

Dollars & Sense



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MINDING OUR MINDSETS

(or "Hey buddy... Can you paradigm?")

by Larry F. Johnston, Ph.D.

The great Satchel Paige once said, "It's mind over matter. If you don't mind, it don't matter."

His words invariably bring a smile to the listener, but their humorous facade veils volumes of profound brain taxing work encompassing philosophy, theology, psychology, phenomenology, physics and the chemistry of consciousness. Despite millennia of reflection, research, and rigorous debate, however, there is still no widely accepted adequate definition of what mind or consciousness is. In fact, the mind-body relationship continues to be the focus of major amounts of research, and yet the mysterious matter of mind remains elusive even to leading cognitive and neuroscientists.

At a more "dirt practical" level, as a good colleague would say, Paige's immortal quote cuts to one of the most important tasks facing us as human beings: *mindset management*. Whether we view the issue of "mind-

sets" (or, loosely speaking, "paradigms") scientifically as did Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, popularly as did Joel Barker in his book *Paradigms*, or pragmatically as do hundreds of self-help books religious and secular, it's clear that *there is little more fundamental to the quality of life than the quality of our consciousness*. In short, how we manage (cultivate, nurture, monitor, expand, safeguard) our minds. Statements like "It's your attitude not your aptitude that determines your altitude in life!" may sound schmaltzy to sophisticates, but such statements reflect an age-old insight from the book of Proverbs: "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he."

With literally hundreds of books from dozens of disciplines addressing different aspects of this topic, no single article can pretend to do much more than scratch the surface to raise awareness, provoke some reflec-

tion, and hopefully incline some of us to be more mindful (mind-full?) of the impact of our paradigms, mental models and attitudes on us and on those around us. The consequences are decidedly nontrivial, for as John Locke discerned with depth and poignancy over 300 years ago, “In truth, the ideas and images in men’s minds are the invisible powers that constantly govern them.”

In what follows, we’ll look with excruciating brevity (or welcomed brevity, depending on one’s perspective!) at the following issues:

- ◆ Our symbolic universes.
- ◆ The transactional nature of perception.
- ◆ The power of images.
- ◆ The need for watchfulness.
- ◆ The opportunities to create our realities and our future.

Two Universes

As best we can tell, humankind is unique in a very special way: While all life on this planet exists in the physical universe of energy-matter, only human beings dwell simultaneously in our highly subjective, internal *symbolic* universes. All life forms are “aware” to some degree (even if only photochemically at the most basic levels), but only *Homo sapiens* as a species is conscious in the sense of being *aware* of awareness. This consciousness entails the extraordinary capacity not only to formulate

images from our external and internal worlds, but to proactively and creatively shape and manipulate these images. This is significant for a thousand reasons (civilization and culture being among the more prominent and obvious), but it’s important in and relevant to our current discussion because these images and ideas, if we believe Locke, become the invisible powers that constantly govern us.

While space precludes even meaningfully dipping our toes into the deeper philosophical waters of correspondence and constructivist theories of truth, let’s note at least this much: Correspondence theorists contend

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that there is external “truth” and that the quest for truth consists largely of so cleansing the lenses of our perception that we are able to approximate an accurate cognitive grasp of what actually *is*. Few people are going to argue that there is not an external, physical, material world, for example. As someone has noted, even the most committed idealist (in the philosophical sense of the word) will look both

ways before crossing a street!

But with a world of energy-matter as a given, constructivism (aka constructionism) argues that “truth” as we know it is largely a social construction. The harder forms of constructivism (with which I would fundamentally disagree) contend that there are no transhistorical or transcultural defining essences or categories, but thankfully we don’t need to dive deep into these waters to understand the basics of perspectivalism: Where you stand on a wide range of issues depends on where you sit. As most of us have experienced countless times, this includes not only where we sit in time and space – for example, 21st Century America vs. the Dark Ages in Europe – but also what chair we occupy in a team or organization. (No one I know would seriously suggest that accountants and marketers consistently see the same realities.)

Not only is much of our world *collectively* constructed – i.e., socially, organizationally, and culturally (if you doubt this, consider the fundamentally different diets of vegetarians and cannibals!) -- much of our daily existence is also psychically or cognitively constructed at an *individual* level. Said another way, each of us perceives events differently and constructs internal images or symbolic representations of these events in ways so varied that we can often wonder if two people actually witness the same event. The simple but

amazing truth is that *no two pairs of eyes ever see exactly the same reality.*

In a humorous vein, this is reminiscent of the old ditty that “Neurotics build castles in the sky. Psychotics live there, and psychiatrists charge rent.”

The Transactional Nature of Perception

My preceding point attempts to make clear that each of us furnishes our respective mental theatres differently based on a wide array of factors. To use a different metaphor, each of us wears “contact lenses” of differing prescriptions that fundamentally alter the way we perceive all we come into contact with.

In terms of psychology, and important to our entire discussion here, is the transactional nature of perception. We’ve all heard a hundred times and no doubt have said ourselves, “I’ll believe it when I see it.” The truth be known, you’ll see it when you believe it. In other words, no one “objectively” and neutrally observes events and sees them “as they are,” despite persistent illusions to the contrary. The internal projector of the mind is continuously imposing on the external world an incessant (and almost always unconscious) stream of psychic “noise” in the form of conceptual categories, preconceptions, biases, selective perception, selective distortion, selective recall, etc. To a degree that can be quite disturbing, we are all encapsu-

lated in our own psycho-epistemological cocoons, seeing only what our paradigms allow us to see.

Recalling Sir Francis Bacon’s well-intentioned but ultimately misguided exhortation to “purge the mind of all theories” so as to achieve an unbiased, unprejudiced state of mind for “objective” observation, the eminent philosopher of science, Karl Popper, noted that “a mind so purged would not only be a pure mind, it would be an empty mind.” Stated another way, there are no such things as “facts,” but only “interpfacts.” Every observation is theory-impregnated to a degree, and part of effective mindset management entails our being aware of the perceptual and conceptual categories (and thus biases) we all bring to our observations.

The Power of Images

How important are these mental images that, according to Locke, become “invisible powers that constantly govern us?”



In a profoundly important book, *Appreciative Inquiry*, David Cooperrider explores the criticality of our mental images and the extent to which these images actually create the realities in which we live. Called the *heliotropic hypothesis* -- based on the directional growth of plants in response to sunlight – his hypothesis contends that in individual, team and organizational contexts, we tend to grow most rapidly and healthily in the direction of positive, affirming *images*. (See my article on “Revisiting Vision” for a discussion of the importance of compelling images in an organization’s vision statement.)

Claiming that “the positive image may well be the sine qua non of human development,” Cooperrider cites hundreds of empirical studies attesting to its theoretical and practical importance.

In fact, in a sweeping study of Western civilization, the Dutch sociologist Fred Polak speaks to the power of our mental images of the future as the single most important dynamic and explanation for understanding cultural evolution:

“Any student of the rise and fall of cultures cannot fail to be impressed by the role played in this historical succession of the future. *The rise and fall of images of the future precedes or accompanies the rise and fall of cultures.* As long as society’s image is positive and flourishing, the flower of culture is in full bloom.

Once the image begins to decay and lose its vitality, however, the culture does not long survive.”

That’s mind-boggling. Read that again. Research suggests that our images precede or accompany the rise and fall of civilizations! If that doesn’t make mindset management important, I don’t know what would!

Watchfulness

“If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up till he sees all things through the narrow chinks of his cavern.”

– William Blake

“Whoever tries to follow Christ ‘wherever He goes’ (Revelation 14.4) will inevitably be rent again and again – at every rise from a lesser to a wider cognition, from a small measure of love to a greater.”

– Archimandrite Sophrony

A number of the world’s religions speak to spiritual disciplines that entail a state of “watchfulness” (*nipsis* in the Greek). This attitude of or orientation to watchfulness is a state of inner vigilance, attention and sobriety. Mental and spiritual “monitoring and inspection,” if you prefer, along with the attendant necessary housekeeping. This watchfulness recalls that Christ did not merely urge prayer. He said, “*Watch and pray, that you enter not into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.*” (Matthew 26.41)

I like the way the Eastern Orthodox monk, Hieromonk Damascene, puts it: “First watch...then pray while watching.”

Co-creating Our Reality

From my vantage point, I see two key benefits of this watchfulness. One is eminently personal, involving the process of becoming all that we are capable of being. By being watchful – by minding our mindsets – we proactively shape the life of our mind with all the attendant consequences in terms of maturation, growth, and the quality of life.

The second benefit, impossible without and interdependent with the first, is the *collective* impact of mindsets well managed. Whether the fruit of positive and skillful mindset management is found within our families, our organizations, our communities or our world, thoughts and attitudes matter. Minds well tended can create soul-stirring symphonies, heart-moving poetry, or stunning scientific and technological breakthroughs for the enduring benefit of mankind. As an organizational consultant, I am also reminded that they can create organizations that empower, affirm, and liberate human potential and creativity in the pursuit of life’s noblest goals.

Mindsets ill-managed, as history has shown with tragic and persistent clarity, can create Auschwitz, the killing fields of Cambodia, the ethnic cleansing of Bosnia, the genocide of

Rwanda, or the current heartache of Darfur.

Because powerful ideas can be contagious, and because our shared images, ideas and thoughts can indeed co-create the realities in which we live as well as the realities we will bequeath to future generations, mindset management is no small priority.

It’s as true today as when John Stuart Mill said it over 200 years ago:

“No great improvements in the lot of mankind are possible until a great change takes place in the fundamental constitution of their modes of thought.”

That’s mindset management. Pure and simple.

For help with organization development, strategic management or other issues you face in your organization, contact Larry Johnston at larry_johnston@mcconkey-johnston.com.