

First Impressions – What You Don't Know About How Others See You

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The authors assert “the most crucial moment of any relationship [is]: the first.”

I. The Theory of First Impressions – Shifting the Focus

The authors describe a lasting sense of someone or something as “retained remembrance.”¹ First impressions is a unique topic in our current society given the rapid rate and ways in which we meet new people. Demarais and White suggest, “in general, regardless of the situation, people form a first impression of you more by your style, such as how you show interest in them, navigate topics, and self-disclose, than by the content of your discussion.”² Throughout the book the authors go against conventional wisdom underscoring what is central to making a good first impression is not how you feel but how others feel. Demarais and White assert, “But how you come across to others is less about what you say or how you feel and more about how you make people feel about themselves in your presence.”³

First impressions can leave an emotional impact on complete strangers. During first impressions Demarais and White illustrate how one might place focus on four different areas:

1. How you feel about yourself
2. How you feel about the other person
3. How the other person feels about you
4. How the other person feels about himself or herself

For Demarais and White, the secret to making a positive first impression is an orientation toward focus 4.”⁴ Ironically they note, “Focus 4 is the most neglected of the four emotional focuses.”⁵ Typically, people place the first impression focus on themselves and how they are feeling about themselves and the other person. The natural evolutionary process of focus begins from our personal core and moves out to others. First our consideration is for how we feel about ourselves, next how we feel about others, next how others are feeling about us, and finally how others are feeling about themselves. Demarais and White claim the process of being other focused is “not obvious because it’s not an automatic emotional orientation.”⁶ Therefore, they encourage an intentional “shifting” the focus from one’s self to others feelings to improve first impressions. They describe first impressions as, “meeting others’ needs.”⁷ They say this illustrates to others the kind of person you may be, “demonstrate[ing] that you can be generous and selfless,” or alternatively “it may demonstrate that you may be an emotional burden.”⁸

¹ Ann Demarais and Valerie White, “First Impressions: What You Don’t Know About How Others See You.” (Bantam Books, 2005.), 2.

² Ibid., 5.

³ Ibid., 20.

⁴ Ibid., 23.

⁵ Ibid., 22.

⁶ Ibid., 23.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

Demarais and White refer to the shift of attention and focus on others as being socially generous, they call it “The Balance Sheet” approach. They assert that people weigh the “social” benefits and costs of interactions with others. In this theory they assert, “We evaluate, and are evaluated by, the benefits we provide to others.”⁹ They conclude, “the shortest route to getting what you want is to give to others first.”¹⁰ They refer to this as “a form of social generosity.”¹¹ It is putting others before yourself, or treating others the way you would want to be treated.

They give consideration to many questions: So what social gifts should one give? Do we consider what we are giving or denying others in a first impression? What is our strong suit of the four focus areas of social interactions? What benefits do I provide others in social interactions? Demarais and White advise, “Knowing what you want to give can help you understand if there are any gaps between what you would like to project and how others actually see you.”¹² First impressions are made quickly and people tend to believe they know 100% of you based on that initial impression. Demarais and White caution, “They assume that your first behaviors represent how you act most of the time, even if it is not true.”¹³ Again, Demarais and White assert the key to making a positive first impression is to focus on how others are feeling “and especially how they are feeling about themselves.”¹⁴

II. Accessibility and Showing Interest

The authors dissect a first impression into seven basic parts: accessibility, showing interest, the subject matter of first conversations, self-disclosure, conversational dynamics, perspective, and sex appeal. For the purposes of providing insight into the IIM Joining Phase, reflection is provided on two basic parts: showing interest and self-disclosure. The authors believe each person is able to apart their own “first impression puzzle” and see how they come across in each area. They also believe by understanding how you come across you are able to “tweak” your first impression style.

The authors place significant capital on accessibility saying, “Your ‘accessibility style’ is important because it literally determines whether an interaction takes place at all.” This basic part of a first impression may set the tone for my ability to effectively minister to congregational members in transition. Already members may feel various levels of isolation and being cut off from congregational life and ministry during the departure a pastor. The authors describe two components of the accessibility style: how one makes contact (active or passive) and the content, that is, what you actually say.¹⁵

Having made one’s self accessible, the authors regard the second fundamental of first impressions, *showing interest in others*, to be a hard and fast rule. They say, “You will come across more positively if you show genuine interest in people you meet for the first time.”¹⁶ They recognize that people seemed highly attuned to how others take interest in them but not necessarily how they are taking interest in others. This ability to consider what others are saying, feeling, and thinking shows “you are secure in yourself and open-minded enough to seek to understand what lies beneath

⁹ Ibid., 24.

¹⁰ Ibid., 25.

¹¹ Ibid., 23.

¹² Ibid., 30.

¹³ Ibid., 31.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 36.

¹⁶ Ibid., 58.

someone's surface appearance."¹⁷ Showing interest is a way we give gifts to people. The authors assert, "Most people want to be understood and will appreciate your attention and focus." Showing interest involves "directing your physical energy – looking, leaning, and nonverbally responding to them. It also consists of asking questions, listening closely, and responding appropriately."¹⁸

III. Application and Theological Review

Demarais and White reveal the secret to first impressions is how the other person feels about himself or herself. God makes himself accessible in Jesus Christ. He invites us to share with him the most insignificant matters. He is proactive in becoming accessible. The Bible says, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). He leans into our lives with interest. God cares about the details. The Apostle Peter affirms God's interest in us saying, "Cast your cares on him for he cares for you" (I Peter 5:7).

Being aware of the "first impression" dynamic and implications offers me insights on what to do and not do as I join new congregations in transition. So many believers seek to make good impressions themselves to the "new" pastor. What an opportunity for me to put them at ease and "love on them." Others simply are seeking to make connections and the joining phase offers an opportunity to make healthy connections beginning with first impressions. It will be important to focus less on how I feel about myself and others, and more on how others feel about themselves. The best way for me to affirm others' feelings about themselves is to treat them how God treats me: accessible to them and interested in them.

¹⁷ Ibid., 58.

¹⁸ Ibid., 80.