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Impression Management

Impression management is conscious or unconscious behaviour engaged in by an individual to create, maintain, protect, or alter images others develop during social interactions. Targets of impression management can be persons on the job (e.g., supervisors), in the selection context (e.g., recruiters), or in everyday life (e.g., dating partners). By using IM, persons may influence their target's evaluations and decisions. Impression management behaviours are often divided into assertive behaviours, which aim at creating a good impression (e.g., self-promotion), and defensive behaviours, which aim at defending a good impression (e.g., excuses). In addition, there are different ways impression management can be classified. In one paradigm, typical behaviour, self-presentation, impression management and faking behaviour can be seen as a continuum ranging from honest behaviour patterns to more dishonest behaviour patterns. In another paradigm, impression management can also be seen as one of the forces that changes typical performance behaviour into maximum performance behaviour.

Studying impression management in organizations increases knowledge of how individuals try to influence others using social interactions. Research debates centre on whether impression management behaviours during evaluation processes influence decisions in an undesirable way. There is a controversy in the selection literature on whether impression management can be interpreted as socially effective behaviour or whether it must be seen as error variance that biases evaluations. Another controversy exists regarding the connection between impression management and organizational citizenship behaviour, behaviours that are by definition voluntary. The debate centres on the motive underlying organizational citizenship behaviour: do employees demonstrate organizational citizenship behaviour because they are engaged organizational members or because they want to convey a good impression on others in the organization?

Interestingly, impression management seems to have some double standards. When employment recruiters use impression management to promote a job, these behaviours are largely seen as appropriate and legitimate. Similarly, desired leadership styles such as transformational leadership can also have some behavioural overlap that is included in impression management concepts. In general, within organizations impression management is often regarded as a legitimate or even, at times, a desired behaviour. This is also the case for using broader influence tactics in reaching relevant organizational goals. However, when applicants use impression management behaviours, these behaviours in the selection context are often seen as negative and dishonest. Therefore, a double standard exists when interpreting impression management behaviour from individuals in different roles.

References and selected further readings

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Suggested cross references:

Faking, self-presentation, transformational leadership, organizational citizen behavior, selection

Dr. Martin Kleinmann, full professor, department of psychology, University of Zurich
Dr. Pia Ingold, assistant professor, department of psychology, University of Zurich
Dr. Annika Wilhelmy, assistant professor, department of psychology, University of Zurich