

How to read people

By Mark H McCormack - ABOUT THE AUTHOR **Mark H McCormack** is the author of *WHAT THEY DON'T TEACH YOU AT HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL*; *NOTES FROM A STREET-SMART EXECUTIVE* and is founder of the International Management Group.,

THE BIGGEST MISTAKE people make, both in business and daily life, is going into an encounter with preconceived notions of how it should turn out. In order to get what you want, you must adjust yourself to the situation – not the other way around.

If you know how to read people, you can use that knowledge and be flexible enough to change direction before it's too late. Learning skilful people-reading can have an enormous and positive effect on your interactions with others.

Aggressive listening

Very often people simply aren't listening when the other person says something very informative, either directly or indirectly.

Example: A friend of mine, an executive at Pepsi, told me he would have saved his company a lot of time and money if he'd been a better listener. Pepsi had been trying forever to get Burger King to carry Pepsi in addition to Coke, not thinking that Burger King would ever drop Coke. The focus of Pepsi's presentation was to give the consumer a choice, since Burger King promoted choice in its advertising. But Burger King told Pepsi time and time again that it only had room for a limited menu, including one cola (it didn't say which cola). Pepsi finally got the big idea, and changed its pitch to stress the corporate similarity between Burger King and Pepsi: That they were number twos going after number ones. So wouldn't it make sense to kick Coke out and bring Pepsi in? After this pitch succeeded, an executive at Burger King mentioned that they'd been trying to tell Pepsi the same thing for months. They were glad someone finally listened. To become a good listener you must pay attention to your listen/talk ratio, making sure there's plenty of silence on your end. Use the silence to let the other guy show you where he's really coming from. Listen to the intonation and inflection in his voice, and consider the adjectives he's using.

Aggressive observation

Think back to when you were a teenager. You knew the best time to ask Dad if you could borrow the car for the weekend was after he had had his evening drink and read the newspaper. We're all good people-readers or we would never have made it through childhood; but we tend to forget this basic skill as we grow older. Much of people-reading involves making elementary, common sense observations and then acting on them.

Example: While you're making a sales presentation, the phone rings. Your prospect, obviously agitated by the call, says angrily into the phone, "tell him I will call him back in 10 minutes." So now you must squeeze a 20-minute presentation into 10 minutes. Instead of rushing, suggest that, since this is obviously a bad time, you would be happy to come back at a more convenient time. People are often unable to switch gears when something unexpected happens. They try to force-feed the situation instead – always a losing proposition.

Observation tips

- **Don't generalise.** Conventional wisdom says that if someone slumps in his chair he's not very commanding, or if he leans forward he's ready to make a deal. However, I've seen a lot of erect, attentive types who hung on my every

word but never made a move. Any useful observation must be considered in the context of the particular situation.

- **Learn the difference** between posture and posturing. Look out for people who lean in toward you, who push things back on the desk at you, who sit back and strike poses, who dress pretentiously, who do strange things with lighting, or who have your chair placed lower than theirs. All those things are keys that you're dealing with a phony, someone who's more concerned with appearance than with accomplishment.
 - **Look at the eyes.** People communicate with their eyes in situations where silence is called for. The next time you're in a meeting with people you don't know, notice the eye contact of the participants. It will tell you who's allied with whom, who is most influential, and, if you're the speaker, whether you're boring everyone to death.
 - **Use ego to your advantage.** Most successful business people are one giant ego with a couple of arms and legs attached. But a giant ego isn't necessarily a strong ego. It may be compensating for low self-esteem. Or someone who seems to have a weak ego may simply be low key. Once you've figured out how secure someone
- is, you can calculate how direct he'll be, whether he'll make a quick decision or vacillate, how consistent he is, etc. When you know these things, you can work with them or around them.
 - **Make inferences** from co-workers and subordinates. I had a series of meetings with a high-ranking executive at a large sporting-goods company. Despite his reputation for competence, he seemed unwilling to commit himself to even minor details. When I later met with his boss, the company chairman, I was prepared for what I found — a man whose ego demanded he make all the decisions.
 - **Take the fish out of water.** People tend to reveal themselves in unexpected ways when outside their usual settings. For this reason I favour breakfast, lunch and dinner meetings. Even the way someone treats a waiter can be very revealing. I once had lunch with a business prospect at a very exclusive restaurant. When the menu came, he said he was on a diet and would have only a cup of coffee. Then the waiter arrived to take our order, and I asked him again if he was sure he wouldn't have something small, maybe a salad. He immediately changed his mind and said, "I'll have whatever you're having." This gave me a clue as to how firm his "final" position in a negotiation might be.

What this Means To You

The more you know about divining a person's hidden agenda or real motives, the stronger your position will be.