

# PERCEPTIONS OF PEOPLE

*by Adam Fletcher*

## Introduction

We have a lot different motivations to work with people. However, few of these motivations are as strong as our perceptions: If we see people as needing or wanting us in any way, we can pretty much justify any activity that creates, fosters, and sustains working with people.

The way we see people determines how we *treat* them; the way we treat people determines the outcomes of our activities with them. It can be hard when we are in the middle of our busy careers and work to stop and reflect on our perceptions of people. This article is a tool that can help make that easier.

Over the years I have reflected a lot on my perceptions of people. After consulting schools, nonprofits, government agencies, and private businesses about engagement for more than 15 years, I have critically deconstructed my actions and assumptions in many ways. I have also worked with others to reflect on their perceptions of people, too. Along the way, engagement has emerged as the primary focus of our perceptions of people. Engagement is any sustained connection a person has to the world around them and inside them, including clothing, friendships, emotions, and ideas. I have seen five distinct perceptions of people emerge, and each of these affects how engaged a person will become.

Following is an exploration of these perceptions. See the guiding questions at the bottom of the article to help facilitate your own reflection.

## Considerations

There are many important considerations to recognize about our perceptions of people. Following are two of the most important:

- Our do not maintain one perception of all people all the time. While there are predominate perceptions, there are also exceptions to the rule. When confronting challenging perceptions it can be important to acknowledge the exception, if it is positive.
- These perceptions are not about “good” and “bad” – they just are. Our simply cannot operate in complete empathy towards people all the time; likewise, people should not be expected to care for every single person they ever meet.

## Reflections

Using these perceptions of people as a starting point, the challenge for our becomes whether we can consciously, critically, and creatively reflect on our attitudes, behaviors, and ultimately, our perceptions. While we do this it is our obligation to keep an eye towards further developing our practice in order to be more effective in the work we do.

## Reflection Questions

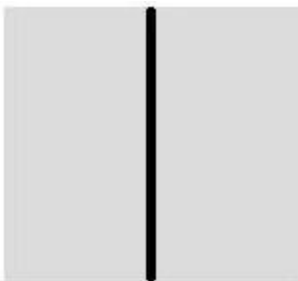
1. How do you treat people differently because of your differences?
2. How does your behavior differ from home to school to work, etc.?
3. What do you think the outcomes of different perceptions of people are?
4. Do people have different perceptions of our? Why or why not, and if so, how?

## Perceptions of People Model

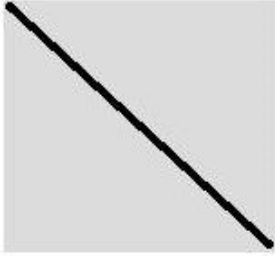
In the following graphics, A represents our perceptions while S represents people.



**Apathy** – The first way our can perceive people is with apathy. This occurs when our deliberately choose to be indifferent toward people. This is different from *antipathy*, where one person does not know the other person exists. However, in schools our implicitly know people exists. Our conscious choice not to perceive it is what determines our apathetic perspective. This can happen throughout school decision-making affecting both individual people and entire schools. Both people and our can (and do) express apathy toward people.



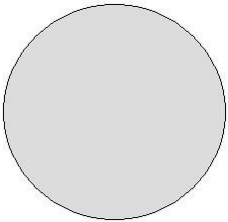
**Pity** – Pity happens when our perceive people from the top down, seeing it as a nice thing to do. Pity makes our completely superior to people in all ways, including intellectually, morally, and culturally. Our view people as completely incapable of providing anything for themselves, and see people as fully dependent on our. By positioning our in positions of absolute authority, pity dehumanizes people by suppressing their self-esteem and incapacitating their self-conceptions of ability and purpose.



**Sympathy** – Perceiving people with sympathy is alluring to many of us. Sympathy disengages people from actively creating knowledge or resources by singularly positioning us to give without acknowledging they are receiving anything in return. Sympathy is another top-down perception. It allows us to give to people what they apparently cannot acquire for themselves, whether material, time, money, or otherwise, and to do that from a position of compassion.



**Empathy** – Reciprocity is at the core of an empathetic perception of people. This viewpoint allows us to see people are giving something as well as receiving it. Each person acknowledges the other as a partner, and each person becomes invested in the outcomes of the others' perception. Empathy is rooted in equity and reciprocity.



**Solidarity** – Complete solidarity comes from the perception that people are not different from us simply because of their age. Instead, it allows for complete equity by fully recognizing the benefits and challenges of people, and engaging people and us in complete partnerships. These relationships between us and people operate from a place of possibilities rather than deficits.

## Resources

There are many, many resources for working to engage communities. I have written many articles and publications about the topic. For more information, visit <http://adamfletcher.net>.