here's why. Your failure to aggressively seek the truth hurts you and everyone around you!

Is it even possible to become a more honest acknowledger of what is? YES! And many leadership development experts advocate that "self-awareness" is the single most important trait for a leader!

So, the logical question is, "How do I become more self-aware?" I suggest three things.

First, pay more attention to how you feel, think, and behave, and notice intentionally how people respond to you. Expand your efforts to learn about the art and science of leadership. Read, seek out experts, experiment with new approaches. Cortney Warren suggests psychotherapy. A more accepted approach for many leaders is to seek the services of an experienced executive coach.

Second, aggressively seek honest feedback. If your organizational culture is one where feedback is not actively sought and courageously volunteered, you will have to work hard to convince people you want the truth. Be an assertive role model in moving your organization's culture in that direction!

Finally, look for "Aha!" opportunities. When you open yourself to the truth, all kinds of paradigms and beliefs will be challenged. The more openly you collaborate with your colleagues, the more willing they are to offer feedback, and the more enthusiastically you'll consider new possibilities.

To be more effective as a leader, become more self-aware. Grab a trusted colleague, talk together about this article, and commit to help each other overcome the tendency toward self-deception!

NOTE: I just discovered this article, which supplements the above with more scientific evidence.
Dennis Hooper, March 29, 2018

We All Think We Know The People We Love. We're All Deluded

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Nicholas Epley, *the John Templeton Keller Professor of Behavioral Science at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business*. He is the author of *Mindwise: Why We Misunderstand What Others Think, Believe, Feel, and Want*.

The average human brain contains roughly 100 billion neurons, each of which is attached to thousands of other neurons, meaning that another person's brain is likely to be the most complicated thing you will ever think about. And yet, despite this dizzying complexity, you and I routinely guess what's going on in the mind of other people almost as easily as we breathe.

It takes only a split second to form an impression about another person's intelligence or intentions, guess what our spouse or a homeless person is feeling, and predict what a political opponent is thinking. You can even leap quickly to conclusions about people in situations you've never experienced before, from what's going on in the mind of our president to the mind of a homeless person begging for food. Making judgments about another person's mind is easy. Making judgments accurately, however, is hard. In fact, our research indicates that it is surprisingly hard.

Consider, for instance, an [experiment](#) that Tal Eyal, Mary Steffel and I conducted that put people's beliefs about their mind reading abilities to the test. We recruited people who we thought would know something about each other, namely romantic couples. These couples had been together for an average of 10 years. Fifty-eight percent were married.

One person in each couple played the role of Responder, reading 20 statements and reporting how much he or she agreed with each one on a scale ranging from minus 3 (strongly disagree) to 3 (strongly agree). These statements included, "I would like to spend a year in London or Paris," "I would rather spend a quiet evening at home rather than go out to a party," and "Our family is too heavily in debt today."

The other member of each couple played the role of Predictor, guessing how his or her partner would respond to each statement, and also predicting how many of the statements he or she guessed correctly. Think of this as something like *The Newlywed Game* for science.

Our Predictors believed they guessed an average of 13 items out of 20 exactly correctly. In truth, the task was much harder than our predictors expected. They actually guessed only five, on average, correctly.

The problem with our inferences about others is not incompetence, but hubris. We tend to think we understand each other better than we actually do.

So what's a person trying to understand the most complicated thing on this planet to do? Dale Carnegie offered a suggestion in 1936: Principle 8. In what has become the Bible of social relations, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Carnegie describes his eighth principle as a method that will "work wonders" for you: "Try honestly to see things from the other person's point of view." That is, do some perspective-taking.

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Even if you never read Carnegie's book, his suggestion has a powerful ring of common sense to it. Indeed, the vast majority of people we surveyed predicted that actively adopting another person's perspective would help them understand another person better in a variety of ways, from understanding another person's reaction when looking at a picture to predicting movie preferences.

Our research, however, suggests that this bit of common sense is at least somewhat mistaken. When we tested the impact of perspective-taking on accuracy in a series of 25 experiments we recently published, we found no evidence that actively considering another person's perspective systematically increased accuracy.

If anything, perspective-taking tended to decrease accuracy, including in the romantic couples study I described earlier. This experiment included another condition in which one member of each couple was asked to put themselves in their partner's shoes before predicting their partner's responses. This perspective-taking actually decreased accuracy compared to the control group I already described, but it slightly increased the number of items these perspective-takers thought they had predicted correctly. Perspective-taking may work some wonders for your social life, but understanding another person better does not seem to be one of those wonders.

Instead, accurate insight reliably comes only when you actually gain knowledge about what it is like to be another person. We refer to this as perspective-getting, as opposed to perspective-taking. The easiest way to get another's perspective is by simply asking them to describe what's actually going on in their minds in a context where they can report it both honestly and accurately.

This solution may seem painfully obvious, but it is not so obvious to people who are in the midst of actually using it. The romantic couples study I've described included another condition in which predictors were given a chance to ask their partner to report their feelings about each of the statements before predicting how he or she would respond. This increased accuracy dramatically, even though those who asked did not have any more confidence in the accuracy of their judgments than those who guessed their partners' reactions. Even those who take the right approach to understanding the mind of another person — asking directly and listening carefully — seem unaware of how much they had learned.

True insight into the minds of others is not likely to come from honing your powers of intuition, but rather by learning to stop guessing about what's on the mind of another person and learning to listen instead.

NOTE: I just discovered this article in Scientific American by Matthew Hutson:

www.scientificamerican.com/article/living-a-lie-we-deceive-ourselves-to-better-deceive-others/

The articles supplements the article above with more even scientific evidence.

Dennis Hooper, April 21, 2020