Managing impressions

1. How would you describe the cultural style prevalent where you work?

2. What values, beliefs or principles are seen as important?

3. What norms of behaviour or practices tend to be preferred?

4. How would you sum up the unwritten dress code?

5. How would you describe the meeting style that prevails?

6. How subjective or objective, formal or informal, personal or factual should you be in order to come across as persuasive?

7. What sort of person tends to get ahead and be seen as 'having potential'?

8. When you review how you've answered the questions above, to what extent does all this meet your preferred style?

9. Are you content with the impression you convey? Does it work for you? If not, what sort of organisation might better match your personal preference?

WHAT IMPRESSION DO YOU WANT TO CREATE?

Pause for thought!

Last week, we received a phone call which gave us pause for thought – and provoked some interesting conversation in the UGM team! See what you make of it.

It was from the HR Director of a large, well-known company. She wondered whether we might be able to provide some coaching for a female executive, Olivia. It seemed Olivia had built a solid reputation in their finance function, not just as a highly competent professional but also as an effective leader of a substantial team. So far, so good. It didn't sound as if Olivia needed any coaching support! But then the HR Director explained that, in a recent performance review, concerns had been raised about Olivia. To put the issue in a nutshell, the company couldn't see Olivia progressing much further unless she learned to convey a "more assertive impression". She was too low key, too diffident.

What is 'impression management'?

Whether we are conscious of it or not, as social creatures we human beings are constantly engaged in monitoring and managing the impression of ourselves that we convey to others. In a job interview, this process is explicit and expected. All of us have done it! We think through everything, including what we will wear and how we want to come across. We sculpt our answers to – in some measure – conform to our estimate of the sort of person we think the panel is seeking.

This isn't as simple as it might sound. Industry norms vary. Organisations and even departments within organisations each have their own style, reflecting key aspects of their particular culture. Think over your career. Chances are you have had to adjust the impression you create, as you have progressed. One obvious challenge is the subtle shift in demeanour required when you get a promotion that means you'll now be managing people who were your peers. How to strike the right balance between authority and friendliness? Not easy!

Impression management is all about presenting ourselves in the *best possible* light – but just what that means in practice keeps shifting. When we get it right, the reward is acceptance and rapport. But when there is a mismatch between expectations and the impression we convey, there can be a painful sense of being an outsider.

What is 'assertiveness' and where did it come from?

It might surprise you to learn that assertiveness as a construct grew out of a 1950s behaviour training method developed to help people suffering from a range of mental illnesses such as depression, addictions and social phobias. In other words,

'assertiveness' as we know it today was a repertoire of behaviours invented to help people seen as having quite severe social problems. It was initially called 'assertiveness therapy'!

The essence of the system was that speech should be direct. Requests and refusals should be stated explicitly. Feelings, desires and beliefs should be made clear. By the early 1970s, this system, created for clinical settings, mutated, we could say. It was seized on as embodying the kind of benign self-interest that was beginning to emerge from that period of intense social change across the English-speaking world. By the 1980s, assertiveness was being written about as the best way of embodying individualism. The ethic of human interdependence and connectedness (and hence face concerns) was muted by a new emphasis on autonomy and individual rights. To be assertive now meant to be mature and mentally healthy.

Why are more women identified as deficient?

In theory, assertion is an acceptable mid-point on a continuum between the two extremes of passivity and aggression. So it could have been argued that both men and women would benefit from assertiveness training to modify those aspects of their early socialisation that might not equip them to work well side by side in the modern workplace. Some people might profit from presenting themselves in more robust and confident way. Others might need to tone down a too direct or insensitive style. But this is not what has happened. The assertiveness training juggernaut has targeted women more than men.

UGM research findings on assertiveness

The notion of assertiveness encodes norms that depict women's speech style as deficient. In this sense, it risks being little more than verbal hygiene for women: a genre with a gender! The prototype of an assertive person becomes virtually synonymous with somewhat old-fashioned stereotypes of masculinity. Returning to Olivia, the successful leader of a (largely female) team: she had been told that she would need to convey a different impression if she wanted to be accepted in the senior (largely male) ranks of her company.

But we've found life is a bit more complicated! The advice to be direct doesn't take into account the interpersonal function of language. It implies that communicating information is really all that's going on when we talk at work. Our filming of everyday workplace talk shows that assertiveness can be evaluated as rude and insensitive in some situations. Reactions also vary depending on gender, with negative reactions being stronger if the speaker is female. Assertiveness alone can be a high risk strategy for women!