

A 3D illustration of a network of stylized human figures. Most figures are light gray, but one figure in the center is bright yellow and stands on a glowing yellow circular base. The figures are interconnected by thin black lines, forming a complex web. The background is a light gray gradient.

# IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT IN THE WORKPLACE

RESEARCH, THEORY, AND PRACTICE

ANDREW J. DUBRIN

# Impression Management in the Workplace

Wanting to create a favorable impression with others is a basic part of human nature in both work and personal life. In this book, Andrew J. DuBrin skillfully provides a guide to the effective use of impression management based on scholarly research and theory, with particular attention to practical application. He highlights not only impressions that individuals make, but those made by entire organizations.

Self-tests and questionnaires allow readers to pinpoint how they currently employ impression management techniques in their work lives. Each chapter includes a section on “Guidelines for Application and Practice” that provides real-world advice based on the theories and research outlined in the chapter.

With this book, students will glean the best methods for creating positive, career-building impressions in current and future positions.

**Andrew J. DuBrin** is a Professor of Management emeritus at the E. Philip Saunders College of Business at the Rochester Institute of Technology, where he has taught courses and conducts research in leadership, organizational behavior, influence processes, and career management.



# Impression Management in the Workplace

*Research, Theory, and Practice*

Andrew J. DuBrin

*Rochester Institute of Technology*

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To Stephanie



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# Preface

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Wanting to create a good impression on others is part of human nature both in personal life and on the job. It is difficult to be successful if you do not create a good impression on influential people. *Impression management* (IM) generally refers to how people control, or manage, the impressions others form of them. Among the hundreds of possibilities in the workplace would be to dress fashionably when visiting a client, and complimenting the presenter at a meeting.

Impression management in organizations, or the workplace, has received some attention in the professional literature for over 45 years, and has been a subject of interest to career advisors for about 75 years. As a popular subject, the topic of impression management in organizations is almost boundless, with about 22 million entries given to the subject for the best-known Internet search engines. However, entries for impression management in an Internet search could include almost anything to do with personal behavior and appearance, such as etiquette and hairstyle.

Some aspects of impression management are studied in a wide range of schools, from career schools (also known as vocational-technical institutes) to MBA programs, and doctoral programs. Almost all business schools offer some instruction in service courses or special seminars on managing one's impression well for purposes of a job search.

## **Purpose and Goals of the Book**

The purpose of *Impression Management in the Workplace: Research, Theory, and Practice* is to provide a guide to the effective use of impression management, with as many strategies and tactics as feasible based on scholarly research and theory. The book is therefore a scholarly book, yet with an emphasis on application. The application emphasis is achieved primarily by presenting positive and ethical strategies and tactics for creating a positive impression in the workplace, including the impressions created by an entire organization.

Another goal of this book is to help overcome the perception that impression management is inherently manipulative, deceitful, and unethical. The subject of impression management needs to create a better impression. Nevertheless, our book includes discussions about negative and unethical forms of impression management.

*Impression Management in the Workplace* fills a niche as supplementary reading in courses and seminars in organizational behavior, power, and influence, and organizational politics. Researchers may be interested in the book as a source of additional research topics and hypotheses to pursue. Another major purpose of our book is to place an up-to-date focus and structure on the field of impression management in the workplace. *Impression Management in the Workplace* also has

the purpose of emphasizing the importance of this field for managers and professionals working in a variety of settings.

As a consequence of the purposes and goals of this book, it has several potential audiences. First, students looking for research-based as well as practice-based ideas for creating a favorable impression should find this book useful. Similarly, managers and professionals who want to impress others favorably in the workplace would find the information in this book to be helpful. Third, scholars in the field might find the integration of research and opinion about impression management useful for their research. At the same time, some of the suggestions made in the book might serve as hypotheses for conducting more research. One example among dozens of possibilities is whether creating a *personal brand* really has a positive effect on job finding and career advancement.

## Structure of the Book

To achieve its purposes and goals the book is divided into 11 chapters. Chapter 1 presents a description of the meaning and nature of impression management. We include a touch of history, definitions of the term, and a two-part model of impression management developed by Leary and Kowalski consisting of motivation for and construction of the impression. Chapter 2 digs further into the subject matter by describing the cybernetic model of impression management developed by Bozeman and Kacmar. This model helps the reader appreciate the complexity of impression management in the workplace.

Chapter 3 describes individual and organizational factors that contribute to or predispose people toward managing their impression. Among these many factors are the traits of self-monitoring and Machiavellianism, and a competitive organization culture. Chapter 4 is about self-presentation tactics for impression management that deal with focusing on the self, and focusing on work accomplishment. Two examples are developing a positive reputation, and becoming a subject matter expert. Chapter 5 is about surface-level self-presentation tactics such as clothing, dress, and appearance, and developing a personal brand.

Chapter 6 describes another vital aspect of impression management—enhancing the status of others including ingratiation along with flattery, and being politically correct. Chapter 7 is about self-protection techniques of impression management, including self-handicapping, excuses, and recovering from a major mistake. Chapter 8 describes the application of impression management for both job search and performance evaluation, one of the most researched topics about impression management. Chapter 9 is about how leaders use impression management to enhance their effectiveness, with a special emphasis on the link between charisma and managing one's impression. Chapter 10 deals with how corporations (or the executives within them) attempt to manage their images, through developing a corporate reputation, spin, and corporate social responsibility,

Chapter 11 ties much of the previous chapters together by describing the functional and dysfunctional consequences of impression management. Among the functional



consequences are successful outcomes of an employment interview, and stronger relationships with work associates. Dysfunctional consequences of impression management include ethical lapses and choking under pressure.

The basic information for each chapter is based on scholarly research. However, the information is supplemented with some information from the business press and the author's judgment. Each chapter contains a section called "Guidelines for Application and Practice," followed by a thorough summary. The notes for each chapter appear at the end of the book.

## Companion Website

To complement the material in the book, we have created a companion website, which provides useful resources for both students and instructors: an instructor's manual with sample test questions, PowerPoint lecture slides, and further resources. This material can be found at [www.routledge.com/textbooks/9780415871747](http://www.routledge.com/textbooks/9780415871747)

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A. J. D.

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DuBrin has business experience in human resource management, and consults with organizations and individuals. His specialties include leadership, organizational politics including influence tactics, and career development. DuBrin is an established author of both textbooks and trade books, and also contributes to professional journals. He has written textbooks on leadership, organizational behavior, management, and human relations.



## Chapter 1

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# The Meaning and Nature of Impression Management

Wanting to create a favorable impression on others is a basic part of human nature in both work and personal life. In meeting with the public, the chief executive officer (CEO) wants to convince others that he or she is wise, hardworking, and trustworthy. When exiting from the cockpit to greet the passengers, the commercial airline pilot wants to project the impression of self-confidence, being in control, and exercising good judgment. The customer service representative listening to the problem you are having with an electronic device wants to project the feeling that he or she is a friendly, competent person who will take care of your problem. And, of course, some scammers want to convey the false impression that they have your best interests in mind while really trying to steal from you.

In fitting with the theme of this book, an instructive definition of **impression management** is the process by which people control the impression others form of them.<sup>1</sup> *Control* in this sense refers to managing, shaping, or adjusting. For example, a certified financial planner wants to ensure that clients and potential clients perceive her to be a trustworthy and knowledgeable person. Toward this end she might engage in such activities as referring to the large portfolios she has managed, and the fact that she holds office in an association of certified professional planners.

People in the workplace are particularly eager to create a positive impression because they want to attain such outcomes as developing allies, getting a raise, getting promoted, receiving a bonus, making a sale, avoiding being placed on the downsizing list, and being hired in the first place. Impression management is such a natural part of organizational life that it is considered to be a major component of organizational politics.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Edward J. Hegarty wrote many years ago that impressing important people is the objective of all company politics.<sup>3</sup>

Impression management often connotes creating a false impression, or hiding deficiencies. In contrast, the thrust of this book will be to focus on research, theory, and practice about creating impressions that help a person emphasize legitimate positive qualities. Another misperception about impression management is that it is largely aimed at superficial aspects of a person's impression, such as wearing expensive clothing and accessories, having their teeth whitened, and facial wrinkles removed. A more rigorous study of impression management suggests that deeper

aspects of behavior, including logical thinking and persuasive skills, are part of managing your impression.

We begin our study of impression management by describing the modern origins of its study, representative definitions, along with the motivation behind creating impressions and how they are constructed. We also describe some of the ethical considerations associated with impression management. As with other chapters in this book, we also devote a separate section to applying knowledge about impression management.

## The Origins of the Modern Study of Impression Management

The idea of people using conscious or pre-conscious techniques to facilitate others thinking positively of them probably goes back thousands of years. (*Conscious* in this context refers to being fully aware of what you are doing. *Pre-conscious* refers to almost automatic behavior not requiring much thought, such as braking when you see a red light.) Survival in prehistoric times might have been partially dependent on other prehistoric people thinking kindly of you. Projecting too strong a negative image might have resulted in being stoned. In approximately 1600, impression management became better known with the famous statement of William Shakespeare, written in *As You Like It*: “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women are merely players. They have their exits and entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts.” Shakespeare’s famous words are still quoted frequently in books and articles about impression management.

The modern-day roots of the scientific study of impression management are frequently attributed to sociologist Erving Goffman, who framed impression management with his dramaturgical model of social interaction.<sup>4</sup> In overview, Goffman views people as “actors” engaging in “performances” in various “settings” before audiences. The key task of actors or performers is to construct an identity. The impression a person creates is a major part of his or her identity.

The actors and the audiences interact to develop a definition of the situation which guides their behavior. Although not mentioned specifically by Goffman, much of this behavior takes place without much conscious awareness by participants. Imagine a CEO holding a town-hall meeting with hundreds of employees. The CEO appears somber and dignified because he has to announce further cost reductions, including worker layoffs, eliminating jobs, and closing several offices and plants. The image the CEO projects helps define the situation as quite serious. As a result, the usual joking and kidding that might occur at a town-hall meeting do not appear.

Goffman reasoned that the performance of people functioning as actors depends upon the characteristics of both the situations and the audiences present. Performing as actors on the stage of life, people attempt to control the images or identities they portray to relevant people in their environment. The end-states the actors hope to attain could be social, psychological, or material. Being perceived in a particular way could therefore lead to better interpersonal relationships, feeling better about yourself, or receiving higher compensation on the job.

Goffman, as well as other researchers, believed that controlling one's identity as it is portrayed to others can influence how situations are defined, and thereby establish expected norms, roles, and behaviors. (Goffman evidently credits most people with a high degree of insight into human behavior and political skill.) By interacting with and influencing situations and audiences (or the environment) actors can better position themselves to achieve their desired ends. Impression management is therefore goal-directed behavior.

Goffman also described the importance of self-presentation for defining the individual's place in the social environment, for establishing the tone and direction of an interaction, and for defining how roles influence performance. According to Goffman, self-presentation is influential in the construction of social reality. For example, if a person projects himself or herself as being intelligent and well informed during a meeting, a social reality of being given a key follow-up assignment to the meeting might be forthcoming.

Perhaps the most useful point of Goffman's complex analysis is that even seemingly innocuous actions might be aimed at showing a person in a favorable light. For example, an electronics repair technician might scratch the back of his head during a discussion of a customer problem. The head scratching is aimed at creating the impression that the technician is thinking deeply about the customer's problem.

In practice, Goffman's analysis would include a mutual funds sales representative dressing elegantly, and making reference to her MBA from an elite school during an investment seminar. Many members of the audience might be persuaded to believe that a credible mutual funds sales representative is therefore a wealthy and well-educated person, prompting them to invest in the funds she represents.

## **A Variety of Definitions of Impression Management**

As mentioned above, impression management refers generally to the process by which individuals attempt to control the impressions others form of them. The object of an individual engaging in impression management is generally to have others form a positive impression of him or her. Yet some people are looking to form a negative impression. A soldier attempting to avoid combat duty, or who is seeking a medical discharge, might want to project the image of an emotionally unstable person, and therefore not suited for combat. A prison inmate might have been incarcerated for so long that when the time comes for parole or release he fears competing in the outside world. With the prospects of no employment, no housing, and no food, he decides to form the impression that he will return quickly to crime if released. So he makes statements to the prison officials and parole board about his likelihood of returning to crime.

Creating a negative impression can also take place within a work organization, in the form of *strategic incompetence*. The actor projects the impression of being incompetent with respect to a task in order to avoid being assigned the task. A person asked to take notes at a meeting might declare, "I am terrible at note taking," in order to avoid the responsibility.

Steven Crawley, a human resources executive, says the inability to perform certain tasks can be very helpful in avoiding the tasks a person does not want to perform. He claims that his proudest moment of strategic incompetence took place when the president of an automotive-parts manufacturer asked Crawley to organize the company picnic. Not liking to do party planning, he responded to inquiries with comments such as “How do you do that?” The responsibility for the picnic was soon assigned to another worker.<sup>5</sup> The link to impression management is that Crawley created a negative impression about his competence by pretending not to understand the task. (You might not think highly of Crawley’s ethics.)

As explained by Mark R. Leary and Robin M. Kowalski, most scholars in the field have used the terms *impression management* and *self-presentation* interchangeably, yet some have distinguished between the terms.<sup>6</sup> For example, Barry Schlenker defined impression management as the “attempt to control images that are projected in real or imagined social interactions.” He reserved the term *self-presentation* for images that are “self-relevant.”<sup>7</sup>

The distinction between impression management and self-presentation can be important. A person might enhance the image of another person, such as through flattery. The flattered person then develops a more positive impression of the flatterer. Another consideration is that images may be managed by methods other than self-presentation. A person intent on developing a good reputation might ask somebody else in his or her network to *good mouth* him or her.

In general, the term impression management is broader and more encompassing than self-presentation. Given that most research on the topic has dealt with how people control the impression others form of them, it is difficult to avoid using the terms interchangeably.<sup>8</sup> Chapter 6 in this book focuses on techniques of impression management designed to enhance the status or good feelings of others, thereby facilitating a positive impression of the enhancer.

Figure 1-1 presents ten representative definitions of impression management. Enough consistency among these definitions exists to make the formal study of impression management viable. At the same time, the term *impression management* conveys enough meaning to facilitate communication about the topic. The common meaning is that the person takes action so that the target person or persons perceive him or her positively. (The slight exceptions about creating a negative impression are mentioned above.)

## Impression Motivation and Impression Construction

Impression management is sufficiently complex to be described and analyzed in a variety of ways. In Chapter 2, we present a cybernetic model of impression management. Here we examine a two-component model of impression management developed by Mark K. Leary and Robin M. Kowalski that offers two major advantages.<sup>9</sup> The model provides a solid base for understanding other frameworks

**Figure 1-1** Ten of Definitions of Impression Management.

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1. The attempt to control the image that others form about an individual.<sup>10</sup>
2. *Impression management* (also called *self-presentation*) refers to the process by which individuals attempt to control the impressions others form of them.<sup>11</sup>
3. Impression management involves what we do to create and maintain the desired impression in others about ourselves.<sup>12</sup>
4. A person's systematic attempt to behave in ways that will create and maintain desired impressions in the eyes of others.<sup>13</sup>
5. Behaviors designed to influence the way in which a person is perceived by others.<sup>14</sup>
6. Impression management in organizations consists of strategic communications designed to establish, maintain, or protect desired identities.<sup>15</sup>
7. The activity of controlling information in order to steer others' opinions in the service of personal or social goals.<sup>16</sup>
8. A new form of social competence in organizations, which individuals employ to master organizational politics, facilitate better work relationships, increase group cohesiveness, avoid offending coworkers, and create a more pleasant organizational climate.<sup>17</sup>
9. Impression management is concerned with the behaviors people direct toward others to create and maintain desired perceptions of themselves.<sup>18</sup>
10. *Image management* is a leader's ability to project an image that is consistent with observers' expectations.<sup>19</sup>

for impression management. The same model offers insights into what makes for successful management of the image a person projects. The model is based on a synthesis of dozens of research studies as well as theorizing about impression management.

The general point of the model under consideration is that impression management involves two discrete processes: impression motivation and impression construction. Under certain circumstances, people become motivated to control how others see them. At a business networking gathering, for example, many people are motivated to project the image of a successful person whom other people would consider to be a valuable network member. Upon being motivated to create certain impressions, people may alter their behaviors to affect others' impressions of them. Altering behavior includes choosing the type of impression to create, and also deciding whether to create the desired impression through such means as self-description, nonverbal behavior, or props.

The person engaged in networking who is motivated to create a successful impression might then rehearse certain scenarios about how well connected he or she is to venture capitalists.

As outlined in Figure 1-2, the process of impression motivation is influenced by three primary factors: the goal relevance of the impression, the value of the desired



**Figure 1-2** The Two Components of Impression Management.

Impression Motivation	Impression Construction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Goal relevance of impressions</li> <li>• Value of desired goals</li> <li>• Discrepancy between desired and current image</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-concept</li> <li>• Desired and undesired identity images</li> <li>• Role constraints</li> <li>• Target values</li> <li>• Current or potential social image</li> </ul>
<p>Source: Mark R. Leary and Robin M. Kowalski, "Impression Management: A Literature Review and Two-Component Model," <i>Psychological Bulletin</i>, No. 1, 1990, p. 36.</p>	

goals, and the discrepancy between the desired and the current image. The process of impression construction is influenced by five factors: the person's self-concept, his or her desired and undesired identity images, role constraints in which the person is placed, the target's values, and the actor's perceptions of his or her current or potential social image.

### *Impression Motivation*

People vary as to how much they are concerned about how others view them. Also, the same person does not always have the same level of concern about how he or she is viewed. A person waiting in line at a fast-food restaurant might be less concerned about the impression he or she creates than during an in-person tax audit or a job interview. Most of the time, people operate between these two extremes. According to Leary and Kowalski, people process others' reactions to them at a pre-attentive or non-conscious level. As a consequence, impression management for most people in most situations occurs automatically without much deliberate thought. Yet, as will be described throughout this book, there are many ways in which people deliberately go about managing their impressions to succeed in a given situation.

### *Motives for Impression Management and Self-Presentation*

Before looking at the antecedents of impression motivation listed in Figure 1-2, it is helpful to examine several of the motives behind managing one's impression.

1. *Maximizing rewards and minimizing punishments.* A primary consideration is that people manage their impression for the same reason they engage in many other behaviors—to maximize expected rewards and minimize expected punishments. For example, during a meeting with potential investors the

aspiring entrepreneur wants to make a positive self-presentation in order to attract investors. Not receiving funding would be a punishment because the entrepreneur's efforts at launching the new company could be blocked without funding.

2. *Gaining power over others.* Self-presentation is also based on the desire to gain power over others. By creating a positive impression, it is possible to control the actions of others toward you in a favorable direction. The supervisor who creates a favorable impression will have an easier time inducing subordinates to work extra hard than a supervisor who creates a negative impression.
3. *Creating a public self in accord with the ideal self.* A subtle reason for impression management is to create a public self that is consistent with the ideal self. Many people have ideal images that go beyond their typical behavior. The ideal image might include believing that one is trustworthy, moral, and highly intelligent. To make others believe that this ideal image is valid, the person constructs a public image that might include references to trustworthy activities such as being a treasurer for a church, or an executor of an estate.
4. *Self-esteem maintenance.* Self-esteem maintenance can be a strong motive for positive self-presentation. Regulation of self-esteem through impression management works in two ways. First, the reaction of others to the individual may raise or deflate self-esteem. Self-esteem is elevated via compliments, praise, and other indicators of positive attitudes toward the person. As a result, many people attempt to create impressions that will bring about the types of positive feedback just mentioned. For example, an engineer having lunch with colleagues in the company cafeteria might casually mention that he just was granted a patent for a technology that supports a major company product. The positive feedback he receives will boost his self-esteem—at least temporarily.  
Second, self-esteem is affected by self-evaluation of performance and others' imagined reactions to the person. Even without explicit feedback from others, the person's subjective self-evaluation of performance can influence self-esteem. Assume that a marketing specialist makes a PowerPoint presentation about sales forecasts for her company's new noncarbonated beverage. Her evaluation is that the presentation was captivating, even if the people present offered no evaluation of her performance. Believing that she did a wonderful job, she gains in self-esteem. The reverse is also true—if the marketing specialist believes that her presentation was flawed, she might suffer a drop in self-esteem.
5. *Creating an identity.* Self-presentation is also a means of creating an identity. The person may engage in public behaviors that symbolize group membership. A person wanting to appear like a young business professional might walk through the office and streets occupied with a cell phone and personal digital assistant, and quite often carrying a bottle of water. The same person would

most likely wear business attire typical of business professionals in his or her field. Although the stereotyped behaviors just mentioned are superficial, they contribute heavily to identity creation.

The different motives for engaging in impression management described above will sometimes be satisfied by the same behavior. For example, documenting one's job successes to other people might (1) enhance rewards, (2) gain power over others, (3) create a positive public self, (4) boost self-esteem, and (5) create an identity.

### *Antecedents of Impression Motivation*

Three central factors that determine impression motivation are outlined in Figure 1-1 and described next: the goal relevance of the impressions, the value of the desired outcomes, and the discrepancy between the person's desired and current social image.

**Goal Relevance of Impressions** The more the managed impression is perceived to be relevant to attaining a person's goals, the more strongly the person will be motivated to manage his or her impression. The goals in question relate to the motives described above, such as gaining power over others and boosting self-esteem. One factor determining whether a given impression management behavior is relevant is how public the behavior will be, including the probability that the behavior will be observed by others and the size of the audience. A worker seeking more self-esteem would be strongly motivated to impress others via a description of her work presented on a company blog because so many other employees would see the blog.

Another factor enhancing goal relevance is the extent of dependency on the target. When the person is dependent on others for valued outcomes, such as receiving a bonus, the impressions he or she creates are more important. The individual will therefore be more motivated to manage his or her impression. If a person's immediate manager has the authority to make bonus recommendations, he or she will be the recipient of considerable ingratiation.

The anticipated frequency of contact with the target will also help shape the relevance of impression management to attaining a goal. When people expect future interactions with another person, they are more likely to attempt to control how that person perceives them. A middle manager who anticipates periodic contact with the company CEO is likely to work hard at creating a good impression in his or her presence.

Personal characteristics can also influence how relevant impression management appears to be in attaining positive outcomes. A person with strong Machiavellian tendencies (a propensity to manipulate others) is likely to perceive creating the right impression as essential in attaining goals. Chapter 3 describes individual factors that predispose people toward impression management.

The characteristics of the target also influence how relevant impression management might be to attaining certain goals. In general, people are more motivated to manage their impressions for people who are powerful because the powerful person

can help the actor attain an important goal, such as being promoted. A small-business owner would be more motivated to manage his impression for a loan officer in a bank than for a vendor, such as the manager of an employment agency for temporary workers. Correctly or incorrectly, the small-business owner reasons that the loan officer has a greater impact on the viability of his or her business. The goal in this situation is to raise enough capital to expand the business.

**Value of Desired Goals** A principle of motivation is that the more value a person places on a goal, the stronger will be his or her effort to pursue that goal. Effort invested in impression management will therefore increase with the value of the goals the individual hopes to attain. If a person believes that becoming a corporate executive is an ideal career outcome, and also believes that appearing charismatic will facilitate attaining the goal of becoming an executive, he or she will work hard at appearing charismatic.

Leary and Kowalski note that because the value of outcomes increases as their availability decreases, the motivation to engage in impression management is stronger when the desired resources are scarce. A CEO position is a scarce resource (only one per company), which triggers a higher frequency of impression management to work toward becoming a CEO.

**Discrepancy between Desired and Current Image** Impression management is also motivated by the person's real and ideal image, or the image that one would like to hold of oneself and the image one believes that others already hold. Most people have a range of images that they regard as acceptable to project. When the image falls outside that range, the person might be motivated to fine-tune the image. When the image falls within the range of acceptability, the person is less likely to be motivated to manage his or her impression.

People who believe they have failed in the eyes of others, as well as those who have been embarrassed, are more likely to want to change the image they project. A case in point was an executive who received feedback from the human resources director, as well as an office assistant, that he had developed a reputation for being too flirtatious toward young women employees. Two women had even complained that some of the executive's comments about their appearance constituted sexual harassment. The executive worked quickly to change the impression he created in respect to his interaction with women. His most effective tactic was to stop commenting on the appearance of women, except for the occasional comment, "You are dressed for success today." He would also make the same comment to men, when appropriate.

### ***Impression Construction***

The construction of an image is not simply based on making a handful of positive statements about yourself to others. Following the synthesis developed by Leary and Kowalski, we look at five determinants of impression content, or how images are constructed.

**Self-Concept** Many impressions that people attempt to create of themselves are accurate impressions that fit their self-concept. Furthermore, the self-concept is the primary determinant of the impressions people attempt to project to others for several reasons. First, most people are proud of certain aspects of their self-concept and therefore eagerly display these aspects at appropriate times. Also, impression management may be used to ensure that people are perceived accurately, such as a software engineer wanting to emphasize to coworkers that she has good interpersonal skills, and is not exclusively a technical person.

Second, self-beliefs serve to limit self-presentations by providing information regarding the probability that they can project particular impressions. If the software engineer just mentioned perceives herself as having good interpersonal skills, she might attempt to project the image of a person who gets along well with people. (A caution is that irrational people may not be constrained by their self-concept because it might be distorted.) Most people are hesitant to attempt to project images that are inconsistent with their self-concept because of concern about being able to pull it off.

Third, people who are uncomfortable with lying are hesitant to make claims about themselves, or project images that are blatantly inconsistent with their self-concepts. The same people might be willing to stretch their self-concept a little before believing they are lying. Job applicants, for example, will often project an image of capabilities that are a little beyond their true expertise. Personal websites are one job-related domain related to work life where positively distorted self-presentations are likely to occur. Exaggerating one's accomplishments on these websites is almost expected.

**Desired and Undesired Identity Images** Image construction is also based on how people would like to be and not be seen. People often convey impressions that are biased in the direction of their desired identities. A manager who wants to see himself as a good coach will frequently engage in behaviors that show an interest in helping others, such as asking subordinates questions about their progress, and making encouraging statements to them. People also manage their impressions to avoid fitting an *undesired* identity image—something a person does not want to be. The manager in question might avoid statements and behaviors that suggest he or she does not really care about the welfare of subordinates. For example, even when work pressures are high the manager would take the time to listen to subordinates.

**Role Constraints** The roles we occupy are typically a powerful force in establishing limits to the impressions we create. In addition to specific prescriptions for behavior, most roles demand that the role occupants appear to be a particular kind of person or possess certain characteristics. To illustrate, a chief financial officer (CFO) is supposed to be a person of high integrity who manages money prudently. It would be inconsistent with the CFO's role to brag about junkets to gambling casinos or having lost thousands of dollars in a risky investment. Executives in general who publicly deviate too far from their role

expectations are subject to dismissal. Several male executives have been asked to resign in recent years because they were known to have sent romantic e-mail messages to young women employees. Similarly, when a married executive conducts an affair with a company employee, he or she might be asked to resign.

On the positive side, role constraints can propel a person into engaging in positive aspects of impression management consistent with the role. Visualize a customer service representative in a department store. Part of her role is to be helpful so she projects the image of being friendly and concerned while dealing with customer problems.

**Target Values** Substantial research indicates that people modify their public images to the perceived values and preferences of key people with whom they interact. In a company where top-level management demands heavy commitment to the job as well as a strong work orientation, many employees will project the image of total company involvement. Among their behaviors would be to brag about working at nights and on weekends, and not having taken allotted vacations. Conversely, when top-level executives favor work-life balance, employees are likely to talk about leisure activities and wonderful family vacations. The people who manage the impressions in question are not necessarily being deceptive. Instead, they are emphasizing different aspects of the self in order to match the target's values. For example, the person who brags about working nights and weekends might also have outside interests and take vacations yet does not brag about these activities in the presence of company executives.

At times people will present themselves in ways that are inconsistent with the target's values. They make these self-presentations for the purpose of irritating the target or displaying independence. By emphasizing an image the target disapproves of, the person achieves his or her goal of annoying the target. Assume that a financial executive believes that the company is spending too much money on frivolous new products that ultimately consume too many company resources, as well as losing money. In contrast, the head of research and development believes that the company must invest heavily in new products in the hopes that one or two will be major successes. To irritate and antagonize the financial executive, the head of research and development talks flamboyantly about new products in her meetings with the financial executive.

**Current or Potential Social Image** A final aspect of how the content of images is determined to be discussed here is how people think they are currently regarded by others and how they think they will be perceived in the future. A primary consideration is that people are reluctant to present themselves in ways that conflict with the information others have about them. To do so might arouse suspicion, and trigger being perceived as unauthentic. The knowledge others have about a person therefore constrains the image projected. A businessperson who was fined for insider trading might be reluctant to attempt to create the impression

of a holier-than-thou individual. Instead, he or she might engage in impression management tactics to repair the damage, such as emphasizing that he or she has learned from the mistake in action and judgment.

Another twist on the impact of the current image on a person's style of impression management can occur when his or her accomplishments are well known. The person might feel compelled to modestly downplay the accomplishments in a show of modesty. A manager well known for having turned around a failing division of the company will often deflect personal credit and talk about the wonderful performance of the team.

Being perceived in certain ways can also make the person feel entitled to claim certain images. A person who has conformed to group norms for a long time will accumulate *idiosyncrasy credits* that allow the person to deviate a little from the norm in the future. A staid information technology specialist known for her conscientiousness might therefore return from a vacation bragging about 24 consecutive hours spent at a casino.

At times the ingredients to impression management will be influenced by how people think they will be perceived in the future. The possibility that people will learn certain information about them in the future affects the content of the self-presentation. A sales consultant might anticipate losing a major account by the end of the year. He might take a pre-emptive approach by explaining to his boss how hard he has worked with the customer to help the company avoid bankruptcy, but his efforts might not be successful.

In review, the model of impression motivation and construction developed by Leary and Kowalski identifies three central factors that determine impression motivation and five central factors that determine the mode of impression construction, as outlined in Figure 1-2.

## **Ethical Considerations Associated with Impression Management**

Impression management in the workplace, as with other forms of organizational politics, often has ethical implications. An extreme example of unethical impression management would be attempting to impress others by pretending that your social network includes world-famous industrialists, athletes, and politicians. An example of ethical impression management would be keeping informed of current events and staying abreast of developments in your field in order to impress others with your knowledge and dedication. Most forms of impression management would fall between these extremes. One example would be exaggerating a little about how interested you are in marketing strategy when speaking to a marketing executive.

When evaluating the ethics of a particular approach to impression management, it is helpful to use a standard ethical screen. A representative ethical screen is the one developed by the Center for Business Ethics at Bentley University, which asks six questions to evaluate the ethics of a specific decision:<sup>20</sup>



- *Is it right?* This question is based on the deontological theory of ethics that there are certainly universally accepted guiding principles of rightness and wrongness, such as “thou shall not steal.”
- *Is it fair?* This question is based on the deontological theory of justice that certain actions are inherently just or unjust. For example, it is unjust to fire a high-performing employee just so you can impress top management that you are cutting costs as much as possible?
- *Who gets hurt?* This question is based on the utilitarian notion of attempting to do the greatest good for the greatest number of people. If your approach to impression management hurts nobody, it is ethical from the standpoint of this question.
- *Would you be comfortable if the details of your decision or actions were made public in the media or through e-mail?* This question is based on the universalist principle of disclosure. Would you be willing to let others know that you blamed your poor performance with a client on a migraine headache you developed from drinking a contaminated energy drink?
- *What would you tell your child, sibling, or young relative to do?* This question is based on the deontological principle of reversibility, which evaluates the ethics of a decision by reversing the decision maker.
- *How does it smell?* This question is based on a person’s intuition and common sense. For example, looking good by stealing someone else’s innovative suggestion would “smell” bad to a sensible person.

As implied above, ethical issues that require a run through the guide are usually subtle rather than blatant, a decision that falls into the gray zone. For example, if you were applying for a position at Calvin Klein, would you purposely purchase some Calvin Klein clothing to wear to the interview?

## **Guidelines for Application and Practice**

1. Managing your impression well at both superficial and deeper levels is a major factor in attaining career and personal success. Studying the subject of impression management and selectively applying the concepts are therefore of substantial potential benefit to your career.
2. Whether or not you believe that impression management is important, others will often judge you on the basis of the impression you create. Projecting a favorable impression, whether spontaneously or through conscious effort, is therefore to your advantage.
3. Your self-presentation is influential in creating a social reality. How you are perceived by others helps create circumstances. An example would be creating a sterling impression on a higher-level executive during a meeting, and subsequently being nominated for a new, higher-level position.



4. Almost any behavior can contribute to or detract from the image you project. Impressions of an individual can be generated by everyday, seemingly innocuous acts such as smiling at others, being helpful, and listening to another person.
5. A practical viewpoint of impression management is that you take actions to be perceived positively by the target person or persons.
6. To manage your impression effectively, it is helpful to understand the motivation behind your attempts at impression management. Among your motives might be maximizing rewards and minimizing punishments, gaining power over others, creating a public self in accord with your ideal self, maintaining your self-esteem, and creating a personal identity. The same behavior on your part, such as being an articulate speaker, might satisfy more than one of these motives.
7. As you go about constructing an image, keep in mind several determinants that may guide you in developing your image. The image should ordinarily fit your self-concept. Your self-beliefs, such as your analysis of your strengths and weaknesses, will often guide you as to the type of image you can project well. What you are the most proud of in relation to yourself should be incorporated into your self-presentation, such as taking pride in your advanced information technology skills. It is natural to incorporate into the impression you create your desired identity, or the way you would like to be known. Think through the role you occupy when creating an image. Your image works most effectively when it is consistent with your role, such as an employee assistance counselor projecting warmth and caring.

It is also helpful to project those aspects of your personality and talents that fit the key values and preferences of your audience. For example, when dealing with cost-conscious managers, emphasize some of your frugal work practices (if true). Should your accomplishments be well known, you will be perceived positively by many audience members when you do not incorporate bragging about these accomplishments in your image.

8. Before choosing a particular approach to impression management, reflect on its ethical merits. In this way, you are likely to engage in impression management that has enduring value.

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## Summary

Impression management refers to the process by which people control the impression others form of them. A positive impression often leads to important work-related outcomes such as getting a raise and being promoted. Impressions can be deep as well as superficial.

The modern-day roots of the scientific study of impression management are frequently attributed to Erving Goffman, who views people as “actors” engaging in

“performances” in various settings before “audiences.” The actors and the audiences interact to develop a definition of the situation which guides their behavior. The performance of people functioning as actors depends upon the characteristics of both the situations and the audiences present. Controlling one’s identity as it is portrayed to others can influence how situations are defined, and thereby establish expected norms, roles, and behavior. Self-presentation also defines the individual’s place in the social environment. Another declaration of Goffman is that even seemingly innocuous actions might be aimed at showing a person in a favorable light.

Impression management has been defined in a variety of ways, as presented in Figure 1-1. Impression management is usually for the purpose of creating a positive impression, yet some people go out of their way to look bad. The terms impression management and self-presentation are often used interchangeably, yet sometimes behaviors are directed at enhancing the impression another person creates in order to be liked. The common meaning of the definitions of impression management is that the person takes action so that the target person or persons perceive him or her positively.

The two-component model of impression management developed by Leary and Kowalski is summarized here. The model states that impression management involves two discrete processes: impression motivation and impression construction. The process of impression motivation is influenced by three primary factors: the goal relevance of the impression, the value of the desired goals, and the discrepancy between the desired and current image. The process of impression construction is influenced by five factors: the person’s self-concept, his or her desired and undesired identity images, role constraints in which the person is placed, the target’s values, and the actor’s perceptions of his or her current or potential social image.

Among the motives for engaging in impression management are (1) maximizing rewards and minimizing punishments, (2) gaining power over others, (3) creating a public self in accord with the ideal self, (4) maintaining self-esteem, and (5) creating an identity. The different motives for engaging in impression management will sometimes be satisfied by the same behavior.

Managing your impression well at both superficial and deeper levels is a major factor in attaining career and personal success. Almost any behavior can contribute to or detract from the image you project. Impressions of an individual can be generated by everyday, seemingly innocuous acts such as smiling at others, being helpful, and listening to another person.

Before reaching a decision about using an approach to impression management that is not obviously ethical or blatantly unethical, seek answers to questions such as: Is it right? Is it fair? Who gets hurt? Would you tell your child, sibling, or young relative to do it?



## Chapter 2

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# A Cybernetic Model of Impression Management

A useful framework for understanding impression management is that it is a control or cybernetic process. We have an ideal in mind of how we would like to be perceived, and we compare that standard to how we think we are currently perceived. We engage in certain behaviors to close the discrepancy between how we are perceived and how we would like to be perceived. The cybernetic perspective also assumes that we are rational, so we stay tuned to feedback that might tell us how well our impression management tactics are working. After receiving the feedback, we fine-tune our tactics to once again close the discrepancy between how we would like to be perceived and how we are perceived. With the modified set of impression management tactics in play, we then seek more feedback and fine-tune our behavior once again. The control process continues until we are satisfied with our approach to impression management.

Visualize Lisa, who is building a career as an international marketing professional. She wants to project the image of, and present herself as, a young professional who is committed to international business. As Lisa reflects on the image she creates, she is concerned that she does not distinguish herself from other young professionals aspiring to advance in international marketing. Lisa decides that she would be more credible—thereby projecting a stronger image—if she strengthened her Spanish-language skills. Following this conviction, Lisa works assiduously at becoming more fluent in Spanish. During business meetings and networking events, Lisa looks for an opportunity to display a little knowledge of Spanish.

At first, Spanish-speaking work associates appear somewhat unimpressed by Lisa's initiatives in the Spanish language. Consequently, Lisa invests more effort into speaking Spanish more fluently and with a better accent. With this fine-tuning accomplished, Lisa observes that both Spanish-speaking people and those who speak only English are more impressed with her second-language skills. Lisa receives feedback in essentially two forms: compliments about her Spanish speaking from work associates, and brief return conversations in Spanish from Spanish-speaking people. Lisa is now content that she has strengthened the image she projects of a credible international marketing professional. (Lisa also projects the image of a marketing professional in other ways, such as talking about international business and alluding to overseas trips she has taken.)

So far we have glimpsed how a cybernetic, or control, model can help us understand the process of impression management in the workplace. In this chapter we summarize the cybernetic model of impression management processes in organizations developed by Dennis P. Bozeman and K. Michele Kacmar.<sup>1</sup> We also provide additional explanation and examples for certain aspects of the model, and concentrate on its more applied and less esoteric aspects.

## A Brief Look at Cybernetic Theory

Cybernetics can be regarded as a theory of information, communication, and control. Given that impression management is mostly about communication, cybernetics can therefore contribute to an understanding how people manage their impressions. At its core, cybernetics is concerned with the behavior and functioning of self-regulating systems. Cybernetic systems feature four components: a reference standard or goal, feedback, a comparator, and an effector. The *comparator* is the process by which the goal and feedback is compared. In everyday language, a comparator is an instrument for making comparisons. The *effector* is the process by which outputs or behavior can be altered. In the case of Lisa, her goal is to be perceived as a competent international marketing specialist. Her comparator is her cognitive evaluation of how close the feedback fits her goal, and her effector is her ability to concentrate more on improving her fluency in Spanish.

According to cybernetic theory, the person processes feedback from the environment by using a comparator to detect discrepancies between the reference standard (goal) and the feedback. In our example, Lisa is focusing on the aspect of her image as being bilingual to strengthen her overall image as an international marketing professional. The subtle feedback she receives about her Spanish-speaking ability helps her know if she has closed the discrepancy between her ideal and real image.

Three outcomes are possible: negative discrepancies, positive discrepancies, and zero discrepancies. Corrective action is likely to be taken when a discrepancy is negative because the person experiences a need for improvement. A positive discrepancy could also lead to improvement, such as a person who is trying to become more assertive discovering that he or she is perceived as being overly assertive, or aggressive. A zero discrepancy indicates that all is well and performance remains stable without taking corrective action.

A negative discrepancy indicates that the organism is not reaching the reference standard or goal. As a result, the organism or person adjusts his or her behavior via the effector to minimize the discrepancies. Lisa might intensify her efforts to become more fluent in Spanish through such means as finding more people with whom to speak Spanish regularly. Or, the person can adjust the reference goal downward to more closely align with the performance level noted in the feedback. Should marketing specialist Lisa interpret the feedback she is receiving as a sign of her inability to speak Spanish fluently, she might decide just to demonstrate a casual familiarity with the Spanish language and Latino culture. In this way her image as an international worker might be authenticated.

A positive discrepancy indicates that what the person attains (his or her output) exceeds the goal he or she was attempting to attain. A human being might make an adjustment because of the positive discrepancy or he or she might be content that performance has exceeded standard. The over-assertive person just mentioned might push back slightly on assertiveness. Over-performance is more difficult to visualize with Lisa. However, better-than-goal performance could include being perceived as having been raised in a Latino household, or being Latino herself.

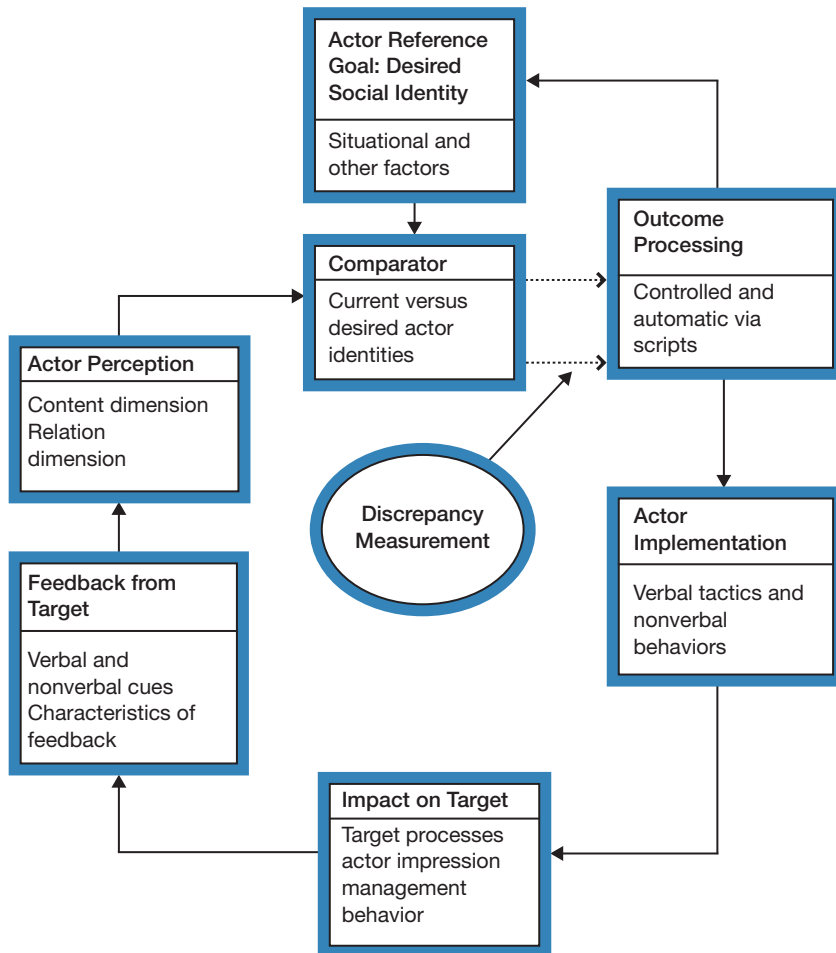
Cybernetic systems have motivational implications. The actors in the system are goal oriented, with negative feedback guiding subsequent action toward attaining goals in the future. According to cybernetic theory, goals and the effort that follows are reflected in two principal activities: (1) effort directed toward gaining control of the environment and (2) effort directed toward getting the system or organism in tune with the demands placed by the environment. Assume that Ken, a manager, wants to project the image of a credible and trustworthy leader. He attempts to control the environment by acting and being trustworthy, for example following through on commitments he makes to subordinates, such as promising to find money for equipment purchase. Ken also analyzes what kind of behavior subordinates are likely to perceive as being trustworthy. A little questioning reveals that many other managers in the company have lied to workers about such matters as outsourcing being out of consideration. Ken will therefore be extra careful to be truthful about such matters.

Part of being perceived as trustworthy is to be perceived as authentic, or not phony. Authenticity is also gauged by feedback. As Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones explain, a leader cannot look in the mirror and say, "I am authentic." A person cannot be authentic acting alone. Authenticity is mostly defined by what other people see in you.<sup>2</sup> You can work at being authentic, yet feedback from others is required to know if an image of authenticity is being projected.

## The Basic Components of the Model

Figure 2-1 presents the Bozeman and Kacmar cybernetic model of impression management. The model suggests that the motivation for impression management is linked most closely to the agent's perception of the difference between the **reference goal** and the feedback provided by the target. The reference goal is the actor's desired state of social identity, such as wanting to be perceived as a competent international marketing professional. These discrepancies are uncovered through the comparator. If the comparisons, or feedback, indicate to the actor that the image he or she wants to project is being achieved, the tactics being used presently will be continued. However, if a discrepancy occurs, the actor will search for other means of attaining the desired image. In a sense, the actor will develop another script. After the next tactic is selected, the actor will implement the behavior and wait for a reaction from the target. The reaction or feedback will be processed and then compared to the image the actor is seeking. The outcome from this comparison is significant because it creates the nature of the next step, leading to continuing interaction in the system.

**Figure 2-1** A Cybernetic Model of Impression Management.



Source: Adapted from Dennis P. Bozeman and K. Michele Kacmar, "A Cybernetic Model of Impression Management Processes in Organizations," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, March 1997, p. 12.

The first part of the model can be illustrated by job interviewees, who are usually highly motivated to present positive images of themselves to interviewers. Quite often, competence to perform the job in question is a key issue to be tackled by the interviewee, and evaluated by the interviewer. To construct an image that conveys job competence, interviewees might use a script that focuses on self-promotion. Assume that the interviewer sends a message to the interviewee that he or she is impressed by the self-promotional information (the desired image to be projected). The interviewee will most likely continue to reinforce the positive image created by using other varieties of self-promotional tactics, such as enhancement or entitlement.

*Enhancement* refers to embellishing the positive aspects of a favorable outcome or accomplishment. *Entitlement* refers to increasing one's perceived role in or responsibility for positive outcomes or events, such as the interviewee explaining that he or she contributed an innovative idea that facilitated the team's success.

The opposite scenario is when the actor perceives that the initial self-promotion tactic backfired and the desired image projection is not achieved. The interviewee might attempt to adapt to the demands of the situation by seeking a more favorable evaluation by the interviewer. A typical tactic would be to qualify prior comments that may have appeared overly boastful by acknowledging the contributions of others to a positive outcome or event, such as team success. The interviewer's verbal and nonverbal feedback to the second tactic would then be used by the interviewee to evaluate whether or not the impression management tactic was effective. By using this additional feedback, the interviewee might be able to fine-tune his or her use of impression management for the rest of the interview.

As with most approaches to impression management, cultural factors can shape the extent to which self-promotion is advised. The job candidate for a position with an Asian company might engage in less self-promotion than if he or she were applying for a comparable position in an American company. The reason is that the typical American hiring manager values self-promotion and boasting about individual accomplishment more than does the typical Asian hiring manager.

The model depicted in Figure 2-1 assumes that impression management, whether conscious or unconscious, is a concern for the actor for several reasons. A major reason is that the interaction of situational factors, target characteristics, and actor individual differences has evoked an identity from among many possible identities that needs to be enhanced, protected, maintained, or adjusted. At the same time the perceived probability of being able to project this identity must be acceptable to the actor. An implication of the model is that impression management will occur only under certain conditions.

In the following pages the segments of the model are described individually. However, impression management really takes place in a dynamic, interactive manner, with the actor making fine adjustments as he or she goes along. Imagine yourself at a social networking event, such as a cocktail and dinner meeting. As you meet various people, you might automatically adjust your impression management tactics to adapt to the needs of individuals. If you meet an operations manager you might emphasize how impressed you are with the profit consequences of managing inventory well. If you meet a person who manages a non-profit agency, you might shift to a discussion of your charitable activities.

### *Reference Goal: Desired Social Identity*

As suggested by Figure 2-1, the model is centered on the actor's reference goal or desired sense of **social identity**. The concept of social identity refers to an actor's



identification with a specific grouping of people, such as team member, leader, or free agent. The social identity is both a dynamic and complex concept. By using target feedback, the actor can compare his or her desired social identity, or goal, to how he or she is perceived by the target. Any discrepancies that might exist between these two entities are noted and corrective actions taken if necessary. For example, a person might reflect, “It doesn’t look as if I am being taken as a person of great accomplishment in my field. Maybe I should make more references to some of my best accomplishments.”

### *Activation of Identity Goal*

Although the model in question suggests one social identity goal for the purpose of impression management, in reality organizational members are likely to possess multiple identity goals they would like to attain. Different situations may call for different identities to be portrayed. For example, a sales representative might want to emphasize the identity of a problem solver and solutions finder in dealing with a client. During a meeting with peers, the representative might want to project the identity of a good team player. While meeting with superiors, he might aspire to attain an identity as an outstanding performer.

An important influence on the nature of the social identity portrayed to others is the specific aspects of the self-concept activated in a given social situation. Because the self-concept is multifaceted, different aspects can be relevant according to the situation. A colleague asking for technical assistance on a problem might trigger the helpful, nurturing part of a person’s self-concept to emerge. In another situation, such as at a company retreat, the brasher, more ego-centered part of the same person’s self-concept might be triggered into action.

Two processes especially linked to the self-concept are important for the motivation to engage in impression management. The motive to engage in self-enhancement stems from the actor’s desire to increase or protect his or her self-esteem. Self-enhancing impression management occurs when an actor has a social identity goal that, if achieved, will enable the actor to bolster or protect his or her self-esteem or emotions related to the self. Self-enhancement motivation may also prompt the actor to select an identity that is not only more positive than his or her present self-concept, but also that can be reasonably claimed and achieved. An administrative assistant, for example, might attempt to project the identity of a person who influences the CEO in decision making because this identity is but a small stretch from what she is already doing.

Self-enhancing impression management involves separate discrepancies between the actor’s self-concept and his or her desired social identity. First, the actor wants to be perceived by others in a more favorable light than is indicated by the current self-concept. Second, the motive of self-verification is derived from the person’s desire to confirm his or her self-concept by receiving feedback about what others perceive to be his or her social identity. The person might reflect, “Do other people in my network see me as a builder of really cool websites?”