

## **Mental Models**

There is a genius behind even the most confounding human behavior when we understand that people do as they *believe*, regardless of what they say. Peter Senge, writing in The Fifth Discipline, uses the concept of “mental models” to describe how people’s “deeply held internal images of how the world works ... limit us to familiar ways of thinking and acting.”<sup>1</sup>

For instance, a manager might issue a directive for honest communication, but denounce any feedback on her product plan. Her mental model might be, “You can’t really trust what people say,” which creates the conflict between her words and actions. In the same way, an organization may declare the need for innovation, yet punish failures with demotions. At an organizational level, an assumption could be, “New ideas are expensive and rarely work.”

The nine personality styles of the Enneagram tool are also mental models. Each style operates from a basic assumption about the nature of the world, which becomes the individual’s filter for interpreting events. Awareness of your personality bias can help bring assumptions to the surface, where their validity can be tested.

For example, more than one of my Enneagram Type Two coaching clients has complained about being taken advantage of by other people. Since the Two mental model says “I am helpful,” and “people need me,” Twos usually have a hard time saying no, and may offer very generous assistance in order to ingratiate themselves to others. The awareness that “I have to say yes, or people won’t like me” is a mental model, not a fact, opens up new choices.

A Type Nine middle manager in a large retail corporation said that he wanted a promotion, yet was unable to approach his supervisor about it for nearly two years. When caught in their Enneagram stress pattern, Nines have a hard time asserting themselves and being “visible.” Part of this man’s conflict was his yearning for more meaningful work, and a mental model that said, “My desires aren’t that important.”

Upon learning that his new boss was a bottom-line oriented manager, a Six employee reacted in a classically ambivalent way. Fearing the loss of his job, he took pains to show the boss that he was a number cruncher *par excellence*. Alternately, he questioned the competence of this boss and challenged many of his ideas. Type Six individuals anticipate negative outcomes, and typically vacillate between loyalty to and rebellion against authority.

Within this same company, a Four employee bristled when the new boss suggested that they save money by scaling back on the firm’s imaginative (and expensive) promotions. A Four mental model: “Be unique and creative!”

The goal of the boss, a Three, was a 20% profit increase, which he planned to achieve in part through significant budget cuts. His mental model, “Whatever it takes to win,” in this instance conflicted with an organizational value of producing top quality products, which demanded experienced and highly paid people.

Organizations themselves operate on assumptions about their business and how things get done. Michael Goldberg describes organizational Enneagram types in his excellent book, The Nine Ways of Working.<sup>2</sup> The assumption of a Seven organization, for instance, is that the market wants imaginative new ideas and products, whereas the paradigm of an Eight company is dominating its industry (fans of “The Apprentice” will notice how Donald Trump describes his

projects as the biggest, the tallest, the best, most luxurious, etc.). The One company is driven by a devotion to high quality standards and strict guidelines for maintaining them.

**May's Coaching Challenge:** Think about an area where you're having difficulty making a change – whether at the organizational, team, or individual level. Where are people's actions in direct opposition to stated desires? What would a person, group, or company need to assume in order to operate in this particular way? Complete this sentence, "The way we get things done around here is to ..."

Although identifying mental models can sometimes be a complex task, it is only when they are surfaced that they can be examined objectively. Questions at this point could be, Where did this assumption come from? How accurate is it? Has the marketplace (or your group, or you personally) changed, making it obsolete? Finally, think about the new assumption that needs to be made in order to respond in a different way.

<sup>1</sup> The Fifth Discipline, The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization, © 1990, Peter M. Senge

<sup>2</sup> The Nine Ways of Working, How to Use the Enneagram to Discover Your Natural Strengths and Work More Effectively, © 1996, 1999, Michael J. Goldberg

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