

Mental Models

Mental models are built upon our beliefs, values, and assumptions developed through experiences throughout our lifetimes. They can be simple generalizations, such as “Christians never wear jeans to church” or complex theories about how the world works. Remember, though, that mental models exist below the surface. We don’t see them. They are not even conscious; that is their purpose—creating automatic responses based on our “model,” so we don’t have to think through each situation every time we encounter it. Because mental models are based on our preferred assumptions about what something is or how something works, they affect what we see. Senge points out that two people observing the same event will describe it differently because of their different mental models. They observe the same event but noticed different details and described it based on what they saw. Our mental models affect what we see. And because they affect what we see, they also affect what we do.ⁱ

Not only do mental models affect what we see and do, but they also affect our understanding of what can and cannot be done in our families, work, and the church. They are so “deeply ingrained,” operating below our conscious thought that we are unaware of the impact they have on our actions.ⁱⁱ They are like programs operating in the background on a computer. We don’t know they are running and don’t realize how they are impacting things like processing speed and memory until we intentionally stop and check. Senge points out that “many insights [about] outdated organizational practices fail to get put into practice because they conflict with powerful, tacit mental models,” like programs operating in the background.ⁱⁱⁱ

Most church leaders have encountered unexplained resistance to the leadership. Very often, resistance in the church is the result of different mental models. Mental models are the product of our life experiences, beliefs, and values, as defined earlier. That means our mental models may not be fully developed, sophisticated, or even rational, in some cases. They can be real, accurate, inaccurate, naïve, or well developed. But, no matter how well developed and reasoned, mental models are never entirely accurate or complete. It is essential to recognize that mental models are all simplifications of reality, and no mental model is perfect. The problem with mental models, as Senge puts it, “is when they become implicit—when they exist below the level of our awareness.” At that level, they remain unexamined and continue to affect what we see, what we do, and what we think is possible or impossible.^{iv}

Church leaders must understand mental models because “as the world changes, the gap widens between our mental models and reality, leading to increasingly counterproductive actions.”^v Failure to appreciate mental models has undermined many efforts to foster systems thinking. Since mental models are the bedrock of system structure, leaders become more effective in leading change when they understand how mental models are formed and how they influence systemic structure. Mental models not only help us make sense of the world, but they also influence how we act.^{vi} Chris Argyris, an expert on mental models and organizational learning, explains that people don’t always behave “congruently with their espoused theories [what they say],” but they do behave “congruently with their theories-in-use [their mental models].”^{vii}

Most church leaders experienced a time when “the best ideas never get put into practice.”^{viii} A promising new worship service, an outreach strategy, or a discipleship program failed to become a reality, but no one can explain exactly why. In cases like these, the culprit is most often mental models. The proposed change conflicted with peoples’ “deeply held internal images of how the world works,” which ultimately limited them to “familiar ways of thinking and acting.”^{ix} Thus, “the discipline of managing mental models—surfacing, testing, and improving our internal pictures of how the world works” is essential for church leaders.^x

One leadership scholar suggested that “organizational learning is change in shared mental models.”^{xi} Leaders must “learn to reflect on their current mental models—until prevailing assumptions are brought into the open, there is no reason to expect mental models to change, and there is little purpose in systems thinking.”^{xii} But, we must understand that when we treat our mental models as facts rather than assumptions, we won’t be willing to have those beliefs, values, and assumptions challenged. Changing mental models can be an emotionally charged process, however, because it addresses emotionally held values and beliefs, and discovering errors and incorrect assumptions can be embarrassing. So, wise church leaders “use frustration as a new inquiry,” by applying a group model building process to surface and examine mental models.^{xiii} This topic will be addressed in detail in Chapter 6.

ⁱ Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 164.

ⁱⁱ Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 8.

ⁱⁱⁱ Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 8.

^{iv} Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 166.

-
- ^v Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 166.
- ^{vi} Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 11.
- ^{vii} Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 164.
- ^{viii} Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 163.
- ^{ix} Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 163.
- ^x Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 163.
- ^{xi} Cabrera, Derek and Laura Cabrera, *Flock Not Clock: Design, Align and Lead to Achieve Your Vision* (New York: Plectica Publishing, 2018), 28.
- ^{xii} Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 189.
- ^{xiii} Charlotte Roberts, “Until the Vulcan Mind Meld...Building Shared Mental Models,” *The Systems Thinker*, Accessed December 18, 2018. <https://www.thesystemsthinkinker.com>.