

Perception Shapes Reality

By Tom Massey, Ph.D.

...the story heard is the story told!

A nationally known singer and songwriter, who is reputedly terrified of performing in front of a live audience was once asked what she experiences before going on stage. She responded, “I get butterflies in my stomach. My palms begin to sweat. My heart begins to pound. And I feel like I’m going to have a nervous breakdown.”

Another prominent entertainer, who thrives on performing for live audiences, was asked the same question about his experiences before taking the stage. He replied, “I get butterflies in my stomach. My palms begin to sweat. My heart begins to pound. And then I know I’m ready!”

Each of these performers experiences the same physiological responses going into similar situations, but each has a different perception of reality, based on their own emotional programming. Consequently, each has an internal dialogue about the experience. The first is telling herself a story about fear and anxiety, while the other tells himself that the increased emotional energy is serving to exhilarate his performance.

Our perceptions shape our reality. We each have a choice. We can let circumstances rule our lives, or we can respond by moving through those circumstances, regardless of how unpleasant they appear, choosing to live with purpose.

Effective leaders possess a high degree of emotional and mental determination. They keep telling themselves a positive story, as they move undauntedly toward their goals. Many great leaders who have been considered “successful” in their field have faced major setbacks:

- Abraham Lincoln lost eight elections and failed twice in business.
- Walt Disney, who was dyslexic as a child, lost his first cartoon production company to bankruptcy.
- Dr. Seuss's first book was rejected by 27 publishers.
- John Grisham's first book was rejected by sixteen agents and 12 publishers.
- Michael Jordan was cut from his high school's varsity football team as a sophomore.

These are just a few examples of determined people who have overcome perceived failures and experienced great success. They each kept telling themselves the story: “I think I can! I think I can!”

What story do you tell yourself when faced with fear or adversity? Do you use that adrenaline-driven energy to motivate you to perform at higher levels or do you allow it to reduce you to a nervous wreck? You have the power to choose your response in any

situation. Be aware that faulty perceptions, based on emotional programming from your past, may at times, cause defeating beliefs. Start changing those beliefs by using positive self-talk. Tell yourself a different story and encourage others to do the same.