

Take a Look at How You Look at Things

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Language and the Pursuit of Happiness is an interesting book by Chalmers Brothers. He contends (and I agree) that “we live in language in the same way that fish live in water: it is transparent to us.” Words are symbols, and when we put words together, they reinforce what we already know and they tend to block our acceptance of new concepts. A series of specific words may not mean the exact same thing to another person, yet we operate assuming that they do.

I find that some leaders are slow to accept new distinctions that I suggest because their existing view of the topic is so firmly cemented in their minds. Early in the book, Brothers’ presents an informal definition of paradigm that is quite revealing: “a way of understanding, believing, and taking action that I have operated out of for so long that I now think it’s the truth!” Of course, the way I “see” a situation is not “the truth” but is a viewpoint based on my accumulated experiences.

My clients soon learn the value of challenging their perspectives, however, and they begin to appreciate their new awareness. They find that “making meaning” of a given situation is not nearly as easy as it once was. They work toward greater clarity in their communications, realizing that gaining the alignment of those they influence is no longer something they can assume will automatically occur.

Brothers explains why two different individuals might make different meaning from the same situation. First, we all “see” based on our past experiences. Some individuals have specialized knowledge, others are less familiar with the subject matter. An auto mechanic, for example, will “see” something very different when looking at a car’s engine than most of the rest of us. A mechanic specially trained on that particular engine will be even more discerning of specific characteristics.

On top of the various distinctions each of us makes in observing a situation, we overlay our opinions and judgments. None of us is purely neutral in what we “see.” We think about the situation, applying evaluative labels such as right or wrong, better or worse, achievable or not. Of course, our assessments are based on our unique experiences, which compounds the variability in how we each “see.”

Third, to make sense of situations and events, we combine our observations and judgments into an explanatory story. The description clarifies the circumstances for us, but we are sometimes confused when others have made very different meaning of the situation. Their explanation makes sense to them, of course. Why is it that we are surprised when we sometimes disagree over an event and its meaning?

To complicate things further, all of the above is influenced by our moods and emotions. “Our emotions and moods are not separate from the way we tend to ‘see things’; rather, they are strongly connected and utterly interdependent. We tend to interpret, to judge, to assess, and to make up stories that justify our moods and make them right.”

Ah, yes, we humans have a tendency to do all those things to “make us right.” We may not do so intentionally. Further, in the workplace, we are likely not malicious in our motive. However, when two or more disagree over a situation and its meaning, a power struggle rarely leads to beneficial progress.

Let me encourage you, as a leader, to pause frequently and to examine consciously how you are looking at things. What I’m suggesting is not easy to do, and it’s unlikely that others will be as diligent at attempting this as you will be once you recognize its value. The first step is to realize that you don’t have a uniquely accurate vision of the truth just because you are the leader.

What’s far more important than “who’s right” is what works and doesn’t work. Generate possible options based on your collective experience. Rely on your organizational values, and evaluate the likelihood of each possible action step leading to a desirable outcome. Choose an approach all can support.

None of us “sees” the world as it truly is. The best we can do is pause periodically and question our objectivity, consider the sources and effects of our opinions and judgments, and challenge the authenticity of our stories and narratives. It’s not easy, but it’s very enlightening!