



Healthcare Rx – Part IV
Challenging Assumptions: How to Break the Cycle of Destructive Interactions
By Marty Jacobs
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How many times have you listened to someone recount a situation you were part of only to think to yourself, “Wow! That’s not how I remember that!” We all experience situations differently and interpret them through our own perceptual filters. In the lingo of organizational learning, those are our mental models in action, and they reinforce patterns of behavior that can either help or hinder us.

What are mental models?

Mental models are deeply ingrained assumptions or generalizations that influence how we understand the world and how we take action. Some other words we use for mental models are perspectives, beliefs, assumptions, and mind set, to name a few. Mental models are often the greatest barriers to implementing new ideas in organizations, but they are also the area of organizational learning where organizations can make the most significant impact.

Unfortunately, assumptions, the word most often used to refer to mental models, have a negative connotation to most of us. We’ve all heard the old adage, “You know what happens when you assume? It makes an ___ out of you and me.” Well, you can fill in the blank. Assumptions, nonetheless, are the only way we can make sense of our complex world. It is not possible to have complete information about every situation we encounter, so by their very nature, our assumptions or mental models are incomplete and therefore flawed. For the most part, however, our mental models serve us well.

There are those occasions, on the other hand, where our mental models lead us astray. A great example of how imperfect mental models can be comes from the ancient parable of the blind men and the elephant, where several blind men are feeling different parts of an elephant and describing it. The descriptions by themselves are inaccurate, but when combined into one, give a clearer albeit still flawed description of what an elephant really looks like. Mental models are like puzzle pieces that we need to fit together into a larger whole. As different mental models are recognized, another piece falls in to place, and we see a clearer picture, but in this work, we do not have the top of the puzzle box to guide us. We must grope along like the blind men.

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What skills do individuals need to develop?

So how does one break the cycle of destructive interactions that our assumptions can create? The first step is to recognize the gap between what we believe to be true and what is actually true, or to put it more precisely, the gap between mental models and current reality. There are two main areas of skills in which individuals can practice working with mental models: 1) skills of reflection and 2) skills of inquiry.

Skills of reflection involve slowing down our thinking so that we become more aware of how we form our mental models and how they influence our behavior. One approach is to become more aware of recognizing when we make what are often referred to as “leaps of abstraction,” that is making generalizations based on our observations with no data to back it up. To avoid this pitfall ask the questions:

- “What is the data on which my beliefs or generalizations are based?”
- “Have I ever seen any disconfirming evidence to my beliefs?”
- “Am I willing to consider the possibility that my beliefs may be inaccurate?”

Another method for developing skills of reflection is often referred to as exposing the “left-hand column.” The “left-hand column” represents thoughts we often have during conversations but do not articulate. By actually writing these thoughts down after the fact, we are making our mental models visible. In turn, we can begin to reflect on how our thinking is blocking us from discovering a more effective solution.

A final technique for developing skills of reflection is to recognize the gap between what we say we believe, our espoused theory, and what we actually do, our theory in use. Put another way, we must start comparing our words to our actions or behaviors. Are we sending consistent messages? We may say we believe in something but our behavior contradicts that belief. Until we actually recognize that incongruence, we cannot begin to make changes that will positively affect the situation.

Skills of inquiry shape how we operate in face-to-face interactions. Once we have begun to practice our skills of reflection, we can then begin to surface and discuss our mental models with others. In doing so, we must remember that our mental models are only pieces to the puzzle. In *The Skilled Facilitator*, Roger Schwarz has developed a technique called the mutual learning model that can help individuals hone their interpersonal skills. It is based on the assumptions that everyone sees things differently, and it is those differences that create opportunities for learning and creativity. It is also based on the belief that everyone is acting with integrity. One can practice the mutual learning model by:

- Testing your assumptions by articulating them and asking for confirming or disconfirming evidence;
- Sharing all relevant information: withholding information will only lead to a less complete picture;
- Being transparent by putting your thinking on the table rather than your finished thought;

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- Focusing on interests, not positions, that is, talking about and agreeing to outcomes before jumping to solutions;
- Discussing those thoughts in the “left-hand column” that are often driving your actions;
- Balancing advocacy with inquiry, that is, asking about other points of view as much as you explain your own.

These skills, in combination with the skills of reflection, will unleash the power to challenge assumptions and to begin moving the organization toward sustainable change. In order to change our behavior we must first change the beliefs upon which those behaviors are based.

A Case Study

Let’s take a look at a particular situation and analyze how skills of inquiry and reflection can help improve the situation. Two nurses on an evening shift on a med-surg floor have a conversation criticizing a third nurse who is scheduled to come in for the night shift. Here is the conversation:

Laura: Oh brother, (rolling eyes and speaking with a disgusted tone) guess who's on tonight?

Donna: Not Mary I hope. I hate giving report to her. She always asks so many detailed questions.

Laura: She also gives me dirty looks if the med cart isn't set up. She is so annoying; I always get out much later when I have to report off to her.

Donna: Yeah, then we'll get the phone call from HR wanting to know why we punched out late.

Laura: Last time HR woke me up at 8:30 because of Mary. I can't stand her.*

The above conversation actually reveals what is likely to be in the “left-hand column” if either Laura or Donna were to talk with Mary before practicing reflection or inquiry. To change this scenario to one that is more productive, Laura and Donna will need to reflect on the following questions:

- What has really led me to think and feel this way?
- What am I seeing and what might I not be seeing?
- What are my intentions and what am I trying to accomplish?
- How might I be contributing to this problem?
- What assumptions am I making about Mary?
- What is preventing me from acting differently?
- What are the costs of continuing to think and act this way?

The intent of reflection is to pull back from blaming and think more systemically about what is driving the behavior in the given situation. Reflection, however, is only half of the equation. Inquiry is the step that will fill in the gaps that Laura’s and Donna’s assumptions are trying to bridge.

Engaging in inquiry can be a scary proposition, so creating the right mindset is critical. True inquiry is based on the assumptions that each person holds only partial information and that we often see things the other does not. Those differences, however, are opportunities for learning and exploration, and we do so with integrity and compassion. If Laura or Donna were to have a conversation with Mary, it would need to begin with sharing how they see the situation, explaining their reasoning and intent and then asking Mary to explain how she sees the situation. Both parties need to focus on the outcomes they hope to achieve. Once they are able to understand each other's perspective and challenge each other's assumptions by offering disconfirming data, they are in a better place to problem solve collaboratively.

Too often we find ourselves in situations where we jump to solutions before truly understanding the nature of the problem. Reflection and inquiry allow us to understand and respond to root causes rather than treating the presenting symptoms. Although it often feels like reflection and inquiry are time consuming, they are nothing compared to the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of solving the wrong problem. Just ask the nurses' supervisor.

Next topic in the series: encouraging dialogue.

**Thanks to Beth Boynton for developing this example.*

Resources:

The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of The Learning Organization, Peter M. Senge, 1990.

The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook, Peter M. Senge, Art Kleiner, Charlotte Roberts, Richard B. Ross, and Bryan J. Smith, 1994.

The Skilled Facilitator, Roger Schwarz, 2002.

Society for Organizational Learning (SoL) (<http://www.solonline.org/>).

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