



Accelerating
Career Success by
Understanding
—and *Boosting*—
Your Reputation

You—According to Them

Sara Canaday

“Reputation” is not a line item we can find on a corporate income statement. But honestly, it should be.

Instead, it’s lurking in there, below the surface of the carefully calculated revenues and expenses. And yet, the accountants can’t assign a specific number to it.

Think about that for a moment. Companies can leverage the incalculable perceptions of a great reputation (their brand) into bottom-line success and a very real corporate advantage. But, sadly, there’s also the flip side. Companies can totally crash and burn because of negative reputations, despite solid product offerings. Perceptions may be unquantifiable, but they are infinitely powerful.

And that’s true of us as individuals as well. Once we understand the power of our personal reputation, we can begin to see how others’ perceptions of us can impact our ability to compete in the marketplace—for jobs, for raises, for promotions. In the same way this concept works for the business world, we can accelerate our own journey toward success by evaluating our reputation and taking action to elevate it.

When we are perceived as we intend, the results eventually show up in our own version of the bottom line, whether that means higher salaries and bonuses or new leadership positions and opportunities. Taking control of the impact we have on others allows us to take control of our own careers. Strange as it might seem at first, perception analysis holds the key to enhancing our “personal market value” and improving our own income statements.

At this point, your inner accountant may be objecting loudly to the idea of a non-quantitative game plan for career advancement. “Analyzing reputations and exploring perceptions? I can’t measure that! If you want to get ahead, earn an advanced degree or complete a professional certification. You need something concrete to differentiate yourself.” Unfortunately, an extra diploma may not be the best answer, or at least not the only one. That traditional line of thinking simply doesn’t hold up in our current environment of corporate downsizing, cost-cutting and resource-slashing. Add in the dizzying pace of business made possible by mind-boggling advances in technology, and you can see why employees at all levels are up against the most intense competitive pressure ever. The fierce battle for job security demands fresh strategies and innovative weapons.

The truth is, those who are most successful today at climbing the proverbial corporate ladder and leading with real impact gain their distinct edge from an intangible skill set. They know their own reputations, their strengths and weaknesses. They are outstanding communicators and listeners. And they have a clear understanding of how their words and actions are perceived by

others. In a nutshell, they are simply more effective at relating to other people while applying their technical and business skills in all types of situations. These employees show up to the workplace armed with a different set of credentials that has proven to be far more powerful than an Ivy League diploma.

Some people might define these intangible skills as emotional intelligence or self-awareness, and scientists and executives seem to agree that both are, in fact, critical components for success in virtually any environment—our workplaces, our communities, and even our families. But, in the business context, success is quantifiable and typically measured in dollars and cents. If we want to advance professionally, we simply must understand our reputations, our impact on others, and the way we are perceived by our colleagues, co-workers and clients. And yet, this angle is so often overlooked.

Why don't more people make an effort to increase their self-awareness? The reasons are pretty diverse. Some may think emotional intelligence sounds far too ethereal, while others might feel uncomfortable with the brutal honesty involved in self-reflection. Working with leadership consultants and executive coaches can be an excellent way to develop these relational abilities, but few people can invest the time and money for individual guidance through the process. Great reasons aside, those who want to compete effectively in the workplace (whether that means ensuring basic job security or fueling bold career moves) must take the initiative to learn these

intangible skills and monitor their reputations, one way or another. In today's business world, it's no longer an option. Professional development is a necessity, and the responsibility for moving forward (or falling behind) lies with each individual.

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The Impact of Perceptions

Though much has been written about the subject, here's all you really need to know: virtually every aspect involved with improving our self-awareness comes down to perceptions.

Understanding them. Changing them. Managing them. And perceptions actually hold the key to our reputations, personally and professionally. If you find that your communication with others is frequently misinterpreted, received negatively or simply not as effective as it could be, inaccurate perceptions could be the culprit. And your reputation might be at risk.

The Dangers of Perception Gaps

To determine if perception gaps or disconnects could be derailing your career progress, take a moment and ask yourself some tough questions. When you interact with others, are you really sending the messages you intend? For instance, do your colleagues think of you as assertive? Or overbearing? Collaborative or manipulative? Gregarious or obnoxious? There's a fine line between these perceptions, but you can see why the subtle differences could have a huge impact on your career and your future. Perhaps the more important questions come next: how are you contributing to the perception gap? What are you doing in your interactions with others that prevents you from being more successful? What obstacles do you need to overcome to better manage the perceptions held by the people around you? By analyzing those perceptions—your reputation, as defined by your co-workers—you can identify the disconnects and strategically change your behavior to correct them, establishing a serious competitive advantage in your journey toward success.

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The Power of Applied Self-Awareness

Simply knowing that a problem exists doesn't fix it. Likewise, becoming aware of our reputations is only useful if we do something to make improvements. While the term "self-awareness" seems to imply a passive state of knowledge, I prefer to focus on the process of applied self-awareness—an active, ongoing brand of perception management that is truly the heart and soul of a stellar reputation. You have to change your behavior to change the end result for yourself, as well as helping to drive better results for the people around you. Essentially, applied self-awareness moves us from insight to action.

In its very simplest form, successfully managing our reputations involves a strategic approach with two basic steps:

Self-Awareness: Identifying the gaps between how our words and actions are perceived versus how we intended them

Applied Self-Awareness: Using that information to adjust our behavior and close the gaps. When we can deliberately change our behavior in a way that allows our words and actions to be perceived precisely as we intended them, we can achieve the reputation and the results that we want.

Some Common Blind Spots

Based on my 20 years of experience and work in this area, I've identified a number of common blind spots that consistently block professionals from reaching their full potential. Here are four examples that demonstrate how subtle perception disconnects can be responsible for derailing what should be a thriving career:

Don't Fence Me In Syndrome: This professional blind spot affects those who are often quite sharp and industrious, but habitually resist what they perceive to be cruel constraints of authority—unnecessary rules that limit their individuality, their creativity, and most of all, their freedom. Sometimes categorized as rebellious or uncooperative, difficult and even defiant.

If this is you, think about the structure and norms of business in a new way. Just because you follow those basic rules doesn't mean that you are being smothered by authority or shamelessly catering to office politics or production rules. Playing the game is a smart, savvy way to get ahead... not a humiliating, white-flag-waving surrender.

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Frozen Compass Syndrome: People with Frozen Compass syndrome rely on their usual style of interacting with others—whether that style is extremely candid and direct or more understated and indirect—despite changing conditions and demands for new approaches. Unfortunately, they are so comfortable following the same path that has always worked for them that they don't recognize the roadblock.

If you suspect that Frozen Compass syndrome might be your professional blind spot, take some time to analyze your personal work style. Start by defining your usual manner of interacting with other people. How has your natural tendency been successful for you in the past? Have you been rewarded for that behavior? What has changed in your work environment? One of the primary tools you can use to minimize Frozen Compass syndrome is self-awareness—being more aware of your own behaviors and those of the people around you.

No Crying in Baseball Syndrome: People in this category excel at functional, task related skills like technology or accounting but fall short with things like relationship building and empathy. What should be a strong reputation for technical excellence is often diluted by a reputation for having a mechanical, detached personality.

If you think you might have tendencies toward No Crying in Baseball syndrome, ask yourself these questions: Do you feel uncomfortable showing any kind of emotions at the office?

Do you inwardly lose respect for colleagues who express emotion more openly? Do you focus so intently on a task that you lose sight of the people involved? If any of these ring a bell, don't panic. There are valid strategies to help you make changes. Start by uncovering the genesis of your belief that displaying emotion is inappropriate. Most of us spend at least half of our waking hours at the office, so it's important to connect with our co-workers and relate to them on a more meaningful level.

Passion Pistol Syndrome: People who have this professional blind spot struggle with finding the proper way to apply their double-barreled enthusiasm. They've frequently been rewarded for this attribute in the past, so they don't always notice when it starts to misfire. No matter what they intend, people with this syndrome are sometimes perceived as overly intense.

The first step in addressing this blind spot is to become more aware of your enthusiasm and its impact on your ability to convey executive presence. Pay close attention to the emotions involved in your interactions with others—your patterns for expressing enthusiasm, the levels of intensity you apply in different situations, and the reactions you get from the people around you. Second, remember that your natural passion isn't like a light switch that should only be turned on or off. Balance is a critical factor. Your enthusiasm has served you well in the past. Take advantage of that! Just temper it with some smart controls and judicious timing.

Your Personal Blind Spots

These are just some of the classic blind spots that seem to be most common in derailing careers and preventing even the most brilliant people from reaching their full potential. Virtually everyone can quickly think of a co-worker who matches some of the profiles described. (They are called “blind spots” for a great reason: they’re always easier to pinpoint in other people.) Based on my experiences from years of coaching, I can tell you that it is quite common for people to see glimpses of themselves in many of the blind-spot stories. Even those who don’t readily relate to a certain gap can often think of a particular situation where a brief lapse in awareness produced the same symptoms. It happens to the best of us.

My hope is that, after reading this manifesto, you will be better prepared by simply knowing about the potential pitfalls in advance and, hopefully, avoiding some of them.

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Strategies to Find and Fix Your Blind Spots

For those of you who want a specific roadmap, here are some tools to help you pinpoint and correct your own personal blind spots. The four steps that follow should prove to be quite valuable:

1. Increase your self-awareness. Before you can determine whether other people are defining your professional reputation exactly in the manner you'd prefer, you'll want to fully understand your own goals and intentions. How would you like to be perceived? What is your ideal reputation?

To find those answers, you'll need to increase your own self-awareness. Set aside some time to seriously consider the following questions and jot down your thoughts for reference:

- What are your strongest and most developed skills?
- How do people benefit from working with you?
- What are the results of your communications and interactions with others?
- How do you make others feel?
- How would you ideally like to be described by the people who work with you?
- Is your ideal reputation realistic and attainable?
- How could that reputation impact your opportunities for advancement?

2. Seek out candid feedback. Regardless of your goals and ideals, what is your actual reputation in the workplace? Uncomfortable or not, we need to know how we're perceived. And that means we need to ask! While this conclusion might seem obvious, many people think that making an educated guess is good enough. Not true. To get an accurate picture of our blind spots, we must gather actual feedback from those who have real experience interacting with us. Ideally, you'll want to get input from people who have observed your behaviors and communication styles for a minimum of six months.

- Managers, directors, supervisors and bosses (current and former)
- Peers, co-workers and colleagues (across departments and teams)
- Staff, subordinates and employees
- Members of common committees or organizations (professional or civic/community)
- Advisors and friends from college
- Family members

When making a list of people to approach, consider these thoughts. Choose those you respect and feel confident would have your best interests in mind. Make sure you select people you trust to give you candid and specific information. A glowing review with exclusively positive remarks might warm your heart, but it won't help you get an accurate picture of any perception gaps that are lurking.

Once we figure out which people to approach, we need to determine how to start the process. As you'll see, we have plenty of options for gathering feedback and evaluating our reputations.

- Official 360° assessments and evaluations (available from many Leadership and Industrial/Organizational Psychology Institutes)
- Self-designed questionnaires distributed in person or online with sites like Survey Monkey
- Formal performance reviews from supervisors
- Candid conversations with mentors or advisors
- Informal dialog with trusted colleagues
- Casual comments from co-workers (sometimes disguised as humor)

However and from whomever you decide to gather your feedback, just do it.

3. Close the gaps. Once you've gathered honest feedback, you'll have what you need to answer the big question: what's the difference between what you intend (your ideal reputation) and what they perceive (your actual reputation)? If the intentions and perceptions don't match, you've uncovered a blind spot. Sometimes the newly found blind spot doesn't really impact your career, and you can simply file the information away in your brain for future reference. In other instances though, you've discovered a clear opportunity for improvement by closing the perception gaps.

The action plans and suggestions throughout my book, *You—According to Them*, are an excellent starting point for making those changes. Still, human behavior is not an exact science. There is no algorithm that produces a definitive solution for Blind Spot #27. Unique situations and diverse personalities make that impossible. On the upside, you are now armed with the most important weapon possible in the battle to close your perception gaps: applied self-awareness.

4. Be prepared for change. Our business environment today is in a constant state of change—the economy, the needs of our customers, the products and services our companies offer, the competition, the technology we employ, the members of our teams. Coping with the challenges of perpetual change is a necessary part of becoming successful within any organization. But it also has two important implications in terms of managing the perceptions that shape our reputations and our careers.

“ Our professional reputations...determine the path and the pace of our careers (for better or worse.)

First, you can gain a real edge by gathering perception feedback on an ongoing basis, making it a natural and automatic component of your interactions with others. If you can integrate feedback collection (verbal or nonverbal) into all of your conversations with other people, you'll have the benefit of instant, real-time results as a priceless guide to your next move. Periodically, you'll still want to repeat a more formal feedback analysis, but consciously reading the reactions of people around you (and even learning to anticipate those reactions) will help you make the simple adjustments that can noticeably set you apart from your peers.

Second, your knowledge of perceptions can prepare you to maneuver through the new challenges and changing expectations that come with professional advancement. Few people discuss it, but those who move to the top of an organization are subjected to an unwritten yet very real shift in expectations. When trying to close their reputation-perception gaps, senior level managers face a task that can be much more complex. Why? To be successful, great leaders need the capacity to exhibit complementary (or even opposite) attributes in certain situations: confident yet humble, visionary yet realistic, strategic yet creative, competitive yet empathetic, energetic yet calm in a crisis, decisive yet flexible, strong yet able to show vulnerability. The basic, straightforward behaviors that allowed them to get ahead early on in their careers suddenly don't fit with the executive persona.

The rising corporate stars who fail to grasp the changing requirements and this seemingly paradoxical set of new expectations end up with high levels of frustration and stalled careers. You, on the other hand, already know the benefits of using feedback regularly, managing the perceptions of others, and maintaining a positive reputation. If you can master these skills, you'll have a solid advantage when navigating the upper echelons of the corporate world.

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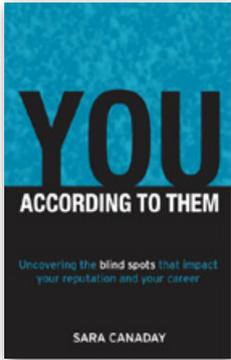
Final Thoughts

Whether we like it or not, perception is reality. Having the best of intentions isn't enough to get us the new job, the big raise or the highly coveted promotion. Our professional reputations are defined through the perceptual lens of our colleagues, coworkers and clients—and those reputations determine the path and the pace of our careers (for better or worse). The truth is, we all have blind spots in some area. No one is so amazingly self-aware that he or she can clearly see and eliminate every potential perception disconnect before it occurs.

Those who are most successful have just learned how to read the diverse people and situations they encounter and respond appropriately. Sure, they are savvy enough to avoid the obvious perception landmines. But they have also mastered a skill that could be even more important: recognizing an inadvertent “hit” and diving in quickly for effective damage control.

Insight to action. **The world's strongest leaders today know how to manage the perception gaps that are inevitable in our fast-paced, technology-fueled, global business environment.** 

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | A rare blend of analytical entrepreneur and perceptive warmth, Sara Canaday has a unique gift for helping high-potential professionals to achieve their best. She began her journey working full-time while she earned an MBA. Despite reaching an executive position in operations with a major company, she realized that helping others to maximize their career potential was her life's work. Today, Sara is happily fulfilling that commitment as a speaker, consultant, coach, author, and owner of her rapidly growing firm, [Sara Canaday & Associates](#).

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