

## Mental Models

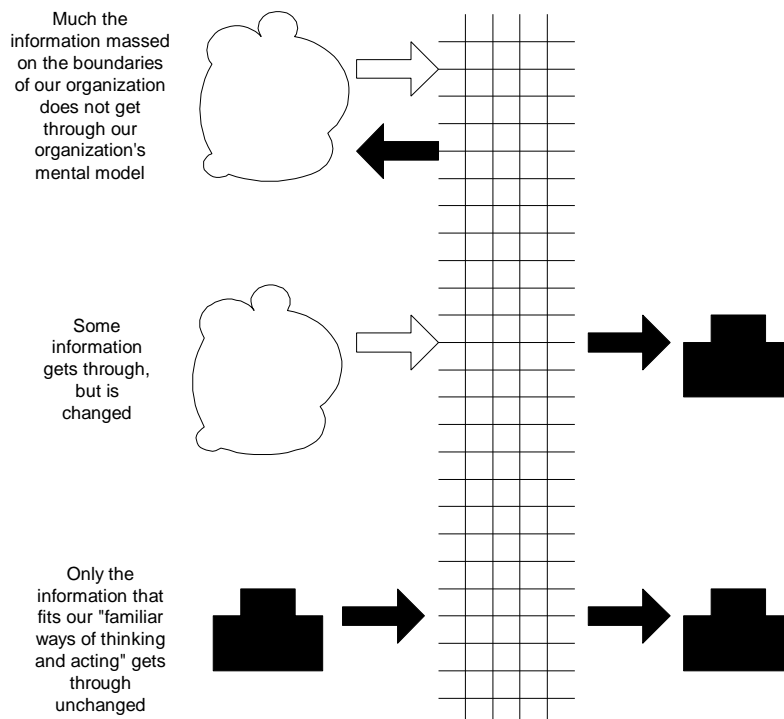
In the words of Peter Senge:

“Mental models are deeply held internal images of how the world works, images that limit us to familiar ways of thinking and acting. Very often, we are not consciously aware of our mental models or the effects they have on our behavior<sup>1</sup>”

Organizations have many mental models. In non-profits, mental models are likely to be built around the people served (“we serve the poorest of the poor”), around the role of the organization (“we are the agency of last resort” or “if we don’t provide a service, no one else will”), and around the nature of the activities performed by the organization (“we are advocates for change”).

Just beyond any organization’s boundary lies a treasure trove of information— about needs and opportunities, about what others are doing, about what really produces change in people’s lives. Mental models are a filter that this information must pass through, as shown below.

THE EFFECT OF MENTAL MODELS



Mental models are subtle but powerful. Subtle, because we usually are unaware of their effect. Powerful, because they determine what we pay attention to, and therefore what we do.

Mental models are strongly conservative: left unchallenged, they will cause us to see what we have always seen: the same needs, the same opportunities, the same results. And because we see what our mental models permit us to see, we do what our mental models permit us to do.

### Mental Models and Planning

Behind every plan lies a gaggle of mental models, unconsciously shaping our decisions: about who will be served, what issues will be addressed, what actions we will permit ourselves to take, what outcomes are desirable, and what standards we will use to determine effectiveness.

What many organizations call “planning” is simply a projection of their current mental models into the future—the status quo with a new date. These projections are not about change and therefore are not planning as defined in this set of documents.

Because mental models “limit us to familiar ways of thinking and acting,” every planning procedure must, at some point, *expose and challenge the organization’s mental models*. This does not mean that all mental models will be changed by a planning procedure. Many of our mental models, once exposed, will be recognized as the essence of our organization. But some of our mental models will have to change before we can change our future.

---

By: John B. Arango. Copyright © Algodones Associates Inc., 1998. We encourage non-profit organizations to reproduce these materials. Please send an e-mail to [jarango@algodonesassociates.com](mailto:jarango@algodonesassociates.com) describing how you will use what you have reproduced. Profit-making organizations: contact us *before* reproducing anything in this site.

---

<sup>1</sup>. Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, Doubleday Currency, 1990, p. 8.