



What Is "Man with a Hammer" Syndrome and How Can You Avoid It?

Thomas Waschenfelder

Reading Time: 2-Minutes

"To a man with a hammer, every problem looks like a nail."
— PROVERB

What Is Man With A Hammer Syndrome?

"Man with a Hammer" syndrome is the idea that if you only have one or two mental models in your head, you'll **approach all your problems with the same solution**.

It's explored at length by Charlie Munger in his 1994 speech, "A Lesson on Elementary, Worldly Wisdom as It Relates to Investment Management and Business."

For example, if you're a graphic designer (and that's all you do), you'll approach each problem with a graphics design solution. Even when a that's not the best 'tool' for the job.

Thomas
@TWaschenfelder · Follow

A master filmmaker or TV director doesn't just understand cinematography.

They have a practiced instinct for:

-architecture
-music
-writing
-acting
-photography
-lighting
-psychology

If you want to get better at your discipline, learn the basics from those that are adjacent.

1:11 AM · May 18, 2020

6

Reply

Copy link

Read 1 reply

SEE ALL ARTICLES

WHAT IS A MENTAL MODEL?

A mental model is a framework that you can use to examine and interpret the world and make

The more frameworks / mental models you have, the less you'll fall into 'man with a hammer syndrome.'

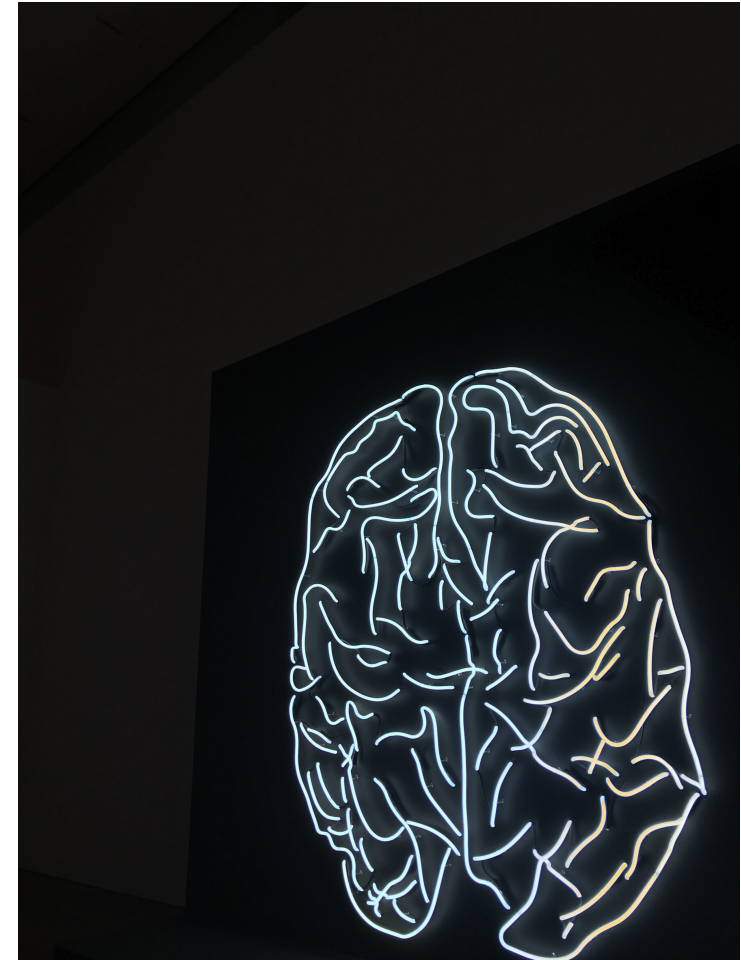


Photo by Tayla Jeffs on Unsplash

How Can You Avoid Man With A Hammer Syndrome?

As a producer, part of my job is finalizing deals with other businesses, and "man with a hammer" syndrome is something I want to avoid.

Whenever I'm having trouble closing a deal, I ask myself a few questions.

- What are the incentives of all the parties involved.
- What are *my* incentives, and how could they be clouding my judgement?
- How is the person across the table from me incentivized?
- How are those incentives affecting their view of the deal?

Charlie Munger would likely say that looking at incentives is a good place to start when analyzing a problem. But it is by no means where you stop.

Because if all you look at are incentives, and ignore other mental models, you are just a man (or woman) with a hammer looking for a nail.

HOW DO YOU AVOID APPROACHING ALL YOUR PROBLEMS WITH THE SAME BASIC SOLUTION FRAMEWORK?

You have to have multiple models in your head that you can use to examine the world.

And, according to Charlie, these “models have to come from multiple disciplines—because all the wisdom of the world is not to be found in one little academic department.”

You can't get all your mental models from physics, or from creative writing, or from bio-medical science. They need to come from different disciplines.

What are the disciplines?

Charlie lays these out for you too. He lists:

- mathematics (combinations and permutations)
- accounting
- statistics (Gaussian distribution)
- engineering (backup system, breakpoints)
- physics (critical mass)
- biology (natural selection, evolution)
- psychology (the psychology of misjudgment)



Photo by Łukasz Mirmietz on Unsplash

These are the elementary, worldly wisdom lenses through which you need to see the world. (I'd also add computer science to this list.)

If I'm trying to lock in a partnership worth millions of dollars, examining incentives is a great place to start.

But what if the other person is perfectly incentivized to close the deal but just doesn't like me?

This is a simple idea taken from psychology. A well placed bottle of red could get the job done. That would also initiate their reciprocation tendency. Or perhaps I just need to issue an apology for a perceived insult that has left the other person bitter.

What if the person likes me just fine, but needs a back-up plan (engineering) in case this particular creative idea falls flat on its face? A parachute plan, which can be executed flawlessly at a moment's notice to ensure success. Maybe that's what I need to develop and present to close this deal.

These are different ways of looking at the same problem. And the more lenses I have to look through - the larger my mental framework - the better I'll be at identifying what's really holding up this deal.

The more mental models, the more solutions I have to offer.

Is It Worth The Effort To Build Yourself A Mental Framework?

Well, Forbes lists Charlie's net worth right around \$1.7 billion. And I bet if you asked Charlie, he'd say that the money his mental models have brought him are the least of their contribution to his well-being.

If you have these mental models in your head, you can avoid “Man with a Hammer” syndrome and stop hammering in those screws.

Just pick-up a screwdriver instead.

[SEE ALL ARTICLES](#)

**If You Want More Ideas Like This, Follow Me On Twitter And
Subscribe To My Newsletter ↓**

JOIN NOW

Get ideas about wealth creation delivered right to your inbox every week. Subscribe now.

Email Address

SUBSCRIBE

We respect your privacy.