

The Power of Paradigms—Seeking New Information

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In 1962, Thomas S. Kuhn, professor emeritus of linguistics and philosophy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, published The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, an extensive essay on the emergence of scientific discoveries.

In his preface, Kuhn introduces the term paradigm, which he uses throughout the work: “a universally recognized scientific achievement that for a time provides model problems and solutions to a community of [scientific] practitioners.”

Some people ridicule the term “paradigm” as fancy jargon, but the term describes well how one **sees** a given situation, which has tremendous influence on what one **does** in response. Synonyms for “paradigm” are many: perspective, viewpoint, belief, mindset, outlook, perception, understanding, assumption, mental image, theory, model, interpretation, frame of reference.

Kuhn says that throughout history “anomalies, or violations of expectation,” have intrigued scientists. These are pieces of information that don’t seem to fit the accepted theory. These data may be false readings or unexplained variants from the norm. Sometimes, however, these unexpected pieces of information offer a new insight, a breakthrough in scientific thought. This “aha” experience is what business leaders and consultants today are calling a “paradigm shift.” Really big ones are called “epiphanies”!

What is required for a paradigm shift? Just the right piece of information at the right time. You’ve probably experienced just such an unexpected awareness yourself. Here are some examples:

--In the 1500’s, Nicholas Copernicus’ calculations suggested that the earth and other planets rotated around the sun, and the idea was considered heresy by the church.

Copernicus (1473-1543) was a Polish astronomer. He completed his theory in 1530 and published it in a six-book set about the time of his death. The books were banned as heresy, awaiting “correction” by the Catholic Church for 200 years. Talk about resisting a paradigm shift!

Galileo (1564-1642) was an Italian astronomer. In 1616, the Catholic Church declared his Copernican theory of the solar system philosophically absurd and banned him from teaching it. He was tried again in 1633 for heresy and placed under house arrest until his death nine years later. This is an example of continued rejection of a new insight. Oh, as humans, how insistent we are that the way we “see” things is “the truth”! We deny new information just because it conflicts with our existing paradigm.

--A guy named Saul was headed to Damascus to arrest Christians when he received some information that radically changed his viewpoint and significantly modified his subsequent behaviors (see the Bible, Acts 9).

--For most of the 20th century, leadership development professionals focused on overcoming a leader’s limitations. The belief was that if an individual could reduce the effects of weaknesses, he or she would become a better leader.

In 2001, the Gallup organization published the results of extensive research in the book *Now, Discover Your Strengths* (authored by Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton). On page 8 is the assertion that, “Each person’s greatest room for growth is in the areas of his or her greatest strength.”

This perspective is so radical that it takes some thought and some experimenting to validate it on a personal basis. I can attest to its legitimacy, however, in fifteen years of my work with clients!

--“Patch Adams” is one of my favorite movies. Early in the film, Robin Williams (as Hunter Adams) has admitted himself into a hospital psychiatric ward. Another individual, self-admitted with “genius syndrome,” keeps holding up four fingers and asking, “How many?” The obvious answer doesn’t satisfy him, so Robin visits with the old man privately. Still seeing four fingers, Robin hears, “You’re focusing on the problem. If you focus on the problem, you can’t see the solution. Never focus on the problem.”

He then advises Robin to look beyond the problem. Looking past his fingers at the expectant man’s face, Robin sees a blur of out-of-focus fingers and hesitantly offers an answer of “Eight?”

The man is jubilant. “Yes, yes. Eight is a good answer! See what no one else sees. See what everyone else chooses not to see...out of fear and conformity and laziness. See the whole world anew each day.”

The experience is a significant insight, a breakthrough in Patch Adams’ awareness. He stops examining his own pain, realizing his calling is to help people deal with their infirmities by listening and linking with each one in a personal, compassionate way. It is a terrific example of a paradigm shift and enhanced awareness.

--Ignaz Semmelweiss was a Hungarian obstetrician in the middle 1800’s in Vienna, Austria. As a teaching physician, he served expectant mothers and conducted research on cadavers. Medical theory at the time was that diseases were transmitted by “miasmas” (bad air). Through research and unfortunate circumstances (see my article entitled “Honorable Intent, Detrimental Effect” on my website), Semmelweiss speculated disease was transmitted by “particles” that could be reduced or even eliminated by washing hands. (This was confirmed years later by French biologist Louis Pasteur (his germ theory) and Englishman Joseph Lister (the concept of antiseptics).) Initially, his physician colleagues rejected the idea; the paradigm shift was simply too severe.

--The Hebrew word “avodah” appears hundreds of times in the Bible’s Old Testament. It can be translated as worship, work, or service. Yes, the concepts of “work” and “worship” have the same root word, such that in the New Testament we are encouraged to do our work--for a customer, a colleague, or a direct report--“as unto the Lord.”

--Near the end of “The Wizard of Oz,” the good witch Glenda helps Dorothy return home, saying: “You’ve always had the power to go back to Kansas.” The Scarecrow says indignantly, “Then why didn’t you tell her before?” Glenda responds, “Because she wouldn’t have believed me. She had to learn it for herself.”

That’s the essence of a paradigm shift. No one can force it on (or experience it for) someone else. We deceive ourselves into thinking we see the truth, yet none of us “sees” the world as it is. We see the world through filters such as our history, our habits and tendencies, our motives, and our preconceived beliefs about what is and what should be. And when we receive that unexpected new piece of information, we experience that amazing “Aha!” breakthrough in our thinking.

Our paradigms are always incomplete. When people consciously choose to open themselves to the possibilities of new information, paradigm shifts occur more frequently and easily. If you have a collaborative colleague, ask, “Would you be willing to help me consider other ways I might look at this situation?”

Paradigm shifts can move you closer to the truth. They are a blessing if you welcome and consciously seek them. When you realize that your perceptions are limiting you, you can evaluate the filtering glasses through which your sight is distorted, and new understanding floods your awareness. “Aha” moments break through your past perceptions, and new options for behavior present themselves like a gift!

P.S. Additional insight for leaders!

Go back to the paragraph above associated with the “Wizard of Oz.” As a leader, you influence other people. That is, you have the capability of providing extremely helpful insight to others (as Glenda, the good witch, did for Dorothy).

When the person is in a frame of mind to receive new information (new insight), I urge you to share it as a gift--never a requirement or demand (which could easily evoke resistance). For the information you share to “take” as a paradigm shift for that individual, he or she must be willing to receive your gift and ponder it.

There may be an immediate “Aha!” as occurred for Dorothy (she was receptive!). However, in my experience, that’s rather rare. The person typically goes away and thinks about the point you’ve made (and maybe never mentions it again). Amazingly, God allows some other influence or source of information to come into that person’s life at about the same time (some people call it “coincidence”); the combination of insights results in that person’s “Aha!” experience.

The bottom line is this. As with Glenda, the good witch, you are faced with opportunities repeatedly, and you should consciously consider when it’s right to do each of the following:

- Do you share the information about the “red shoes” the first time you can?
- Or do you wait (as Glenda did) for a time when the person is very receptive to the new information about the “red shoes”?

It’s a dilemma that occurs repeatedly for anyone who has an awareness that others have not yet experienced. It happens often to leaders. Please be careful that your agenda doesn’t cause you to become dictatorial. There is so much power when the “Aha!” discovery is the person’s own!

Note: The final following page was added several years after all of the above. I was generating a training session on how “Enhancing Awareness” occurs. Interestingly, “paradigm shifts” are one (typically, the most impactful) of three ways that increased awareness occurs. They often surprise us and are occasionally almost shocking! (See the article entitled “Increasing Your Sensitivity to Awareness--Three Ways.”)

Dennis Hooper, September, 2012

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Examples of Paradigms that Shifted

--In the 2nd century, Ptolemy (the great Egyptian astronomer) declared, "The earth is the center of the universe." This was commonly accepted as "truth" until the early 1500's, when Nicholas Copernicus' calculations suggested that the earth and other planets rotated around the sun. The Catholic Church banned Copernicus and his work as heresy. In the 1600's, Galileo's experiments confirmed Copernicus' hypothesis. Also considered by the church to be heresy, Galileo's reward was house arrest until he died!

--Prior to the late 1700's, countries were ruled based on the power of an elite family (the reign of kings and queens). No one had ever attempted to run a country based on the power of the people. We in the United States of America are the beneficiaries of a paradigm shift called "democracy" (a new way of thinking for the world) that has lasted for over two hundred years.

--On July 4, 1776, King George III of England made the following entry in his journal: "Nothing of importance happened today."

--Around 1850, accurate times for track meets started being kept. For a century, the four-minute mile was considered impossible. On May 6, 1954, Britain's Roger Bannister broke this barrier. Just 46 days later, Australia's John Landy broke Bannister's record. Four-minute miles are routinely run today, even by some high school students!

--An 1876 internal memo of the Western Union company reads: "This 'telephone' has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us."

--In 1899, in a report to Congress, U.S. Commissioner of Patents, Charles H. Duell, stated: "Everything that can be invented has been invented."

--In 1911, Ferdinand Foch, French military strategist (supreme commander of the allied armies at the end of World War I), stated, "Airplanes are interesting toys but are of no military value."

--In 1920, Robert Milliken, Nobel Prize winner in physics, declared, "There is no likelihood man can ever tap the power of the atom."

--In 1937, Mark Twain wrote in Reader's Digest, "When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant, I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years."

--In 1943, Thomas Watson, then President of IBM, declared: "I think there is a world market for about five computers."

--In 1962, a Decca Records executive rejected the Beatles, saying "We don't like their sound. Groups of guitars are on their way out." On February 9, 1964, the Beatles first appeared in the United States on the Ed Sullivan Show, and the rest is history!

--In the 1968 Olympics, an unknown high jumper won the Gold Medal. Dick Fosbury revolutionized the sport with his novel, awkward style, the Fosbury Flop (now the technique of choice for high jumpers!).

--Prior to September, 2001, Americans believed we were safe from terrorist attacks. We learned when the planes crashed into the World Trade Center's twin towers that there are people in the world who hate America, and we must be more vigilant.

--In my training with clients regarding "feedback," the distinction between Person A knowing his or her "**intent**" (but not the **effect** of the behavior) and Person B knowing clearly the "**effect**" of Person A's behavior is usually a significant "aha." It helps them see that feedback is a beneficial communication tool!

--Fill a cup as full of water as you can. Estimate the number of paper clips you can add without overflowing the water. Gently add one paper clip at a time. How accurate were you?

--"Change the way you look at things and the things you look at will change." author Wayne Dyer