## Program Concepts

## Tool: Assessing Your Workplace Mental Models
## Key Points

To learn more about mental models and how they influence our thinking, see the "Mental Models" excerpt from *The Fifth Discipline* by Peter Senge. To learn more about the "Mutual Learning" and "Be in Control" mental models and their associated productive and unproductive thinking habits, see "Managing Difficult Conversations" by Bill Noonan located in the Resources section of the program.

| **The "Be in Control" Mental Model** |
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| • Assume we are right.<br>• See ourselves as more reasonable than others.<br>• Assign negative attributes and motives to others.<br>• Hold others accountable for problems.<br>• Avoid upsetting situations. |

| **The "Mutual Learning" Mental Model** |
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| • Assume we have partial knowledge.<br>• Grant legitimacy to other perspectives.<br>• Assume positive intentions on the part of others.<br>• Acknowledge our role in problems.<br>• Embrace learning. |

**Tool: Using the Left-Hand/Right-Hand Column Case Study**
**Key Points**

To learn more about the Left-Hand/Right-Hand Column Case Study exercise, see "Managing Difficult Conversations" by Bill Noonan and the "Left-Hand Column" excerpt from *The Fifth Discipline* by Peter Senge located in the Resources section of the program.

| **The Left-Hand/Right-Hand Column Case Study Exercise** | |
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| **Using the Exercise** | • On the right-hand side of a piece of paper, write the key statements and behaviors that occurred during a difficult conversation. Use a dialogue format ("He said/I said").<br>• On the left-hand side of the paper, write the thoughts and feelings you had during the conversation but *did not express at the time*.<br>• Examine the items in your left-hand column for judgments, elaborate explanations for why the other person is being so difficult, and charged emotions.<br>• Look for signs of the five "Be in Control" thinking habits: assuming we're right, seeing ourselves as reasonable, assigning negative attributes and motives to others, holding others accountable for our problems, and avoiding upsetting situations. |
| **Benefits of the Exercise** | • You gain awareness of the thinking habits that become activated for you during difficult conversations.<br>• You gain insights into the mental models that are shaping your actions and your responses to other people during difficult exchanges.<br>• You see how "Be in Control" thinking can make a difficult conversation unproductive.<br>• You likely develop a desire to change the way you handle difficult conversations. |

**Tool: Reframing "Be in Control" Thinking**
**Key Points**

To learn more about reframing "Be in Control" thinking habits, see "Managing Difficult Conversations" by Bill Noonan. To learn more about quality advocacy and inquiry statements, see "Productive Business Dialogue" by Bill Noonan located in the Resources section of the program.

| **Reframing "Be in Control" Thinking** |
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| • Reframing our thinking is difficult for all of us. It takes practice, humility, and lots of reflection. Be patient with yourself during this learning process.<br>• During difficult conversations, it can help to remember that your conclusions are inferences, not facts.<br>• If changing a thinking habit (such as shifting from "I know I'm right" to "I might be wrong") seems too big a leap, try taking smaller steps. For example, ask yourself, "What information may I be missing?"<br>• Sometimes the best first step to reframing your thinking is to disrupt the intense emotions and defensiveness that can arise during a difficult conversation. Repeating a mantra (such as "I want to learn"), taking some deep breaths, or taking a break can provide that disruption.<br>• If you're anticipating being involved in a difficult conversation, try to identify ahead of time the problems you might have during the encounter. Jot down some ideas about how you might deal with those problems in real time. Then, after the conversation, reflect on how it went—and what you might do differently the next time around.<br>• Practice helps. Take opportunities to practice these skills with less difficult conversations. Look for opportunities to practice with people who know you well. A good start is to pick one skill that you want to work on, rather than trying to do everything at once perfectly. |

## Scenario Summary

### Avoiding Difficult Conversations

We all tend to put off difficult conversations—or avoid them entirely. However, avoiding these exchanges can mean that we:

- Delay making crucial decisions.
- Base decisions on inadequate information, which often leads to poor business decisions.
- Compromise, rather than have the difficult discussion that could lead to a better decision.
- Try to please everyone—and end up pleasing no one.
- Fail to address deep, underlying issues that could help our teams understand one another better and learn from each other.

Outside the workplace, many conversations we tend to avoid—such as discussions about politics or religion—touch on deeply personal issues and beliefs. Or, perhaps we know someone has a different opinion from ours, so we avoid discussing our opinions with him or her because we want to avoid an argument.

In the workplace, we also tend to avoid conversations that address more personal or difficult issues, such as discussions about poor performance or other troubling problems. While we may talk privately with a colleague about others who think differently than we do, we tend to avoid frank conversations that could unpleasantly pit one functional group against another. And if we do try to engage in such uncomfortable exchanges, we often don't know how to handle the tensions, frustration, and outright conflict that can surface.

### Understanding Mental Models

Our mental models are our deeply held beliefs and assumptions about how the world around us works. They determine how we make sense of events and strongly shape our decisions and actions.

Mental models:

- Are like "master programs," or sets of rules, that we use to quickly interpret others' actions and determine our own actions—especially during stressful moments.
- Range from simple, such as "You can't trust management"—to complex, such as how different functions within an organization should work together.
- Affect what we choose to notice. For example, two people can observe the same event and describe it very differently, because they've focused on different aspects of that event.
- Tend to limit us to familiar ways of thinking and acting, thus discouraging us from testing our deeply held beliefs and possibly changing them.
- Prevent us from identifying the information we've selected to pay attention to, examining the assumptions we're making, and understanding the thinking behind the conclusions we've reached.

Keep in mind: Mental models are very useful, yet also limiting. They are useful when we need to act efficiently and when we're not attempting to resolve a difficult situation. It's when we're faced with conflict or when we need to make a difficult decision that we want to slow down our thinking and examine our mental models. In particular, we need to consider how they might be limiting our perspective.

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**Scenario Summary** (continued)

**Mental Models and the Ladder of Inference**
The Ladder of Inference, a metaphorical tool developed by Chris Argyris, is a reflective aid that helps us uncover the thinking behind our conclusions.

When we reach a conclusion, we gradually move up this Ladder:
- We select data and information from the available pool around us.
- We interpret and add our own meaning to the data we've selected.
- We finally reach our conclusion—at the top of the Ladder.

We can think of our mental models as the sides of the Ladder of Inference. These sides represent the deeply held beliefs that influence what we see and what interpretations we make as we climb our Ladders to reach our conclusions.

**Our Private Thinking**
What we say during a difficult conversation is very often not what we are thinking. However, what we are thinking does determine what we end up saying. To improve a difficult conversation, we therefore need to focus on our private thinking and figure out how it may be affecting the situation at hand.

The "Left-Hand/Right-Hand Column Case Study" is a technique first introduced by Chris Argyris and Donald Schön to help uncover our private thinking. Using this technique, we can begin to get at the mental models that are influencing our private thinking and thus shaping our conversations. (For more on this technique, see Tool 2: Using the Left-Hand/Right-Hand Column Case Study.)

**A Defensive Mental Model: Be in Control**
One common mental model that tends to be triggered when we sense a threat or the potential for embarrassment, is "Be in Control." This mental model focuses us on defending ourselves rather than on learning. We think and behave in ways that defend our perspective and don't invite other perspectives.

The "Be in Control" mental model leads to five unproductive thinking habits:
1. Assume we are right.
2. See ourselves as more reasonable than others.
3. Assign negative attributes and motives to others.
4. Hold others accountable for problems.
5. Avoid upsetting situations.

**A Productive Mental Model: Mutual Learning**
To boost our chances of having more productive conversations in the workplace, we need to unlearn the "Be in Control" mental model and learn a new one, called "Mutual Learning."

The "Mutual Learning" mental model includes five productive thinking habits:
1. Assume we have partial knowledge.
2. Grant legitimacy to other perspectives.
3. Assume positive intentions on the part of others.
4. Acknowledge our role in problems.
5. Embrace learning.

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**Scenario Summary** (continued)

**Moving from Unproductive Habits to Productive Alternatives**
Once we're aware of our private thinking and have analyzed it for unproductive thinking habits, we need to take on the tough job of shifting to a more productive mindframe. This is not easy. But by replacing a "Be in Control" mental model in favor of a "Mutual Learning" mental model, we can improve the outcome (and the experience) of difficult conversations.

Making the shift involves self-reflection and much practice. You might start by considering conversations that went awry. By analyzing what you were thinking and feeling at the time—but not expressing—you will start to identify patterns of unproductive thinking. You can then assess what kinds of thinking would have been more productive. Eventually, you'll start to catch yourself *during* conversations, as you slip into these unproductive habits. And, you'll be able to improve conversations in real time. After a while, these productive alternatives will start to feel more natural to you as your thinking habits actually change.

Consider how the following unproductive thinking habits and their alternatives might sound in your private thinking:

1. **Assume we are right:**
   I have the relevant information, and I'm right. They are wrong. I must "win" by convincing them that I'm right.

   **Assume we have partial knowledge:** My information and perspective is limited and biased by my own mental models, assumptions, values, and access to information. They may know something or be focused on something that I'm unaware of. We will both "win" if we surface the relevant information and achieve mutual learning.

2. **See ourselves as more reasonable than others:** My own reasoning makes perfect sense. It's logical and obvious. If they can't see the sense in my thinking, there must be something wrong with *them.* They are being unreasonable. If I explain harder, and overwhelm them with my logic, they'll get it.

   **Grant legitimacy to other perspectives:** If my own reasoning makes perfect sense to *me*, their reasoning probably makes perfect sense to *them*. They don't see themselves as unreasonable; therefore, there must be some logic that is obvious to them, that's not so obvious to me.

3. **Assign negative attributes and motives to others:** Since they are doing something that seems obviously wrong to me, and they appear to be doing it of their own free will, there must be something wrong with them. They are acting out of ill intent or have a serious character flaw. For example, "He's probably unprepared for the meeting and wants to cover that up" or "She's only concerned about her own interests."

   **Assume positive intentions on the part of others:** Just as I want to do well, achieve my desired results, and be competent, so do most other people. And like me, most people consider themselves basically decent and good. Just because they disagree with me or have come to a different conclusion doesn't mean that they're stupid or mean. Similarly, I don't know what their motives are unless I check my assumptions with them.

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**Scenario Summary** (continued)

4. **Hold others accountable for problems:** It's their fault that we're in this difficult conversation or predicament. For example, "She has a bad attitude" or "He made a bad decision." I'm don't see how *I* might have contributed to the problem.

   **Acknowledge our role in problems:** I may not be aware of how my actions have impacted them and this situation. I may have done or said something that had unintended consequences. Or they may have interpreted something I said or did in a way that I did not intend.

5. **Avoid upsetting situations:** I must avoid upset whenever possible. I don't want to hurt their feelings, so I'm not going to tell them what I really think of their work. Or, I don't want to cause an argument, so I'll agree to disagree.

   **Embrace learning:** We are both strong enough to learn from our mistakes—and we are committed to learning. I will find a way to engage productively in this difficult conversation and stay focused on mutual learning.