

# The Great Divide Between INTENT *and* PERCEPTION

By Ann McGee-Cooper, Ed.D

“How can they be so stupid?” “Why won’t he listen to reason?” “I feel like I am beating my head against the wall!” Most of us have heard (or felt) these types of frustrations at some point in our workplace. And while it may seem to us that *other* people are the problem, the true problem may lie in the gap between INTENT and PERCEPTION. The next time you are working to resolve issues that divide you, use these tips to practice recognizing the difference.

1. Remember that when you do have strong differences of opinion, you have typically told yourself a story many times about “what is wrong.” This can bias you without your knowing it because there is always another side to the story. As we grow in emotional intelligence, we learn to remind ourselves that we may not know everything there is to know about a certain issue.
2. Keep in mind that there can be a huge difference between your INTENT and the PERCEPTION of another person. For example, one team has been hiring ahead of the need so that you will be fully staffed once you win a contract. This is your INTENT. Yet a PERCEPTION might be that you could manage cost more effectively if you wait until the contract is won before beginning to recruit. On the other hand, this might be the INTENT and approach of the other team in a joint venture.



However, PERCEPTION of the first Team might be that their partner is not investing in resources early enough and therefore handicapping the team by being spread too thin. Both sides of this equation are “right” when seen through the lens of INTENT. Yet for each, there is another side to the story, which is the PERCEPTION of the other team. And just as

## The Great Divide Between Intent and Perception

there is “truth” in intent, there is also “truth” in perception.

3. It is critical to use active listening to slow down the dialogue and make sure you are hearing the INTENT. It might sound like this: “Let me make sure I am hearing you accurately. You are feeling unevenly yoked because we are delaying to recruit for the extra talent needed for this job until the contract has been won. Did I get this right?” When you slow down to rephrase the *meaning* of what you heard in your own words, you let the other person know that you heard them fully before answering.
4. Slowing down the dialogue is also critical. Early in the practice of dialogue, it is typical to interrupt and talk over each other in an effort to make your point. This almost guarantees that you will only be hearing your perceptions and miss the intent of the other person. This is one classic example of where “slowing down to go faster” works. The more you interrupt and talk over each other, the less you hear each other’s true meaning and the more you ramp up the adrenaline, which leads to a neural hijack. Are you remembering that when in a neural hijack, we think very simplistically? This will guarantee that you will exaggerate why you are right and the other person is wrong. (Your mind will be thinking that the other person is “stupid” in that we tend to vilify each other when in a neural hijack!) Think about that most recent yelling match you may have had with your beloved spouse or teenager. Nothing good comes from it and both parties leave thinking they are right and the other person is stubborn, resistant and lacking brain cells. Whenever you notice yourself thinking insulting thoughts about another person, you very likely have been influenced by too much adrenaline!
5. Learning to ask clarifying questions is key. “Help me understand your logic. Tell me more about why you took that approach.” Make sure you are respectful and not sarcastic in asking clarifying questions. It is important to be genuinely curious. The more information you

get from the other person, the more likely you will be able to untangle your disagreement. And if things get too heated, call a time out to sleep on the issue or simply return when you’ve had time to assume good will and slow yourself down.

6. Seek what we call Third Right Answers, which means to seek solutions that include what is important for all sides of a disagreement. Once you begin to create genuine Third Right Answers, it gets even easier the next time. The first step is believing that you can create solutions that integrate the best of two opposite approaches to a situation.

You can see from this description that servant-leader style conflict resolution does take some patience and practice. We typically need someone to facilitate as we work our way through this process. Respectfully remind each other to slow down and use these steps rather than barreling ahead into a heated disagreement. The more you argue, the harder it will be to ever truly understand the other point of view because ADRENALINE DUMBS YOU DOWN SIGNIFICANTLY. You will be sure that you are right and the other person is totally wrong but it is because you are in your brain stem (reptilian brain) and have lost contact with the more sophisticated parts of your limbic and neocortex quadrants.

Be gentle with yourself and each other. Each person brings so much to the whole, and learning to build true collective intelligence will make your organization vastly smarter overall!

Seminars and additional resources are available from Ann McGee-Cooper and Associates, Inc. 214 357-8550 or visit us at [AMCA.com](http://AMCA.com)