

**Book Review**  
**NO ONE UNDERSTANDS YOU**  
**AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT**

**Author:** Heidi Grant Halvorson | Harvard Review Press  
**Boston, Massachusetts, Year of Publication:** 2015,  
**Publisher:** Hard Bound, Page. 213, Price 695

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Human beings have a proclivity to garble other people's feedback to fit their own views. We are often misconstrued by people around, regardless of our efforts to communicate clearly. Communication is vital, however, the irony is that people have a remarkably tough time when it comes to knowing what exactly they are communicating. We assume that other individuals see us as we see ourselves, and that they see us as we truly are. However, the uncomfortable truth is that our daily interactions are often shaped by subtle biases that alters how other people perceive us and also alters our perceptions of them. When people don't come across the way they intend to, it becomes vexing, resulting in disconnect that may lead to big problems in their personal and professional lives. Heidi Grant Halvorson, author and social psychologist clearly states that "the aim of this book is to facilitate an understanding of how other people really see us, and give us tools to alter our words (when necessary), and actions so that you can send the signal you want to send". The book is divided into four parts, the details for which are provided in the ensuing sections.

**Part I - Why it's so hard to understand each other:** In Chapter one of Part I, Halvorson outlined the weak association that exists between how others see us and how we believe we are seen. People fall prey to two kind of perceptions, firstly, other people see us objectively as we are, and secondly, other people see us as we see ourselves. They usually harp on assumptions like "I made my intentions clear" or "he knows what I meant", which we didn't and he doesn't, thus, making their victimization to transparency illusion very clear. Perceiving people including yourself accurately is perhaps the most difficult thing as no one is an open book. Moreover, people are complicated, and their words and actions are riddled with ambiguity and open to interpretation. In Chapter 2, a number of insights from different set of researches have been skilfully used to let the reader understand the implications of various perceptual biases. It discusses how perceivers as cognitive misers spend very little of their mental energy to get the things done. Undoubtedly, individuals are bombarded with lot

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of things to notice, understand and act on. While processing the information, people as cognitive misers adopt their favourite shortcuts viz., heuristics and assumptions. Confirmation bias is one of the most prevalent and influential assumption that governs our perception about other individuals. Once we form an impression of someone, we tend to look selectively at his or her behaviour to find confirming evidence that our impression is correct, rather than looking at the evidences available. Stereotyping is another very common assumptive behaviour the mind uses to categorize similar things. At times, people unconsciously rely on stereotypes to interpret the words and deeds of their counterparts. Halo effect too, is a perceptual bias in which multiple positive qualities are attributed to someone simply because they possess one positive quality. Another assumptive tendency (false-consensus effect) that people unconsciously fall prey to is that they believe other people think and feel like they do, and their negative qualities are normal and possessed by others too. However, when it comes to goodness, they see themselves as more virtuous than other individuals, thus, experiencing false uniqueness.

The later chunk of Part I introduces reader to the two phases of perceiving people. Phase I of perception is quick, effortless, lacks conscious intent, and is largely uncontrollable. Consequently, the perceivers form automatic and effortless assumptions using shortcuts without being mindful of the fact that their perception is punctured with all kinds of bias. Correspondence bias is one such perceptive behaviour, wherein the perceiver assumes that others actions are reflection of their personality, character, or abilities, without even considering the wider context, essentially the situational forces or underlying circumstances. Phase II, often called the correction phase requires investment of mental energy, time, and motivation, and feeds on what Phase I doesn't take a note of i.e., situational factors. In Phase II thinking, perceivers are aware of biases and stereotypes, and seek understanding beyond what they perceive overtly. To conclude, while Phase I thinking addresses the "what," Phase II addresses the "why."

**PART II - THE LENSES THAT SHAPE PERCEPTION:** Part II of the book takes the reader through a series of lenses viz. the trust lens, the power lens, and the ego lens. The key is to understand various lenses people view others through.

**The Trust Lens:** "Are you friend or foe?", "Can I trust him?" are some of the questions which a perceiver seek answers for while meeting someone for the first time. The perceiver's trust is chiefly based on the extent of warmth and competence conveyed during the interaction. Warmth connotes intention towards the perceiver, while competence signals potential to confirm up to those intentions. In later section, the paradox between warmth and competence is also pointed out. To deal with the paradox, Halvorson stresses upon projecting those qualities of warmth that are not considered incompetent. Particularly, 'leaders' while attempting to inspire trust and loyalty must prioritize warmth over competence.

**The Power Lens:** The power lens is more situational in nature, and is worn by powerful people. It stresses upon the returns a powerful person is likely to get upon investment of his time and mental energy. As a result, the powerful person in any given situation is likely to view others in terms of their usefulness, and not the other way around. Research has also demonstrated that those in power are less likely to invest in knowing you, relying instead on stereotypes and prior expectations to form their opinions of you. In other words, to be clearly seen through the fog of power, instrumentality is the key, and for the powerful, instrumentality isn't about being nice, it's about being useful.

**The Ego Lens:** The mission of ego lens is to protect perceiver's self-esteem. The strategies deployed by the ego lens to fulfil its mission are: firstly, to know how the perceiver is better than you, secondly, how you and perceiver belong to the same group, and lastly, the qualities possessed by you are not threatening to the perceiver. If the first three strategies are not applicable, then your good qualities are threat to perceiver's self-esteem. Hence, you must be ducked or sabotaged to neutralise the perceived threat. The degree to which a person's accomplishments poses threat to the perceiver's self-esteem, is a function of relevance and closeness. When both relevance and closeness are high, the perceiver will try to maintain greater distance to protect his or her self-esteem. The author advocates the role of modesty and affirmation for neutralising and diffusing such threats. Additionally, creating an "us" mentality by identifying commonalities and de-emphasizing comparisons also pre-empt the ego threat.

**PART III- Lens for Particular Personalities:** The preceding chapter emphasised on how the trust, power and ego lens are worn by all of us at some or the other point of time. However, there are other lenses that are specific to particular types of people or personalities, which the author has delineated in this section of the book. It is interesting to see how the personality driven lenses come with unique biases. An understanding of the personality based lens through which others might be perceiving the world will certainly pave the way for speaking the right motivational language while communicating with the perceiver. As human beings, we engage in activities whose purpose is both to safeguard what we already have, and to further enrich our lives. In other words, some of us tend to see what we do as being first and foremost about advancing, while many of us see what we do as being about playing safe. It is in this backdrop, Heidi has identified two distinct lenses viz. promotion focus and prevention focus. Promotion focused people seek and seize opportunities to become better off than they are at present. On the other hand, prevention-focused perceivers believe in staying safe with what they already possess, and are cautious, deliberate and analytical. These lenses effect the perceiver's tendency to judge the persuasiveness of various arguments and evidences. As a case in point, a regional league in the German Football Association had players practicing penalty shot kicking. Players were provided one of two instructions: "You are going to shoot five penalties. Your aspiration is to score at least

three times." and "You are going to shoot five penalties. Your obligation is to not miss more than two times." According to Halvorson, Promotion focused players outperformed when told to score three times out of five. The influence was even greater for prevention focused players, who scored nearly twice as often when told to "not miss more than two times". The use of prevention or promotion focus is situational in nature, but people usually have a dominant lens to look through. The author has also provided a set of cues viz. age, emotional tone, job role that can be used to identify our own lens and that of the perceiver's. For instance, success makes promotion-focused people feel elated and excited. On the other hand, prevention-focused people tend to avoid the limelight and believe in disaster avoidance.

**The Clingy, Anxious Perceiver and the Aloof Avoidant Perceiver:** This chapter of the book takes the reader through various mental models that are formed during the early childhood. Psychologist John Bowlby in his study of child development figured out three ways in which children become attached to their care givers. These are kind of lenses that are products of early life experiences. For instance, securely attached children have caregivers who are receptive of their needs, and can count upon their adults for comfort and help. They are confident and relate well with others. A securely attached person looks through the secure lens. They are easy to get along and don't have trust issues. Anxiously attached children, as the name depicts, are anxious about their relationships. Such children have loving, but unreliable, neglectful and inconsistently responsive caregiver, as a result they become sceptical of their parents trust and affection. They act out to get the caregivers attention and are get easily upset when the desired attention is not given. To communicate effectively with an anxiously attached person, ambiguity avoidance is the key. Avoidant attached children, on the other hand, are unresponsive to the caregivers affection and attention as they never got it, therefore, they never expect it. People wearing avoidant attachment lens prefer to maintain emotional distance, and do not trust others completely. To communicate with avoidant-attached personalities, over-friendliness should be avoided as it makes them uncomfortable. Relationship building with avoidant attached is time taking, and requires a long term view.

The last chapter, interestingly, delivers insights on how to correct bad impressions and overcome misunderstandings. If someone ends up making a bad impression in Phase I and now looking forward to repair the damage, then it's time to take measures that will let the perceiver enter into Phase II, also known as the correction phase. It gives a ray of hope to the reader that it's never too late to fix a negative first impression. In doing so, the author crisply pointed out ways that can do wonders to revise the perceiver's opinion. The first way is to bombard them with overwhelming evidences that their impression of you is wrong. Secondly, make them revise their opinion of you by activating their inherent desire to be egalitarian, fair and unbiased.

Emphasizing on 'mea culpa', which essentially relates to apology, the author pointed out that sometimes it really works to get someone's attention and revise the opinion already formed. However, it is a very tricky affair. But, if done correctly, apology leads to improved feelings and relationships. Some of the strategies to get the apology right as suggested by the author are: Don't justify, imagine their perspective, restore a sense of 'us', and know your audience. In the end, the author succinctly describes the compensation vs. empathy component of apology. "Who am I talking to and what they are looking for in my apology" is what one needs to understand while flavouring apology with ingredients of compensation or empathy. For e.g. the spouse whose feelings you hurt, doesn't want compensation, rather it is the expression of empathy that will make him or her feel understood and valued as a partner in relationship.

To conclude, "No One Understands You and What to Do About It" is worth reading for those who want to ensure they are better understood by others. It will definitely help the reader to get the premise that we get others to perceive us as we really are. It offers guidance on how to communicate with others who are different from you, thus, making it a valuable reading for all those who interact in a social setting. The book features many real-life cases to aid readers understand the key points. The author has beautifully provided exhaustive descriptions of the unconscious drivers that shape people's perceptions and provides a practical guide to overcome misperceptions. Halvorson clearly excels at synthesizing a great deal of academic research too. Additionally, most chapters end with a key takeaways segment that summarizes the chapter's main themes. But it's not until the very last page that the author takes note of an important element which is based on the premises that we are also pretty bad at perceiving ourselves. The image we produce in our minds usually doesn't match with how we actually act. The book leaves the reader with strategies to enhance how we're perceived by others without extending any guidance to better understand ourselves through their eyes. Without greater self-awareness, feeling of misunderstanding is likely to persist as more often than not, it's our own perception that is at fault. Nevertheless, the book is riveting and extremely useful.