

# The Fundamental Attribution Error

In the May 29th issue of The New Yorker Magazine, Malcolm Gladwell reported on two experiments that point to the power of first impressions.

Some years ago, Nalini Ambady, an experimental psychologist at Harvard University, was curious about the non-verbal aspects of good teaching. She wanted to get at least a minute of film on each teacher to be rated, play the tapes without sound for outside observers, and then to have those observers rate the effectiveness of the teachers by their expressions and physical cues.

She could only get ten seconds worth of tape and thought she'd have to abandon the project. But her advisor encouraged her to try anyway, and with ten seconds of tape, the observers rated the teachers on a fifteen-item checklist of personality traits. In fact, when Ambady cut the clips back to five seconds and showed them to other raters, the ratings were the same. They were even the same when she showed still other raters just two seconds of videotape. It seemed that anything beyond that first impression was superfluous.

Ambady's next step led to an even more remarkable conclusion. She compared those snap judgments about teacher effectiveness with evaluations made, after a full semester of classes, by students of the same teachers. The correlation between the two, she found, was astoundingly high. A person watching a two-second silent video clip of a teacher he has never met will reach conclusions about how good that teacher is that are very similar to those of a student who sits in the teacher's class for an entire semester.

Tricia Prickett, an undergraduate at the University of Toledo, conducted a similar experiment. She collected videotapes of twenty-minute job interviews in order to test the adage that "the handshake is everything." She took fifteen seconds of videotape showing the applicant as he or she knocks on the door, comes in, shakes the hand of the interviewer, sits down, and is welcomed by the interviewer.

Like Ambady, she then got a series of strangers to rate the applicants based on the handshake clip, using the same criteria that the interviewers had used for the original twenty-minute interviews. Once more, against all expectations, the ratings were very similar to those of the interviewers. On nine out of the eleven traits the applicants were being judged on, the fifteen-second observers significantly predicted the outcome of the twenty-minute interview.

I suppose science has again proven what wisdom has known all along, that first impressions are lasting impressions. It also seems that our first impressions will override hard evidence to the contrary. In other words, it's difficult to overcome a negative (or positive) first impression.

Unfortunately, science has also proven that our first impressions are not altogether accurate and has dubbed our tendency to leap to judgment the Fundamental Attribution Error. It's an error because how a person behaves in one situation is not an accurate predictor of her behavior in a different situation. We vastly underestimate the role of context in controlling human behavior and choose instead to base our judgments on extremely limited information.

The implications for business presenters? Get off to a good start, by all means, but fight the laziness and stupidity of the FAE too. Make them think again. Don't let your talk sag in the middle (most do), and, as you approach your conclusion, and your listeners begin to lapse again into their faulty first impression (good or bad), grip them, goad them, goose them with your ending and make them mutter, "Holy shit, this person is good." The power of endings can match the power of beginnings. After all, endings have the last say.



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