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## Focus on Innovation

Focus on Innovation is a monthly electronic newsletter designed to provoke thoughts and ideas on how to bring innovation to life within the organizations in which we work.

### For Those on the Run

Assumptions and perceptual blocks can prevent us from identifying the real problem we are trying to solve, and from seeing innovative solutions to the problem. The key to building innovative capacity is to overcome our perceptual blocks and assumptions, and to challenge them when we see them.

### To Assume or Not to Assume, That is the Question

So often we are faced with a seemingly unsolvable problem; without even thinking about the possibilities we assume that there is no way out. We base our assumptions on heresy or unsubstantiated evidence and take that as gospel. These assumptions get in the way of seeing other possibilities; they blind us from seeing what is possible. In order to build innovative capacity, in ourselves or in others, we need to either set aside or validate these assumptions to come up with all the possible solutions to the current problem.

In many cases our inability to see possibilities can be linked to our own blocks in perception, based in learning and habit. We have become accustomed to perceiving things in familiar ways, making it difficult to see new meaning, new relationships, or new applications and uses. A perfect example of this is Zenith who invented a Walkman-type personal stereo almost 10 years before Sony did; however, the company's top management derided it as a ridiculous toy, killed the project, and gave the production away to charity. Psychologists have referred to this tendency to perceive things in certain ways as perceptual set, mental set, or functional fixity. These perceptual sets are different for different people, and rooted in our unique interests, needs, biases, values and past learning. Just like assumptions, they can lead to us making quick decisions or jumping to conclusions, rather than having the flexibility to see possibilities.

Assumptions and perceptual blocks can also prevent us from identifying the real problem. For example, based on symptoms that seem familiar, a leader may persist in misclassifying a problem and will treat it incorrectly. They may also prevent us from getting a complete and accurate picture of the world around us. For example, a salesperson invited by a client to demonstrate e-learning, and "mentally set" to do just that, may fail to perceive that the client needs more than just e-learning.

Creativity leader William J. J. Gordon (1961), in his book *Synerctics* (New York: Harper & Row), described how 'making the familiar strange'—perceiving common objects and ideas in new ways—is a central creative process. A lot of what stands behind building innovative capacity is a mental transformation, the perception of new meanings, combinations, and relationships that depend upon overcoming our perceptual blocks and assumptions. What's that old saying, "To assume makes an ass out of you and me."

## What's the Bottom line

Overcoming perceptual blocks and assumptions is key to building innovative capacity.



Please feel free to pass this newsletter on to others.

If you would like more information about the ideas and topics listed in this issue, contact Judy Laws, Ph.D. at [jlaws@foursightconsulting.com](mailto:jlaws@foursightconsulting.com).

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