

WOULD YOU WANT TO BECOME YOUR PERCEPTIONS?

by L. Michael Hall Ph.D.

The other day I got thinking about fire hydrants. I don't know why. I was running along a sidewalk and gradually I became aware that the string of my running shoe felt loose. With that awareness a thought popped into my conscious mind, "The laces of my right shoe would soon come undone." In a nanosecond I knew that meant stopping to tie the shoe again. At that very instant I open my eyes to the outside world (because I had been inside having that one-second dialogue) and seeing a fire hydrant I realized I could stop there at fire hydrant and tie my shoe.

But at that moment I was running and the momentum took me past the fire hydrant and, not wanting to stop and turn around, I thought, "Next one." As I ran on I then realized something. "I have never seen that fire hydrant before!" Sure, while that's no world-shaking epiphany of an insight, I did find it insightful. After all, I had run that very route for more than seven years and if you had asked me where a fire hydrant was along that route, I could not have been able to tell you. Yet today I saw one for the first time.

Then, I did something really mundane yet which had magic-like effects, I set in my mind that I would look for the next fire hydrant so I could stop, put my foot up on it and tie my shoe. It was all so simple, so mundane, so everyday, and yet some really incredible things occurred because of it.

What happened? Well as I continued running, the crazy thing is that I began finding fire hydrants everywhere. Fire hydrants were suddenly popping into my awareness. As I ran the roads that I had run for so many years, I began seeing fire hydrants! Having never seen one (none that I could recall), suddenly it was as if they were reaching out to me, "Notice me!" "See me!" "Here I am, right here on this corner!"

It was the weirdest thing, almost surreal. I would jog along as usual and suddenly, *Fire Hydrant!* After the third or fourth time I remembered that this is similar to the old NLP exercise where we have everybody close their eyes and ask questions about what color the front, back, and side walls were or what design or words are on them. The great majority don't know. So while they had their eyes open as they entered the room, they had not seen. Everybody would then open their eyes, turn around and look. Upon closing eyes again, we ask about all of the blues in the room and have eyes open and people scanning around to identify all the blues. Then the browns, or reds, or yellows.

We do that to drive home a critical point about perception, namely, *we find what we look for*. Perception is not only made up of raw stimuli. Perception, in fact, is made up 80% of our mind and internal state. Literally, we do not see with our eyes, we see with the brain.¹

Have you ever noticed this? Have you noticed how you tend to find whatever it is that you're looking for? Actually this neuro-cognitive fact reflects a critical factor of how your brain works. Today the cognitive sciences have repeatedly demonstrated that we do not see with the eye, we see with the brain and mind and what we see and perceive in life, in others, in our careers, in our relationships, wealth creation, etc. is more about us than what's "out there."

- Is that scary?
- Do you find that disappointing?
- What does that mean to you?
- How do you *perceive* that?

- Do you feel pessimistic or optimistic about that?
- Is your glass half full or half empty?

All of this reveals the degree that we walk through life as if we have *perceptual filters* coloring what and how we see. And, in fact, that's precisely how it is. Typically we call these perceptual filters "beliefs, values, understandings, intentions, and frames." What controls these *perceptual filters* and what can we do about them? Ah, this is where the adventure, power, and fun of meta-programs begins!

Perception is Not Reality, but it Creates Our Personal Reality

Those who are not very discriminating have taken some of these facts and jumped to the unfounded and false conclusion that "perception is reality." Some even go further and suggest that there is no reality, only perception. Both of these ideas are non-sense.²

What is externally real certainly exists "out there" as the actual territory beyond our nervous system and ability to detect and process it. If that's the territory, then our map of it consists of the various belief frames, understanding frames, intention frames, interest frames, etc. We set a bias within our minds that then guides and directs our perception - that's why we typically find what we look for. In this, perception is not reality, not external reality, but perception does create our *internal* reality, our personal, subjective reality. This also is what makes *perception* critically important in human relationships, marketing, selling, managing, leading, coaching, therapy, change, love, etc.

This ability to *set a bias inside* is what creates the experience we all have had with regard to

buying a new car. Once we begin to think about purchasing a new car, and especially after the purchase, suddenly we can see that make and model of car everywhere! Suddenly we seem to have eyes to see. Suddenly these cars seem to be assaulting our eye balls as never before.

If we “find what we’re looking for,” then the most personal and confrontively challenging questions that I can pose are these:

- What are you looking for?
- What do you care about?
- What do you want?
- What do you expect and anticipate?
- What do you believe?

Asking these questions about what you are *finding* and what you are invites all of us to turn inward and to begin to really explore our perceptual filters. What if we all have a certain set of lens, a kind of mental glasses, like optimism and pessimism, the glass being half full or half empty, and that it is these lens that actually create so much of our experiences, including our emotions and skills? What if the problems and successes that we have are as much a function of our perceptual filters as our raw talent, intellect, or learning?

If this seems preposterous to you, humor me and go with it for just a moment. Just suppose that our sense of reality and our experience of what we sense as real is as much as a function of our mental filters, our perceptual lens - would it not make sense that before we go about investing lots of time and energy into changing the outside world, and the things

we *see*, that we first begin by looking at our own mental lens? Perhaps it’s the color of our lens. Perhaps we need to clean them of other properties.

After all, if you’re looking at the world of people, events, and even yourself, and do so through dirty lens, what you will be seeing will differ from the person who sees through clear lens. And, what about the everyday experience of experiencing some event and ten people walking away from it, all with their own perceptions, views, interpretations, and feelings about it? What creates that? And why do witnesses to an event so often contradict each other and talk as if they witnesses different events? Is it not that each brings his or her own perceptual filter to the event? A biased judge (e.g., any human being), whether on the bench, or in the car next to you, or in bed next to you is just that-biased.

All of this suggests the power and influence of our perceptual filters. So this brings up the personality question, the exploration into personality types and styles, into how we all can differ so radically from each other in what we see and therefore experience. Actually, this isn’t so far-fetched a realization after all. We all know people who seem to wear dark glasses as they go through the world and so see things in dark, gloomy terms. We also all know those who seem to have golden glasses on and exude with optimism that at times seem sugary sweet to the point of being nauseous. We have known those who seem to see red who are easily angered and ready to fight; those who see with the green eye of jealousy, the pale eye of boredom, etc.

Exploring Perception and Experience

All of this suggests that there's a very close relationship between our *perceptual filters* and *style* and our mental, emotional, behavioral, and relational experiences. And there is. We do tend to find what we're looking for. And what we set in our mind to look for does tend to control the perceptual lens that we develop, and once habituated, becomes the way we *do* our style of personality.

Frightening? Exciting? Discouraging? Hopeful? Again, it depends on your perceptual filters, does it not? Which brings me to the domain that specializes in this area, the domain called *Meta-Programs*. These are those programmed ways of thinking, feeling, choosing, and giving meaning that we develop, which when repeated and habituated over a period of time become our default choices. In this we *learn* to see (perceive, think, compute) life, the world, others, and ourselves in a certain way and after a while those interpretative frames *get into our eyes* as our *perceptual frames*.

Then something even more powerful happens. Not only do we see the world via those filters, but those filters operate as *attractors* pulling in, magnetizing, and self-organizing our entire mind-body-emotion system to do service to that way of seeing things. In systems language, the perceptual *filter* becomes a self-organizing attractor within our personality. *How* and *what* we perceive eventually influences and forms the kind of personality we develop. Seeing things through doubt, disbelief, and rejection creates the pessimistic filter which eventually creates the pessimistic personality.

The person who has learned to *think* in terms of possibilities, openness, growth, change, and opportunities eventually learns to see career and business in those terms. Those values

and ways of thinking become his or her *perceptual lens*. And then given enough time and repetition, those perceptual filters becomes that persons *way of being* in the world-his or her personality style. What began as a thought becomes a frame of mind, becomes a perceptual filter, becomes a personality style, becomes personality.

It's that simple; it's also that profound. It also suggests a truly revolutionary conclusion, namely, *when we change our filters, we change our experiences and ultimately transform our personalities*. This, in fact, is now what we now recognize as the cognitive-behavioral foundation for change and renewal. In other words, if you don't like what you are *finding* in the world, what you are finding in relationships, in business, in your finances, in your health, in your personality, etc., there is something that you can *do* about it! You can change your filters.³

The Perceptual Filter Workshop

Now given all of that, suppose that you could identify, detect, communicate to, change, and transform the *perceptual filters* of the people you encounter in your life-suppose you could recognize the filters of your lover, partner, children, friends, colleagues, manager, employees, customers, clients, public and either communicate to their set of lens or begin to invite them to adapt and change their lens? Suppose you could almost instantly recognize the *perceptual filters* people use as they talk to you-imagine the advantages that would create!

- More accurately understand yourself and others
- Enhance powers to communicate persuasively.
- Reduce conflict with people hard to understand or difficult to deal with.
- Enrich ability to make accurate judgments about people.

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- Make more accurate predictions about others
 - Increase emotional intelligence about yourself and others.
 - Give more pleasure in experiencing the richness of others.
 - Increase control over your own responses to others.
 - Enhance ability to market, sell, negotiate, and close deals.
 - Expand greater flexibility in recognizing patterns in the moment.

All of this is what makes our *perceptual filters* and those of others so important. Perceptual lens explains why we find some people hard to communicate with, get along with, and understand. Yet when we understand what filters a person is using and how to deal with it - we suddenly are empowered in ways almost unimaginable, are we not? Then we understand what's going on, that the problem is *not* the person, but the filter, the frame.

Talk about a healthy and non-judging way to look at things! Recognizing the cognitive-behavioral fact that we all move through life with mental frames and perceptual filters helps us to acknowledge that “problems” arise not because of us or others, but because of the particular lens we’re using. This is especially true if a person uses a mis-matching frame, a strong-will frame, a pessimistic frame, a golden-glasses frame, etc. And by being able to speak to others about their filters or lens as something apart from them, enables us to bring up “touchy subjects” without evoking defensiveness. Now imagine that!

Now if you think that this whole domain of perceptual filters is something new, think again. It’s been around for decades in various psychologies and in the mid-1980s it became a domain of NLP called *Meta-Programs*. Since then several books have been written on Meta-Programs applying

them to therapy, business, culture, relationships, coaching, sports, etc.⁴

The good news is that there are trainings in Meta-Programs around the world, trainings that apply these perceptual filters to managers and leaders, for coaches and therapists, for sales people and marketers, for lawyers and doctors, for judges and politicians, for parents, lovers, and friends.

Summary

- If our perceptual filters or meta-programs are this powerful in our mind-body-emotion system influencing our relationships, career, health, personality, etc, the more we are able to detect and work with them, the more empowered we become, the more we are able to take charge of our own life and destiny.

- As cognitive-behavioral or mind-body-emotional beings we have no choice but to create our own perceptual filters. Mostly we adopt the ones around us and then learn some others. Yet they are learnable, they can be changed. Discover how to identify and transform your perceptual filters via learning the Meta-Programs model. You will be glad that you did!

About the Author

L. Michael Hall, Ph.D. got his doctorate in Cognitive-Behavioral psychology (Union Institute University, Cincinnati, Ohio) and after years of working as a psychotherapist became a best-selling author, entrepreneur, and modeler of excellence. Today he is a leading visionary leader in NLP and Neuro-Semantics, prolific author and developer of models in business, coaching, and creativity. Michael authored the best-selling book on Meta-Programs, *Figuring Out People*.

End Notes:

1. See Richard Bolstad’s article in *Anchor Point* on how the brain and eyes work together to create

sight and perception. Volume 18, Number 1, 2005.

2. See www.neurosemantics.com "Perception is not Reality," L. Michael Hall. 2004.

3. For an extensive and academic use of meta-programs, see *The Structure of Personality* by Hall, Bodenhamer, Bolstad, and Hamlett. Fourteen personality disorders are analyzed in terms of the language, states, levels, and perceptual filters that make them work as disorderings of personality with suggestions for re-ordering.

4. Books on the domain of perceptual filters or Meta-Programs include *Time Line Therapy* (1987) Woodsmall and James, *Words that Change Minds* (1997) Shelly Rose Chaveret, *Figuring Out People* (1999) L. Michael Hall and Bob Bodenhamer.