



Management and Performance Associates – January 2012

Paris Hilton... who would have thought?

“The only rule is don’t be boring and dress cute wherever you go. Life is too short to blend in.”
~Paris Hilton, *Socialite*.

Perhaps you’re thinking that quoting Paris Hilton at the beginning of this newsletter is a little unusual, since she is not exactly a point of reference for the corporate world. But, she has a point.

Life – especially corporate life – can be short and cruel for those who are unconcerned with creating an image that translates their best content and the promise of a differentiated performance.

How is self-image built and how is it perceived by others?

Self-image is the impression we have about ourselves. Our behaviors project, voluntarily or not, all that we value and all that we believe will make us accepted and admired by the group we belong to or aspire to belong to.

Closely observe people: the way they dress, the adornments they exhibit, the way they approach you (or remain distant), the way they express themselves, and how they position themselves. Each gesture, each word reveals an aspect of the image they have about themselves.

Two minutes is all it takes to check this great YouTube video (<http://youtu.be/WAOVZ70QItY>). In the video, you will have the opportunity to see Steve Ballmer of Microsoft and the late Steve Jobs of Apple in similar situations, but exhibiting diametrically opposed behaviors. Both walk on stage facing their employees. Both take one minute to start their presentation. But the non-verbal message transmitted by each one cannot be more disparate. It is worthwhile to check the video and draw your own conclusions.

Back to our own world, the question then becomes: are we projecting the image we want people to have about us, especially people that matter? Perhaps. Many variables will interfere with building

perception. An improper word, an involuntary gesture, an out-of-sync tune, they can all affect the image we are trying to build or consolidate with these people.

People see us by using their own frame of reference, their values and their assumptions. This is enough to distort the image we project. The experience we build together can be favorable to us...or not. What can we do to project a positive corporate image?

1) Be clear about your role and what is expected of you

Remember that whenever you interact with third parties (clients and others) you are projecting not only your own values, but also the corporate ones. Your personal image gets blended with the corporate one. Therefore, double attention. Companies invest heavily in building a brand, in nurturing a positive image in the markets they operate and sometimes all that is wasted as some employees, although representing the company, are not clear in the role they play, consolidating that image. We have all had bad experiences dealing with employees who did not behave according to the corporate image. Some time ago, while shopping in a very renowned bookstore, we witnessed an awkward scene: a supervisor fired an employee, in front of a large number of clients, while screaming and swearing. Absolutely unnecessary . . .

2) Be open to feedback

As people many times don't accept feedback, they take a dangerous blind flight throughout their lives. Although we can admit that it's not always easy to receive feedback, there is no other method to effectively check how we are projecting our image. Feedback is a mirror which allows us to check if the image we want to project is the same others are building about us. If



there is a discrepancy, it's better to know about it so that we can take action and adjust it.

3) Question your assumptions

If you aren't able to close the perception gap between your self-image and the image someone (who is important to you) has built about you, then it's time to go beyond feedback and start an open conversation. It is fundamental to probe, checking on what assumptions this person is basing these conclusions about you. Many times the problem does not reside with your ability to adjust your self-image but in the other person's assumptions.

The above point is well illustrated in "Dom Casmurro", a classic of Brazilian Literature, by Machado de Assis. In the book, Bentinho explores his great love for Capitu, a childhood sweetheart to whom he got married. He firmly believes that Capitu is betraying him with his best friend. What makes the book extraordinary is the fact that all the evidences he reports to support his theory that Capitu is unfaithful could also support the opposing point of view. The interpretation, and therefore the conclusion or verdict depends only on the assumptions that are used to go from one conclusion to the next.

Are we always using the same lenses to judge different situations?

Back to Paris Hilton, remember to:

- 1) "Dress cute", or, do your best and build a great image
- 2) "Don't be boring", in other words, act consistently with the image you want to project and
- 3) Make a difference in the environment you live in and also in the company you work for.

See you next month. Suggestions are welcome.

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