Overcoming managers’ perceptual shortcuts through improvisational theater games

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Abstract

Purpose – To present an improvisational theater game (ITG) workshop design that allows participants to surface their perceptual shortcuts, practice alternative behaviors, overcome biases, and expand their repertoire of managerial skills.

Design/methodology/approach – The ITGs described in this paper were originally presented by the authors to management professionals in US classroom settings from approximately 1995 through the present.

Findings – Managerial processes involving interpersonal communications are imperfect because they are greatly influenced by perception. Perception often involves shortcuts, however, which may have significant negative effects on managerial functions, but these effects can be mitigated by applying ITGs – a particularly effective method of arts-based experiential learning – to management development.

Research limitations/implications – This is not an all-inclusive workshop design of ITGs for management development, but one example for practitioners’ use. Many other ITGs exist outside of this design. Also, this workshop was tested and presented in the USA only, thus its utility in other countries cannot be generalized from the findings.

Practical implications – A step-by-step guide on conducting ITG workshops, with a discussion of how and why they can be effective.

Originality/value – This paper provides detailed technical resources for practitioners who wish to incorporate ITGs in their management development programs.

Keywords Theatre, Management development, Perception, United States of America

Paper type Technical Paper

A vital part of the human learning process includes perception. This is the capability of a learner to classify cues and meaning gathered from the environment, process the assembled message, and operate based on this process (Noe, 2001). In the absence of time, energy, or other resources, people often take shortcuts in absorbing and processing information; and this tendency is not excluded from the organizational context. These perceptual shortcuts – and the biases that result – have potentially serious and far-reaching implications for organizations. For example, the effectiveness of selection and appraisal functions varies depending on the accuracy of managers’ perceptions of others (Dipboye, 1982; Feldman, 1981; Mitchell et al., 1981; Vredenburgh and Brender, 1998; Webster, 1982), and the quality of interpersonal workplace interaction is influenced by the perceptions of employees (Labianca et al., 1998).
Perceptual shortcuts occur when the perceiver categorizes the perceived and infers something about the perceived based on past experiences. Such judgments are made quickly, without attending to objective information. Perceptual shortcuts may function as heuristic cues in social information processing, reducing a person's data processing load. This reduction effect can be especially useful to managers due to the limited human capacity for processing information. Shortcuts also allow a quick response when the perceiver has inadequate resources or does not care to engage in more thoughtful analysis (Bodenhausen et al., 1996).

Misunderstandings may be caused by varying interpretations of what organizational members perceive as “right or wrong” (McLean, 2001). Individuals use all the knowledge they have to make the “right” decisions, but the knowledge each person uses to interpret objects and events is a function of prior experiences, mental structures, and beliefs (Jonassen, 1991). In perceiving others and interpreting what they mean to us, we make meanings of their actions and ascribe motivations to them. For example, our perceptions lead us to make judgments about others, whom we then treat based on these judgments rather than who and what they really are (Jones, 1990).

The increasingly rapid pace of organizational life may increase the managerial use of perceptual shortcuts, deterring them from vigilantly attending to and accurately processing both tangible and intangible cues in the work environment (Corsun and Enz, 1995). Due to environmental and internal constraints, managers may avoid consciously examining their perceptions – and organizations may take them for granted – until a significant threat occurs.

Management development programs that incorporate theatrical or arts-based techniques can help protect long- and short-term organizational health and success by increasing the use and impact of conscious perception in managerial behavior (Schreyögg and Höpf, 2004). While minimizing the use of perceptual shortcuts in simple decision-making does not guarantee the same effect on complex decisions in ambiguous environments, accurate information processing may increase decision-making quality. Development programs that target perception and behavior can arrest dysfunctional interaction patterns, which may significantly lower the cost of doing business (McLean, 2001).

In this paper, we discuss the implications of taking perceptual shortcuts and present arts-based experiential exercises (see Gibb, 2004 for an overview) that can help to correct them. These exercises, based on improvisational theater games (ITGs), were presented by the authors to management professionals in US classroom settings from approximately 1995 through 2004. ITGs teach managers about perception by:

- surfacing participants’ perceptual shortcomings; and
- enhancing their perceptual accuracy by increasing their data gathering and processing capabilities.

Perception and perceptual shortcuts defined
Understanding the limits of how people process information is crucial to managerial development given today’s rapid organizational tempo. Humans come in contact with an enormous volume of environmental stimuli on a daily basis, but cannot process all of it. For example, the human ear has the capacity to distinguish 11,000 separate tones and the human eye can discriminate 35,000 different hues, but the human mind can process only about seven pieces of information at one time (Miller, 1956). As a result of the disparity
between what the sense organs can register and what the mind can process at one time, individuals selectively perceive data and organize it into categories of thought, thus summarizing large quantities of information into a single classification.

They way managers select data from the environment is based on many factors, including environmental cues and the perceiver. The perceiver comes to an interaction with expectations related to the perceived and/or the interaction itself. These expectancies may be:

- category-based;
- target-based; or
- normative.

Category-based expectancies reflect individual or societal beliefs about some group (e.g., all Asians are good at math and science). Target-based expectancies use one’s a priori knowledge of the perceived (e.g., because a person is good at math, he or she is also good at science). Normative expectancies are related to what a person anticipates an interaction may entail (Jones, 1990), and can be culturally influenced because of situational behavioral norms. Category-based and normative expectancies tend to be less reliable than target-based expectancies – which are more specific, and cognitively demanding (Jones, 1990). These expectancies are based on group and/or cultural data rather than individual level data, usually grounded in personal experience with the target individual.

Using expectancies as a data source, instead of actual environmental cues, can be considered a perceptual shortcut (Jones, 1990, p. 88). Perception is influenced by expectancies in that “our expectancies ... reflect knowledge structures ... that influence how we select and interpret information about a specific person”. In essence, our beliefs about the world, and the people in it, shape the data we attend to, and how we respond to that data. The impact of expectancies is reflected in the tendency to select information that conforms to one’s beliefs and ignore that which conflicts with them, i.e. a confirmatory bias. Confirmatory biases, imperfect information processing, and a lack of resources such as time, effort, or motivation relate to three perceptual shortcuts commonly observed in the workplace: stereotyping, halo effects, and implicit personality theories.

Humans do not always process information in a logical or rational way, especially in the workplace (Gore, 1995). People are not computers, and do not merely shuffle information. Instead, they use it as a learning tool by continually interpreting the world and testing those interpretations (Schwier, 1991) in comprehensive cognitive processes. Information is omitted, however, when perceptual shortcuts replace more comprehensive cognitive processes.

One common way information is omitted is through stereotyping. The stereotyping process classifies individuals into groups according to diffuse, visible criteria (i.e. culture, nationality and race). As group members are observed in particular activities, behaviors, traits, abilities and personality attributes are perceptually connected to the activities, and are determined to be typical of all members of a group (Eagly and Steffen, 1984).

Another example of information omission is the halo effect. Halo effects occur when one characteristic of a person influences the perceiver’s impressions about the person’s other characteristics – with a detrimental outcome similar to stereotyping. Physical attractiveness and height are common halo effects (Dion, 1972; Frieze et al., 1991), and tend to be associated with increased power and intelligence.
A third way that information omission may occur is through implicit personality theories, which occur when individuals group traits together (Bruner et al., 1958) when perceiving others. For example, orderly people can be assumed to also be punctual and efficient, accountants as quiet and uninteresting, entertainers as spontaneous and outgoing. While these are simple examples,

Stereotyping (Falkenberg, 1990), halo effects (Cardy and Dobbins, 1986; Smither et al., 1989) and implicit personality theories (Krzystofiak et al., 1988) are perceptual shortcuts that can significantly influence managerial functions and daily decision-making. Research findings show that perceptual shortcuts are associated with erroneous managerial judgment, i.e. unrealistically high performance evaluations. Supervisors’ positive feelings toward their direct reports have been found to explain more of the variation in performance appraisals than do objective performance indicators (Alexander and Wilkins, 1982).

Some perceptual shortcuts may be perceived as positive if they increase the efficiency of interpreting environmental information. However, the likelihood of error increases as an individual goes further beyond the information provided to infer abilities and traits to the perceived. As the data attended to increase in quantity and accuracy, the probability of perceiving accurately increases (Jones, 1990). Subconscious cognitive processes can increase the efficiency of interpretation, but perceptual shortcuts rarely achieve this because they lower the quantity and accuracy of data a person processes.

Creating an awareness of perceptual shortcuts
Creating awareness in learners that a “problem” exists is an important step in dealing with the negative aspects of perceptual shortcuts. Managers can override personal biases of all types with proper training, development, and support (Cisneros et al., 2003; Friedman et al., 2000); however, learners tend to disbelieve that they take perceptual shortcuts. Many think their perception skills operate like a video camera, attending to and recording every piece of data in the environment. For this reason, lectures or traditional classroom learning methods may not be effective. Telling learners they use perceptual shortcuts may not be as effective as demonstrating it (Gist, 1996; Yorton, in Friedman, 2000). The success of such efforts may improve when participants have the opportunity to be fully involved in learning activities - specifically in practicing desirable behaviors (Noe, 2001).

Cognitive development theorists believe that personal development can occur if participants “are ready for development to occur” and a stimulus is present to “challenge the individual, to upset an existing psychological equilibrium . . . or upset the individual” (Sanford in McEwen, 1996, p. 56). Improvisational theater games use both of these factors to maximize management development. Moreover, the scenarios in which learners engage act as meaningful coding schemes and enhance the transfer of content (Ormrod, 1999).

Experiential learning methods “demonstrate,” rather than “tell” the effects of perceptual shortcuts. Experiential learning is “a participatory method of learning that involves a variety of a person’s mental capabilities. It exists when a learner processes information in an active and immersive learning environment” (Feinstein et al., 2001). These methods require that participants “involve themselves fully, openly and without bias” (Kolb, 1984, p. 236). When hesitancy, withdrawal, or biases surface, perceptual shortcomings reveal themselves and the learning begins.
The history and contemporary development of ITGs

Several learning methods are classified as experiential, notably role play, games, and simulation. Improvisational theater is a game that has no “script.” Creativity is pushed to an extreme as participants are given little other than the environment around them to construct meaning in various exercises. This focus on the environment forces an open assessment of all environmental cues; participants are made aware when some cues are missed or misinterpreted. More typical “non-theater” games have a “prescribed setting and are constrained by rules and procedures” (Hsu, 1989, p. 409), which prevents a dynamic, in-the-moment environment from developing.

Games have a long history of application in management development (see Greenlaw and Wyman, 1973; Wolfe, 1985, 1993), but the application of ITGs is relatively new (for a comprehensive review of theatre and improvisation, see Gibb, 2004). Over the centuries, improvisational theater has evolved into many forms. The ancestor of modern improvisational applications, the Commedia Dell’Arte, was popular throughout Europe for almost 200 years from the mid-1500s to the mid-1700s. Troupes of improv performers traveled from town to town, presenting shows in public squares and on makeshift stages. A scenario was set, and dialogue was entirely improvised within it. Improvisational theatre faded as the industrial era approached until it was revived by Keith Johnstone and Viola Spolin for use in drama training (see Johnstone, 1981; Spolin, 1983).

Theater games were originally devised to teach actors to open up to the “phenomenal world” (Spolin, 1983, p. 14) and create reality on the stage. However, “not everything is performance” in the theatrical sense. In management development, theater games can be viewed as rehearsals that help managers understand perception and improve their data gathering and processing capabilities through performance in a controlled environment. Participation in ITGs may increase the capacity for taking in information, sharpen management-dependent sensory skills, and temporarily detach perceptual biases, namely “preconceptions, interpretations, and assumptions” (Spolin, 1983, p. 15). When these biases are absent, managers can approach the environment objectively and strategically. Instead of relying on perceptual shortcuts, managers may be more able to act in ways that foster organizational innovation, improvisation, and change (Cunha et al., 1999).

The current popularity of ITGs

ITGs are quite popular in today’s workplace (Beckwith, 2003) for a number of reasons. First, they are particularly good for improving and assessing interpersonal skills (Wiener, 1999), of utmost importance to supervisors at all levels. It has been suggested that the best selection criteria for managers is the intuitive ability to know how to behave in different circumstances, but this ability and others – notably judgment – are often crippled by managers’ perceptual biases. ITGs eliminate this problem by allowing managers to process more environmental cues, minimizing perceptual shortcuts that foster a “one size fits all” managerial approach.

Second, gaps between learning and working environments are often so large that managers are unable to build a bridge and apply the new lessons to the old workplace. ITG development, however, is readily transferable. The interpersonal improvisation used in ITGs is a large part of managers’ daily lives in the workplace (Corsun and Enz, 1995), and the “imperfections and imprecision arising from the persons and
personalities present ... makes [games like ITGs] somewhat reflective of the
decision-making environments real organizations represent” (Feinstein et al., 2001,
p. 735). Also, once managers uncover “deficiencies” in their perception, bridges are
built as soon as they begin communicating with others in the workplace.

The immediate nature of ITGs’ work-related benefits may increase managerial
motivation to apply ITG techniques. Enhanced interpersonal skills can give managers
more flexibility in their decision-making and leadership approaches (Greenberg and
Baron, 2000; Mullins, 2001) and the strengthened ability to interpret outside cues
(Crossan, 1997). ITGs also reduce the psychological risk that may accompany
participation in change, enhance interpersonal trust, and improve work-related
creativity and collaborative effort (Cunha et al., 1999; Moshavi, 2001).

Third, ITGs “provide a synthesis of information and entertainment” (Gibb, 2004,
p. 741), increasing participants’ engagement in development activities. This
engagement has been noted in many arts-based traditions, such as forum theatre
(Gibb, 2004), theatre of the oppressed, Agit Prop (Smith, 2003), Image Theatre, story
development, and sociodrama (Moreno, 1953). Additionally, when conducted with
respect for participants and their learning processes, ITG is a non-threatening,
arts-based, management development exercise that can access and surface perceptual
shortcuts which might otherwise lay dormant.

Concerns about ITG implementation
Organizations may hesitate to use ITGs because of two main areas of concern. The first
concern is the claim or myth that ITGs are a “magic pill” to solve managerial problems.
In reality, few to no development methods are magical or guaranteed – ITGs included.
Many programs fail to make a difference in the quality of supervision subordinates
receive after a manager returns to his or her position. However, ITGs combat this
tendency by providing managers with an applied understanding of psychology, which
research has shown to improve managers’ on-the-job problem-solving,
decision-making, and interpersonal skills (Gore, 1995). The end goal of ITGs, while
never guaranteed, is change in managerial behavior. As noted by Gibb (2004, p. 748),

With improvisational theatre, the desire and the intention is to actually change how people
think and feel, so that they will behave differently. This is contrasted with the standard
instructional conceptualisation of such learning; where a trainer is responsible for initiating,
directing and controlling learning and development.

The second concern is a question of which learning theories underpin ITG applications.
ITGs admittedly lean toward constructivist philosophies (Phillips, 2000) by
recognizing that knowledge is a sense-making process that learners gain from
experience and situation (Richardson, 2003). Some learners require highly prescriptive
solutions, whereas others are more suited to control their own environment (Schwier,
1995). ITGs are flexible enough to match learning types across the spectrum from
introductory to expert, and to accommodate learners and instructors with various
theoretical preferences.

The instructional guide presented in the Appendix includes exercises with levels of
difficulty ranging from beginner to more advanced. This cognitive approach to
instructional design increases in order of complexity, moving from prerequisite
learning to learner control of the outcomes. In such a design, learners can be introduced
to the main concepts of perceptual shortcuts and then move on to a more self-directed study that is meaningful to them and the context of their particular work roles (English and Reigeluth, 1996; Hoffman, 1997).

**ITG instructional design**

Although ITGs have been applied successfully in a variety of learning environments (e.g., Lobman, 2003), ITGs are geared toward adult learners, relying heavily on andragogical (adult learning) principles and leaving pedagogy (child learning) in a peripheral role. Four assumptions compose the foundation of adult learning (Knowles, 1980), all of which are addressed in ITG instructional design. These assumptions state that adult learners prefer:

- self-directed learning;
- performance versus subject-centered learning, with immediate application of knowledge;
- developmental tasks that are similar to their social roles; and
- to be treated as a learning resource due to their experience.

Noe (2001, p. 87) adds the fifth assumption that “adults are motivated to learn by both extrinsic and intrinsic motivators”. ITG introductory exercises take little time to complete, and content quickly moves to more advanced methods in which participants can actively shape the learning experience. The exercises immediately immerse learners in the instructional content, using interpersonal encounters and everyday observations to which all learners can relate. Last, ITG participants are the core resource through which learning occurs, since learning quality hinges on learners’ participation and examination of their perceptual processes.

**Applying ITGs to managerial development**

Traditional games may have less interaction among participants than ITGs, and may favor competition over collaboration. In contrast, ITGs borrow elements of role play to highlight interaction and collaboration, which are valuable processes in today’s interdependent global economy. ITG interaction is wholly based on interpersonal ties removed from the constraints of scripts, expected roles and contexts, and the noise of everyday work environments. This allows deeply-rooted perceptual shortcuts to surface.

For managers to avoid using perceptual shortcuts and allow optimal information processing to occur, two levels of expectancies must be removed. The first level consists of category- and target-based expectancies. ITGs focus attention on the present, forcing people to respond quickly to environmental cues and encouraging them to process information based on experience. When the constraints of managers’ inner expectations and biases are removed, their responses can become spontaneous, intuitive, and based on actual data present in the environment instead of category- and target-based expectancies.

The second obstacle, normative expectancies, relates to the way managers as people are socialized throughout their human development. Interactions with the environment are mediated by an individual’s desire for outside approval, especially from sources of authority (Johnstone, 1981; Spolin, 1983). Theater games remove normative expectancies from the equation by demanding direct and open involvement with the
cues in the here-and-now environment (Spolin, 1983). When people do not attend to all environmental cues as they occur, perceptual shortcuts may affect their observations.

A basic exercise that uncovers the perceptual effects on observation asks learners to place a hand over the face of their watches. When asked to recall whether the watch they are wearing has a second hand, Roman or Arabic numerals, or simply “tick marks” where numbers would be, most learners are at a loss. The object here is to help them recognize that they do not simply pay attention to all data in their everyday environment. In a similar vein, a written set of questions about common objects such as currency, postage, and common consumer goods can highlight that informational cues are often taken for granted when perceived to be of low importance – regardless of cause.

After learners become aware of their observational shortcomings, they are ready to experience perceptual shortcuts firsthand by participating in ITGs. This instructional technique involves role-playing where there are no “written scripts” (Moshavi, 2001). The instructor’s guide (see the Appendix) provides a list of recommended improvisational theater games and explanations of their use. The guide also includes the exercises and corresponding support materials appropriate for surfacing perceptual shortcomings.

The games presented in the teaching guide are sequenced for participants to:

1. discover their perceptual shortcomings;
2. develop basic observational and improvisational skills; and
3. test those skills at a more advanced level.

Although instructors could feasibly teach a 1-2 hour perception workshop using these materials, extra time allows more challenging exercises to be incorporated. Currently available improvisational texts offer a wealth of exercises to from which instructors may choose, but Improvisation for the Theater (Spolin, 1983) and Impro (Johnstone, 1981) provide an excellent foundation for advanced management development.

Conclusion

Perceptual shortcuts influence many interpersonal managerial activities. Although perceptual shortcuts lighten the load of excessive information processing, they negatively affect the quality of managerial activities such as performance appraisal and employee selection (Alexander and Wilkins, 1982; Webster, 1982; Cardy and Dobbins, 1986; Vredenburgh and Brender, 1998).

As the demand on individuals’ information-processing in the business environment increases, flexibility and accuracy are critical to managerial and organizational success in the dynamic world. This is reflected in the increasing volume of literature focused on “organizational improvisation” (Cunha et al., 1999). The literature indicates there can be great benefit for organizations from implementing arts-based or theatrical exercises such as ITG when participants are able to draw a parallel between their practice experiences and real-life ones (Meisiek, 2004). Such approaches can reduce or eliminate problems associated with perceptual shortcomings and increase managers’ interpersonal competence. The exercises and games described here are designed to uncover perceptual shortcuts, help managers learn to modify them, and hasten the development of flexible, accurate information-processing styles needed in today’s organizational environments.
References


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Further reading


Appendix. Instructor’s guide

(Please attend to the following considerations for the learning environment (adapted from Newby et al., 1996) when implementing the instructional modules included in this guide: provide comfortable seating; provide adequate ventilation; control temperature; provide suitable lighting; and arrange seating so that all learners can observe and hear.)

In introducing the topic of perception, we recommend that, rather than explaining the process of perception, the instructor begins by surfacing participants’ perceptual shortcomings. Learners seem more energized and engaged in learning about perception once they have learned of, and begun to overcome, their shortcuts. Instructors may observe that participants become increasingly involved as their perceptual ability is challenged. As this occurs, they attempt to become better perceivers with each surfacing exercise and exert great effort to attend to the cues provided them. Interestingly, in our experience, the desire to be a better perceiver is usually not enough to make one so. It is not so easy to shed the expectancies learned over a lifetime.

Additionally, some of the exercises below may be easily recognizable to readers with prior knowledge of perception and/or theater games, begging the question, “Why are the exercises not more advanced?” The answer is twofold. First, not all managers are familiar with these exercises or the topic of perception despite their experience and education. Learners who recognize the exercises may be surprised by fellow classmates who do not. It is critical that learners become aware not only of their own perceptual shortcuts, but of the shortcuts that others take as well. Second, participants with prior experience in these exercises may still take the same perceptual shortcuts that were surfaced, and warned against, earlier in life. Revisiting the concepts of perception over time dissuades learners from falling back into old routines once they return to the workplace, and points out the reality that perceptual habits are hard to break. Similarly, the theater games and exercises chosen for this workshop are purposefully basic. Internationally, most managers and executives do not have theater or drama experience and will likely have difficulty executing on more advanced, sophisticated games. The skills and self-awareness the workshop is designed to build are more than adequately addressed by these games. While for some a particular game may not be new, the learning derived from it is likely to be.

Exercises for surfacing perceptual shortcomings

Setting the stage for ITG implementation. The appropriate classroom environment should be developed prior to engaging in any of the improvisational games. To introduce the learning objectives and the concept of perceptual shortcuts, participants can work through exercises that some may have completed in undergraduate courses or their own learning initiatives. These exercises provide an effective springboard for the classroom improvisation experiences.

A brief discussion of the flaws inherent in expectancy-based perception (i.e. confirmatory biases, stereotypes, halo errors, and implicit personality theories) is an effective transition into an introduction to improvisational theater games and their role in improving managerial functions. After discussing the learning objectives of the games, the instructor should spend a few moments laying the foundation for the improvisation by stating the rules of play.

It is important that all involved agree to abide by a few simple rules:

1. participants must act and react honestly and immediately;
2. participants must suspend all judgments of self and others; and
3. participants must reward effort, participation, and active engagement regardless of outcome.

When improvising, the goal is not to be clever or funny, but to act and react in the immediate moment. The context-dependent constraints individuals place on their expression is thus removed, allowing perceptual shortcuts to be detected. This is the most basic and fundamental tenet.
Second, judging other group members can intimidate the class and compromise rule number one, bringing the learning process to an abrupt halt. What is said and done during the improvisations cannot be taken out of context. First thoughts and seat-of-the-pants reactions to unusual – perhaps even embarrassing – situations cannot be treated as ammunition against any participant, in or out of the classroom. The collective and individual progress of the learning group is contingent upon established trust and risk-free personal expression.

Third, instructors must stress that the learning process is more important than the outcome (Vera and Crossan, 2004). As in the business world, lessons need not be severe to be meaningful, and a situation itself is not as important as what can be learned from it. For instance, if participants have few to no perceptual shortcuts in areas highlighted by an exercise, they should be applauded. Next, discussion might delve into why biases in this area are rare, and where perceptual problems frequently occur among group members. Learning can occur in any context if members are willing to undertake the process.

Preliminary exercises for the managerial development of perception. Many people have a rather inflated sense of their perceptual abilities. The first three exercises outlined below are designed to surface participants’ perceptual shortcomings. The two remaining set-up exercises involve preparing the participants for the ITGs by providing: first, a general introduction to ITGs that is encouraging and efficacy building; and second, an opportunity to establish trust.

Exercise 1: Bird in the hand
The diagram provided in Figure A1, having been copied onto a transparency, is projected for participants to view. The following instruction should be given prior to showing the diagram: “I will turn the projector on for less than a second, but long enough for you to see what is on the screen. Please do not tell anyone what you saw until I specifically call on you to tell the whole group.” At this point, project the figure for approximately one-half second. This can be easily timed by turning the projector on, pausing for a beat, and turning the projector back off.

When called upon, most participants respond that they saw the phrase “bird in the hand.” However, almost invariably, at least one person will have read the phrase as it appears – this is more likely among learners who may have prior experience with this exercise. After soliciting participants’ perceptions, project the figure again, this time for several seconds. As participants are confronted by the first evidence of their perceptual imperfection, introduce the concept of normative expectancies and briefly discuss the role they play in perception. In this exercise, individuals were probably expecting to see “bird in the hand” because they selectively saw the words “bird” and “hand” and ignored the rest of the words. Similarly, a manager may attend to only an employee’s skin color, sex, or job title and conclude, for example, that she or he could not possibly have good ideas for cutting costs, rather than listening to the ideas before rendering a judgment.
Exercise 2: Confronting stereotypes
Many people have heard the following riddle: “A father and son are driving together one evening. The road conditions are poor due to the weather. They get into a serious car accident and the father is killed on impact. When an ambulance arrives, the son, barely alive, is rushed to the hospital. The surgical resident in the emergency room examines the boy quickly and decides he cannot treat the patient without first consulting the chief of surgery. The chief of surgery, arriving moments later, rushes into the emergency room, looks at the child and says ‘I cannot operate on this child. He is my son.’ How is this possible?” The answer, of course, is that the chief of surgery is the child’s mother. Yet few people respond correctly and most do not respond at all, because the data does not conform to typical category-based or normative expectancies.

The previous exercise surfaces perceptual shortcuts that are both auditory-specific and stereotypical in nature. Any number of variations on this theme can be constructed based on the experiences and demographics of the group members participating. Instructors should be forewarned, however, that their own perceptual shortcuts may surface in constructing exercises for the learning group. This exercise can be processed by asking about the workplace implications of participants’ failure to recognize that the chief of surgery was the boy’s mother. If a further prompt is required, one might ask about how female job candidates for managerial, especially top executive, positions are likely to be viewed. If women, as a group, are not seen as “executive material,” is the playing field level for them?

Exercise 3: Often overlooked, everyday data
In addition to taking perceptual shortcuts, many of which are flawed, people do not fully attend to and/or process much of the available data. This exercise is designed to surface that there is much we overlook. Exhibit 1 contains a list of questions regarding objects that are part of the

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Test your powers of observation:
1. Which way does Abe Lincoln face on a penny?
2. In which hand does the Statue of Liberty hold her torch?
3. What is the highest number on an AM radio dial?
4. How many tines are on a standard dinner fork?
5. What two letters do not appear on a standard telephone dial?
6. Most US postage stamps give their denominations with a number plus:
   a. cents;
   b. c;
   c. ¢
7. On the back of a $5 bill is the Lincoln Memorial; on a $10 bill it’s the Treasury building; on a $20 bill the White House. What’s in the center of the back of a $1 bill?
8. If a common pencil isn’t cylindrical, how many sides does it have?
9. Does “Coke” or “Coca Cola” appear on every can of the soft drink?
10. How many shapes are in the CBS “eye” logo?

Answers:
1. left – his nose points right
2. right hand
3. 1600 or 160
4. usually four
5. Q and Z
6. c
7. no picture, just the word ONE in large letters
8. six
9. both
10. three – a circle inside a football inside a circle.

Source: Indianapolis Star Magazine (January 6, 1960)
shared cultural experience of most, if not all, US residents. We recommend presenting the questions one at a time, soliciting responses from the group. After participants have “voted” for their preferred response, the correct answer should be given.

You may choose to update the questions with more contemporary themes or information specific to your group’s background. It should be noted that what constitutes “common knowledge” is culturally influenced. As such, the questions in Exhibit 1 are culturally bound, rather than broadly applicable. It is the type of questions that may be used that we wish to demonstrate here more than it is the actual questions themselves.

One can process this exercise by beginning with several questions. What workplace data are you failing to observe? Are you able to provide accurate feedback or performance appraisal to people when you miss details? What do you think influences whether or not you attend to details and to which details you attend?

Exercise 4: Building self-efficacy
The next piece of groundwork is to encourage participation and build self-efficacy. Perceived self-efficacy is defined by Bandura (1986, p. 391) as:

People's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances. It is concerned not with the skills one has but with the judgments of what one can do with whatever skills one possesses.

Self-efficacy correlates to both performance and behavior (Bandura, 1997; Stajkovic and Luthans, 1998), and influences people to set higher personal goals (Bandura, 1986; Locke and Latham, 1990; Wood and Bandura). Instructors may wish to monitor the self-efficacy of group members and determine the effectiveness of various exercises for use in future workshops.

One source of efficacy information is verbal persuasion. To leverage this source, the instructor should inform the participants that improvisation is something everyone can do (Spolin, 1983), and the key is to focus on the activity, rather than the feeling of being observed. In two-person games, tell them that they should stay centered on making their partners look good by focusing on the moment and paying attention to and responding to every cue provided by the partner. When each is focused on the other’s success, both players look great.

The following example from the theater illustrates the importance of these coaching tips. In the theater, two actors may play a scene night in and night out for months, even years. If one evening, something unexpected happens (e.g. one actor has a facial tic) and the other ignores it, playing the scene as each night before, the audience recognizes that something is wrong. The actor, by ignoring the tic (a strong cue), ignores the environmental cues noticed by the audience, to the detriment of the performance. An environment-sensitive actor who incorporates the cue into the scripted action enhances the performance. Beginning with more basic exercises allows for participants to experience some early success, increasing efficacy through enactive mastery. Finally, when the instructor models the desired behaviors prior to participants engaging in them, the vicarious learning that takes place from watching a behavior model builds efficacy.

The last essential piece of groundwork to establish before moving on to the ITGs is trust. It is imperative that the instructor leads the process by modeling the desired behavior. This practice lowers group members’ anxiety about participating in the exercise that follows and increases their self-efficacy.

Exercise 5: Self-disclosure/trust
To complete the introductory part of the workshop, the instructor introduces the exercise that participants will undertake, explaining that he or she will go first to model the behavior. Participants are instructed to introduce themselves to the group and take three to five minutes to describe an emotionally-significant turning point in their lives.
There are several reasons this is a particularly effective opening exercise. First, self-disclosure is a form of risk-taking. As such, it encourages the group to develop trust and communicate openly. It is also a powerful aid in transforming individuals into a cohesive and committed team. Eventually, individuals may develop trust, cohesion, commitment, and open communication on their own, but self-disclosure greatly accelerates the process (Bowen and Jackson, 1986).

After laying down the rules, establishing some measure of trust in the environment, and encouraging participation, one is ready to commence with the theater games.

**ITGs for improving perception**  
**Listening to the environment**

Begin by asking participants to recall how incomplete their data gathering is. Tell them that the first exercise is one that requires them to concentrate and probe the environment for auditory cues, and instruct them to close their eyes. Ask participants to keep their eyes closed, and listen to the environment, and remember the sounds they hear. After a minute, ask the participants to open their eyes and tell you what they heard. Responses can be recorded so all can review what others heard. Next, discuss what it means to take cues for granted in management: i.e. what is heard and ignored may be potentially vital information in managing organizations. Managers who fail to actively listen, taking 100 percent responsibility for understanding workers and customers in the way in which they wish to be understood, put themselves at a disadvantage. Environmental cues are perishable and, if ignored, lost forever.

**Offer and accept.** This exercise requires the participants to work in pairs, with everyone engaged in simultaneous play. Discuss the difference between accepting and blocking offers. Tell participants they should begin to think of environmental cues as offers. In life, they choose to either block or accept each offer made to them. Next, ask participants whether they tend to block or accept offers more frequently. Most people admit that they block far more offers than they accept. To follow up, ask, “What are some ways we block offers?” Individual responses generally include ignoring, turning away, pretending not to hear, and talking over a person. Next (if no one offers this response) ask what single, small word is the most frequently used block in the English language. The answer is “no”. Nothing will neutralize or kill an idea, a conversation, or a relationship more quickly. Facilitate a brief discussion about why we block offers so frequently, revisiting the notion of perishability. When two people accept each other’s offers, synergy occurs. Ideas are hatched, relationships born, and conversation seems effortless.

Demonstrate the behavior first with a volunteer. Instruct the class by saying to the volunteer: “I will make an offer to you, which will be non-verbal. This means I will be making some physical gesture or expression, which you will accept by responding with another gesture or expression. Your acceptance must be non-verbal. Speaking is only allowed after an offer is accepted. At this point, I will simply say ‘thank you.’ After you accept my offer and I thank you for doing so, we will trade roles and you will make a non-verbal offer to me.” Examples of non-verbal offers are extending one’s hand for a handshake, sticking out one’s tongue, pointing at another with one’s elbow, and doing the twist. After trading offers with the volunteer, instruct the rest of the class to pair off and trade offers with a partner. Each person should make and accept at least one offer.

Process this exercise by asking how it felt to accept these peculiar physical offers. Participants generally respond that they felt “weird”. Talk about the sources of this weirdness. Participants are not used to matter-of-factly accepting every offer made to them. Moreover, the newness of this experience is heightened by the fact that all environmental cues (or offers) must be attended to. This exercise promotes better data gathering by reframing cues as offers, and engaging participants in the routine acceptance of them. The “ignore it-block it” mode is abandoned in favor of a “see it-accept it” mindset. The resulting interactions positively reinforce the desired, accepting behavior.
For some managers who are particularly focused on hierarchical status, their knee-jerk reaction to employee suggestions is to be dismissive. This is certainly a form of blocking, and is likely to limit future employee involvement. Contrast this negative example with one in which the organizational culture promotes acceptance rather than blocking. In many firms that are heavily reliant on research and development (R&D) to generate new products, failed product launches are celebrated with the same gusto as are the successes. The reason for such acceptance is that R&D is a creative endeavor. While it is certainly important to launch successful products, it is the creative activity itself that drives organizational success. Blocking, in this case by failing to celebrate – or even worse, by punishing – a failure, might shut down creativity.

Tag. This game is rather advanced; however, it can be used with beginners. Explain that this game will allow the participants to employ the skills developed in the previous two exercises. The rapid pace of tag forces back-to-back offer recognition, processing, and response. Instructors can side-coach while participants play, point out missed or blocked offers, and refocus them on their partners and the activity at hand.

Introduce the game by explaining that as with “offer and accept”, two people will work together at a time. Ask for a volunteer to begin the exercise with you, and ask the group to suggest a fictional relationship for the two of you (e.g., two doctors, spectators at a football game, dentist and patient, etc.). Starting the scene with a relationship, rather than a situation or scenario, forces the players to respond to data in the environment instead of their scenario-based preconceptions. For example, given the scenario of a doctor informing a patient that she or he has terminal cancer, the player acting the part of the patient might respond based upon category-based expectancies about terminal cancer patients. Here there is less a priori information provided. Players must attend and respond to the offers made by the other player in order for the action to progress.

After you have established what your relationship will be, continue by explaining that the two of you will play a scene together, the basis of which is the relationship you have chosen. Whenever one of the other group members feels so motivated, she or he may call “freeze.” When a freeze is called, you and the participant will stop action and hold your positions. At this point, the individual who called the freeze comes forward and tags one of the two of you. The tagged person then departs and the new player assumes the physical position in which the departing player was frozen. Stress that each time a pair of players unfreezes, the scene they play must be different from the previous scene. No one tells the players what or when to play. The action begins when one of the players spontaneously moves or speaks. The basis of the new scene is an attempt to justify the physical position from which the two players are beginning. The only data the players have to go on is their physical position. If they are having difficulty gaining momentum, side-coach by reminding the players to work with the data they have. Ideally, the game should continue until everyone has played at least once. You may encounter very gregarious participants who may limit opportunities for their more timid peers. If this occurs, gently suggest that the frequent players permit everyone to play.

It is important to let participants know that if they do not call freezes, usually one every thirty to forty-five seconds, you will begin to do so. Make certain they understand that if you start calling freezes, you will also be volunteering people to play. Remember to side-coach and do not permit participants to ignore their physical starting positions. Most of these starting points are fertile. The physical position is data – an offer that, once recognized and accepted, will result in a satisfying and entertaining scene.

One approach to processing tag is to discuss the nature of managerial work. The work environment is such that the flow of stimuli is constant and many situations require quick, read-and-react responses. How quickly one recognizes the verbal and non-verbal signals, and how well one responds in the moment may mean the difference between enrolling someone in an employee assistance program and having that person harm her or his coworker(s). Improvising, particularly playing games like tag, improve data-gathering and response skills. Rather than unconsciously blocking data, one can recognize it and make a conscious choice to accept and process it.
Debriefing
Improvisational theater games are highly interactive and involve a great deal of physical movement. Hence, most participants find them energizing and enjoyable to play. The down side of participants’ excitement is the possibility that they may lose sight of the lessons learned. Therefore, even though each exercise and game is processed after it is conducted, it is important to facilitate a general debriefing to ensure participants understand the messages from this set of experiential exercises.

The session can be debriefed in several ways. One may choose to:

(1) Elicit from the participants what they learned about perception generally, and about their own tendencies specifically.

(2) List completed activities and reiterate learning objectives for the participants.

(3) Assign a short essay asking participants to summarize what they learned about perception and how the exercises and games assisted in their learning.

(4) Have participants work in duos or trios to discuss work situations they have encountered in which their flawed and/or incomplete perception produced a negative outcome. Encourage them to discuss how the skills they acquired via the workshop might have helped them produce more positive results.

(5) Ask participants to consciously apply the lessons and skills learned via the exercises and games for some reasonable period of time. This application period should be followed up by a short written assignment in which participants describe differences in their perceptual abilities and difficulties encountered as a result.

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