

First impressions



"You can't make a second, first impression"

As you walk into the conference room to make your inaugural speech, your coat pocket catches on the door handle causing you to drop the folder you are holding and your papers end up in the front row of the audience. Bending down to pick up your papers causes, unknowingly, your USB key to fall to the floor. Papers gathered, you are in front of the podium searching hectically for your USB key in order to fire up your presentation

When you next go in to make a speech you will be remembered as the one who "stumbled" into the room – is this the end of the world as we know it?

It takes just a quick glance, maybe four or five seconds, for someone to evaluate you when you meet for the first time. In this amazingly short period of time, the other person forms an opinion about you based on your appearance, your body language, your demeanour, your mannerisms, and how you are dressed – and all that before you have even opened your mouth!

So, where do first impressions come from?

We don't really know where our first impressions of someone come from or even what they mean, they bubble up from the our unconscious; from behind a locked door somewhere inside of our brain. We may not know where they come from but part of the answer can be explained by the "Ladder of Inference" – we all have our own personal ladder of inference, donc (as they say

in French) we all have our own personal “first impression” of a given event or person.

Most of us don’t always appreciate the fragility of our first impressions of others, we are not aware of ourselves “jumping to the top of our ladder”, however, just because something is outside of our awareness that doesn’t mean that it’s outside of our control.

We live very much in a bi-polar world; good & bad, pretty & ugly, right & wrong, etc. Judgmental thinking is often automatic, so we need to learn how to put the brakes on it now and then.

Try to pause when you have a judgmental thought, step back and challenge your judgmental thinking; the person who “stumbled” into the conference room earlier on may not be incompetent. Try to be understanding and wait a while before coming to your “definitive” first impression.

“You cannot, not communicate”

Whatever we do will give a first impression; an overly firm hand shake and we are aggressive and an “limp” handshake and we are passive; or is it as simple as that? What if my overly firm handshake is with someone who has a really strong handshake; what first impression have I made?

Others will always have a first impression of us; but they will not all necessarily have the “same” first impression of us – they all have their own personal filters and their own personal ladder.

Yes, there are some “obvious” hints to giving a “good” first impression, being on time, looking confident, smiling, eye contact, etc. But even then, others may see you as rigid, overconfident, grinning and staring.

So, is there an answer to making a good first impression?

The key, for me, is simply to be aware that you are making an impression (be it the first, the second or the n^{th}), everything you do or don't do is communication and everything you do or don't do will make an impression; you may not know exactly what impression you are making, but you are making as many impressions as there are people around you.

Don' be paranoid by the fact you are making an impression and don't ignore the fact that you are making an impression; it's a fact, it can't be avoided – mitigate for the worst-case scenarios and have confidence in yourself.

"You can't please all of the people all of the time"