

The Power of Paradigms—Seeking New Information

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2002, published August 13, 2002 in the Houston Home Journal

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 to that situation. 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.”

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.

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

--Near the end of “The Wizard of Oz,” the good witch 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?” The good witch 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 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 “Aha!”

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 willing 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!