

First Impression

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Why is it that some people make a strong or positive first impression and others make a poor or negative first impression? A first encounter between two people, depending on the context, almost always creates an impression of one person by the other, and this impression involves some degree of evaluation—or appraisal—a fundamental principle that governs respect.

The following is a scenario that I'd like you to assess — you have a breakfast meeting scheduled with a new business acquaintance and you have arrived at the lobby of the high-rise building where your meeting will take place. You proceed to the (lobby) front desk to find out what floor your venue is located and you are told, *"You need to go to the top floor—the 80th floor. There are two express elevators that you may use — one is located one level down from here and you may access it by taking the stairway to your left; the other is located one level up and you may access it by taking the stairway to your right."* You take a quick glance at your watch and notice that you have only two minutes left to arrive on the 80th floor—on time. Which express elevator will you choose — the one located one level down, or the one located one level up?

This scenario depicts, in a very simplistic manner, what is at stake when you have an opportunity to make a first impression. You can begin a new encounter by lowering yourself into a hole, and then climbing your way up; or you can begin a new encounter by first elevating yourself and then climbing your way up. Either way, you will have to climb your way further up as the encounter evolves!

A first impression is an opportunity to establish an advantage at the onset of a potential relationship. This opportunity occurs only once! People who are in tune with this concept and continuously take advantage of it afford themselves the opportunity to earn respect early in a relationship or an encounter. Moreover, people who understand this concept particularly use it to create a positive lasting impression for a one-time encounter situation.

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There is generally one of two circumstances in play when given an opportunity to make a first impression. The first is a case when advance knowledge of you is known to the person (or persons) that you are meeting for the first time. In this context an expectation of you would already exist and the question would become whether or not you measure up to this expectation. An example would be the case when you attend a first job interview, where your resume provided some advance knowledge of you to your interviewer. Another example would be a case when someone puts "a word in" for you ahead of a scheduled encounter.

The second circumstance is a case when no prior knowledge of you is known to the person (or persons) that you are meeting for the first time. In this situation there is no

specific expectation of you and so you have complete latitude to forge a first impression as you see fit. An example here would be the case when you come to work for the first time with a new employer—and you meet your peers, other superiors, and subordinates for the first time. Or, you may have a case where you have a first encounter in a social, an organized, or a public setting.

So what are the key ingredients for achieving a strong or positive first impression? There are two perspectives to understand prior to appreciating the answer to this question—the visible (what you see and readily observe) and the invisible (what you do not see or readily observe). As humans we typically process what we see before we process what we do not see, barring any visual impairment.

First, the visible — the first key ingredient is your appearance, that is the way you are dressed, including your personal hygiene. The way you dress for an occasion is the first aspect of you that others notice. Your appearance engages the visual senses of others around you and establishes a psychological foundation pending further evaluation of you. The second key ingredient is your attitude—and this is a major ingredient. Your attitude projects, in a very loud and visible way, the unseen aspects about you. Your attitude represents a flow of energy that can dampen or brighten the current mood. The psychological evaluation that a person performs (of you) in response to your appearance (the way you are dressed) and your attitude, at the onset of an encounter, establishes to a large degree the quality of a first impression.

Second, the invisible — the key ingredient here is the level of comfort that you have for yourself. If you know and appreciate the qualities that you possess, and you hold firmly established principles and beliefs, then a first encounter (with someone) evolves in a very natural way and proceeds gradually along a positive path. This third ingredient may reinforce or undermine the first two (key) ingredients—appearance and attitude; and so it becomes equally important.

I'd like to end with a story that appropriately captures the essence of a first impression. Jane was the newly appointed director of a business division that her employer recently acquired (from another firm). She had edged out another candidate—David—who had been with the business division for the past 5 years and was considered the preferred candidate by almost all the employees of the division.

On her first day on the job Jane arrived at her office and noticed a picture posted on the wall next to the entrance doorway (to her office). It was an unframed piece of paper with a somewhat dramatic picture of the sun setting over the horizon. It had a sad tone to it, given the current climate in the division. Jane later learned from David—who would now be reporting to her—that the previous director had put the picture on the wall prior to his departure after giving an emotional speech to members of his senior team. The picture had since portrayed a sense of the end to an era, leaving a rather gloomy tone.

The next morning Jane arrived very early before her administrative assistant and other early risers showed up. She replaced the piece of paper with a nicely framed new picture—of a breathtaking and spectacular sunrise! She had chosen an oversized frame with a landscape orientation to emphasis the picture's effect.

As the day progressed, the new picture became the topic of conversation in many corners of the office floor and indeed across the division by the end of the week. Jane concluded her first week with a series of meetings and email communications to the entire organization ensuring everyone that her tenure was the start of a bright new era—one that will be marked with challenges and successes, and hopefully a brighter future for everyone. She had made a very strong and positive first impression.

About the Author



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