

Mental Models: The Key to Making Reality-Based Decisions

PREVIEW

Course Objectives

- Define mental models and describe how they influence the workplace.
- Identify your own mental models.
- Recognize the assumptions in your mental models.
- Reveal hidden assumptions.
- Avoid typical mental mistakes.
- Implement strategies to adjust inaccurate mental models.

Mental Models: The Key to Making Reality-Based Decisions

Module One: What Is a Mental Model?

PREVIEW

What Is a Mental Model?

Before we talk about the definition of a mental model, take a few minutes to think about this question:

What do you expect this e-learning experience to be like?

Do you expect that it will be easy to follow? If it was a course in school, would it be an “easy A?” Or are your expectations more skeptical? Perhaps you were told you had to take this course and you have no interest whatsoever. In that case, your expectations would be different. Depending on the different circumstances, the answers may differ.

Each person has a different *mental model* or *perception* of what the training is going to be like.



Definition

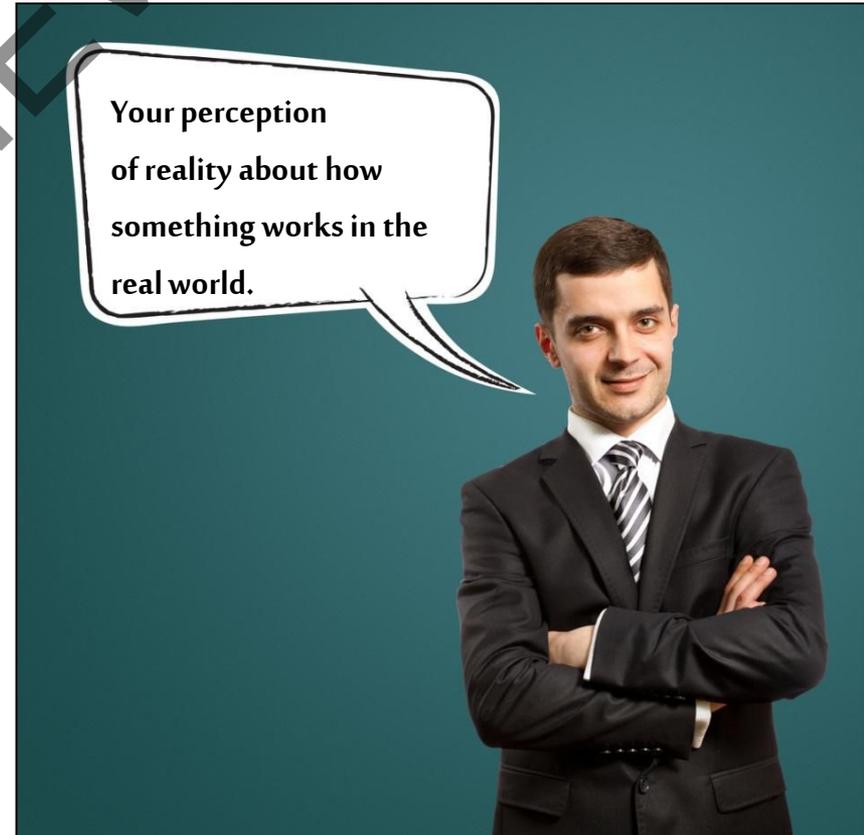
- *Mental models can be defined in a variety of ways:*

They are deeply held internal images of how the world works. (Peter Senge)

They are your understanding of your motivations and thought processes, along with the emotional and philosophical landscape in which you are operating. (Indi Young)

They are organized knowledge frameworks that allow individuals to describe, explain, and predict behavior. (Donald Norman)

A good generic definition is: Your perception of reality about how something works in the real world.



Elements of Mental Models

A mental model is:

- A set of fundamental assumptions (these must be accurate!)
- Consistent, predictable behaviors based on your assumptions

“You will always define events in a manner which will validate your agreement with reality.”

Steve Maraboli

Characteristics of Mental Models

A mental model:

- Is usually incomplete and constantly evolving
- Usually contains some errors and contradictions
- Usually provides simplified explanations for complex situations
- Is usually based on a degree of vagueness that allows it to be used even if incorrect

Mental Models Organize Information

People use mental models because they organize information and make it easier to make decisions. For example, once you see a dog, you recognize all dogs.

However, there are significant drawbacks to mental models: most importantly, that they are not usually 100% accurate.

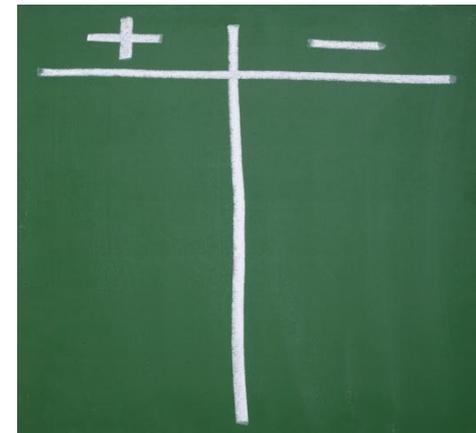


Benefits

As with many things in life, there are benefits and drawbacks to mental models.

On the positive side, they:

- + *Serve as an information filter*
- + *Make you more efficient at processing information*
- + *Predict behaviors, decisions, and actions*
- + *Eliminate internal confusion*
- + *Simplify complicated strategies*



Drawbacks

The drawbacks of mental models are that they:

- *Are not always based on facts*
- *Blind you to ideas that challenge your deeply held beliefs*
- *Divert your attention from important cues*
- *Are not always accurate when you generalize*
- *May limit you to familiar ways of thinking*

What Do You Predict Will Happen?



Let's look at an example. When showing a hand over a stove, most people's mental models suggest that the hand will burn. But what if it's an induction cooktop that doesn't heat up? The mental model doesn't account for that possibility.

- Established mental model: Hand will burn
- Hand will not burn (induction cooktop)

Brainstorming Activity

Take a few moments to brainstorm the pros and cons of having a mental model for driving a car.

PREVIEW



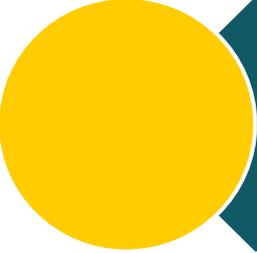
Brainstorming Activity Responses

Perhaps these are some of the things you thought of.

- **Pros:** Compare a beginning driver to an experienced driver who has developed a mental model about driving. The mental model allows the experienced driver to drive without thinking about every single piece of information in the environment, which often paralyzes a new driver.
- **Cons:** An ingrained mental model may cause the driver to ignore a cue that doesn't fit into his/her mental model. Example: Driving a rental car that doesn't have as much pickup as your own car. When you try to gun it to pass another car, it doesn't have the power you expect and you risk an accident.

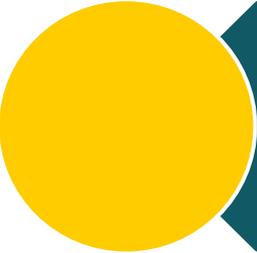
Next, we'll take a look at how mental models are formed.

The Origins of Mental Models



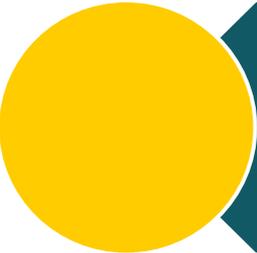
Influence of others

We are hugely influenced by others, not only as we grow up in school, but also as adults. Teachers are a primary influence, as are books and mass culture (for better or worse!).



Personal experience

How we cope affects how we approach subsequent challenges.



Rewards and incentives

Your mental models and actions are shaped by the rewards you receive for holding them. They can be tangible, such as monetary gain, or intangible, such as social approval.

Activity

Take a moment to reflect on how your own education and experiences have affected your mental models.

Now think about other people you know. How might their mental models be different from yours, due to their different experiences and education?

Be aware that everyone's mental models are different.

"Every man takes the limits of his own field of vision for the limits of the world."

Arthur Schopenhauer

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