

Shape Perceptions of Your Work, Early and Often

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by Jeffrey Pfeffer | [Comments \(4\)](#)

This election season, like every politically fraught time, offers many lessons in the getting and wielding of power. What you may not appreciate is that the lessons apply not only to politicians but to people in every career situation. Here's a big one: what matters is not so much what you do, but what people *think* you have done.

I was reminded of this by [a New York Times article](#) pointing out that during President Obama's term, Americans' income taxes went down by \$116 billion, but that's a little recognized fact. About half of those responding to recent public opinion poll thought their taxes had remained the same, a third thought they had gone up, and about one in ten said they did not know.

There is an obvious lesson for you in this: don't assume that anyone — your boss, your peer, or your subordinate — knows the good work you are doing. They are all probably focused on their own jobs and concerns. Do things to let them know.

Yes, I know this smacks of self-promotion, and self-promoters are not only disliked for blowing their own horns but not particularly credible in doing so. But there is a way around the dilemma. Research by social psychologist Robert Cialdini, two doctoral students, and myself shows that when you get someone else to sing your praises — even if that individual is hired by you, under your control, and the audience knows these facts — you receive attributions of competence without being tarred by the brush of behaving inappropriately.

If hiring someone is not an option for you, then start relying on the norm of reciprocity. Praise one of your colleagues for her good work and chances are, she will feel obligated to return the favor. When others talk about your great works, those works will garner the attention they deserve.

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There is also a second, more subtle, lesson: When it comes to job performance, be it in politics or in a company, perception becomes reality. This implies that you ought to manage your image and reputation as well as your actual work.

It's important to get started early on this, because perceptions become self-sustaining. This happens, first, because people tend to assimilate new information in ways consistent with their initial perception. John Browne, the former CEO of BP, was smart and hard-working and made sure everyone knew that. He was also shy and ill at ease in social situations, characteristics that might have impeded his rise to the top. But given the image of intelligence he projected in meetings and his willingness to move all over the world and work long hours, social reticence became interpreted as a result of his brilliance and intense concentration.

Perceptions are also self-sustaining because, once people have formed an impression of another, they stop actively gathering new information. Once I know you are smart, I won't attend as much to every little thing you do — which means you can more easily get away with being not so brilliant and I won't notice.

The old saw, then, that first impressions are lasting has real psychological basis. And the implication is clear: the most important time to focus on the image you are projecting is when you first enter an organization or a new job. That's when people are going to be forming their judgments. Get off on the right foot by doing a lot of good work early and also interacting with others in a style that conveys the sort of personal brand you are seeking to build — brilliant, sociable, humorous, serious or whatever image suits you.

And here's the corollary: if bosses and colleagues have formed some *unfavorable* impression of you in your current setting, then find another one. Many people want to "prove" that others are wrong about them — and they may be. But it's a waste of precious time to fight that uphill battle. Why make heroic efforts to dig out of a hole when the same energy spent elsewhere could make you a star?

I'll end with a last piece of advice: do consider having an intentional, strategic, public relations strategy. Cultivate the media, write stories and blogs, give speeches relevant to your industry and area of expertise — in short, become known. When Marcelo Miranda, now the CEO of Brazilian real estate and pre-fabricated housing manufacturer Precon, was named by one of the leading Brazilian business magazines one of the 10 CEOs of the future a few years ago, his future career success was assured. Miranda, a talented and hard working individual, ensured his media exposure — and continues to do so — by reaching out to the business press in numerous ways. As he so perceptively noted when I saw him in Sao Paulo recently, "I now run a private company. If I want people to appreciate how we are growing revenues by a factor of ten in one year, I have to let them know." That's good advice for everyone seeking to rise up the corporate ladder.