PSYCHOLOGY & HUMAN NATURE

No One Understands You and What to Do About It

by Heidi Grant Halvorson

Others never see the real you - they see you through three lenses. Learn the lenses and fix the picture.

BEST POINTS FROM THE BOOK

01 **Others never see the real you - they see their version of you.**

We assume people see us objectively, and as we see ourselves. Both assumptions are wrong: perception is biased, incomplete, and largely automatic.

02 **You think your intentions are obvious. They are not - that is the transparency illusion.**

Most times you thought 'I made myself clear,' you didn't and they don't. Your face and tone say far less than you believe, so the signals you mean must be sent on purpose.

03 **Perception runs in two phases, and phase one usually wins.**

Phase one is a fast, automatic verdict built from stereotypes, appearance, and body language. Phase two - the fair, effortful look - only happens when a perceiver is motivated and not distracted.

04 **People see what they expect to see.**

Confirmation bias: an expectation - from a stereotype, a rumor, or a past encounter - filters everything after it. Evidence that fits is absorbed; evidence that doesn't is explained away.

05 **First impressions do not just count - they interpret everything that follows.**

The primacy effect makes the earliest verdict the lasting one. Later behavior gets read through it, which is why the first meeting carries weight far beyond its minutes.

06 **The trust lens is checked first: friend or foe?**

Before anything else, perceivers size up your trustworthiness from two signals - warmth (are your intentions good?) and competence (can you act on them?). Every later judgment builds on this one.

07 **Show warmth before competence - skill without warmth looks like a threat.**

Competence without warmth suggests a potent foe. Eye contact, listening without interrupting, and keeping your word read as warm and principled; posture and track record carry the competence.

08 **Through the power lens, the powerful ask one question: are you useful to me?**

People with power over you pay less attention and lean harder on stereotypes. To be seen clearly, spell out your instrumentality - exactly how you help them reach their goals.

09 **Through the ego lens, never make the person judging you feel smaller.**

Perceivers want to feel they - and their group - come out on top. Be modest and inclusive, affirm their strengths, and build a sense of 'us,' so your success stops feeling like their loss.

10 **Match your message to your perceiver's focus: gains for the eager, safety for the vigilant.**

Promotion-focused people chase gains and hate missed chances; prevention-focused people guard against losses. Framed in their own motivational language, the same request lands twice as well.

11 **An anxious or avoidant perceiver will misread your closeness, not your content.**

About half of adults are insecurely attached: the anxious read rejection into neutral signals, the avoidant keep their distance. Patience, empathy, and plain reliability are the counter-signals.

12 **A bad impression is not fixed by one good deed - flood it with proof.**

To force phase two, evidence must be plentiful, attention-getting, and clearly inconsistent with the old verdict - then piled on. Beating the next five deadlines by a week rewrites what one missed deadline wrote.

THE BOOK, IN SHORT

You assume other people see you as you are - and as you see yourself. Social psychologist Heidi Grant Halvorson says both assumptions are false. We judge each other through shortcuts, stereotypes, and old expectations, and we suffer the transparency illusion: we believe our intentions are obvious when they are anything but. The person others react to is often someone you would barely recognize.

Perception runs in two phases. Phase one is fast and automatic: a snap verdict assembled from appearance, role, body language, and whatever the perceiver expected to find - confirmation bias then protects that verdict by absorbing what fits and discounting what doesn't, and the primacy effect makes the first verdict the frame for everything later. Phase two, the slower and fairer look, costs real effort, so it only happens when a perceiver is motivated - which is why most people, most of the time, stay in phase one.

Halvorson groups the phase-one filters into three lenses. The trust lens asks friend or foe, reading warmth (good intentions) and competence (ability to act on them) - and competence displayed without warmth registers as a potential foe. The power lens means people with power over you

judge you in shorthand, asking mainly whether you are instrumental to their goals. The ego lens means that anyone you make feel insecure or small will see a warped, unflattering picture of you.

On top of the lenses sit the perceiver's own settings. Promotion-focused perceivers watch for gains and missed opportunities; prevention-focused ones watch for losses and threats to the status quo - and each hears a message framed in the other's language poorly. Attachment styles bend things further: anxious perceivers scan for rejection, avoidant ones resist closeness, and roughly half of adults fall into one of those two camps.

The fix is not faking - it is sending the signals you actually mean, on purpose. Warmth before competence. Usefulness, spelled out, for the powerful. Affirmation for fragile egos, and the right motivational language for each focus. And when an impression has already gone wrong, the book's final part gives a repair plan: overwhelm the old verdict with repeated, unmistakable, hard-to-ignore evidence, and give the perceiver reasons - fairness, and needing you - to do the phase-two work of changing their mind.

DO THIS WEEK

This week, pick one person whose picture of you matters. Run the lens check first: through trust, do they see warmth yet, or only competence? Through power, have you ever said plainly how you help their goals? Then act on the answer - open your next conversation with two minutes of real listening and interest before any of your own content, and name one specific way your work serves what they are trying to do.

By Heidi Grant Halvorson, first published 2015 (Harvard Business Review Press). Read it if you have ever walked away thinking 'that is not who I am' - and want the tools to fix it.