

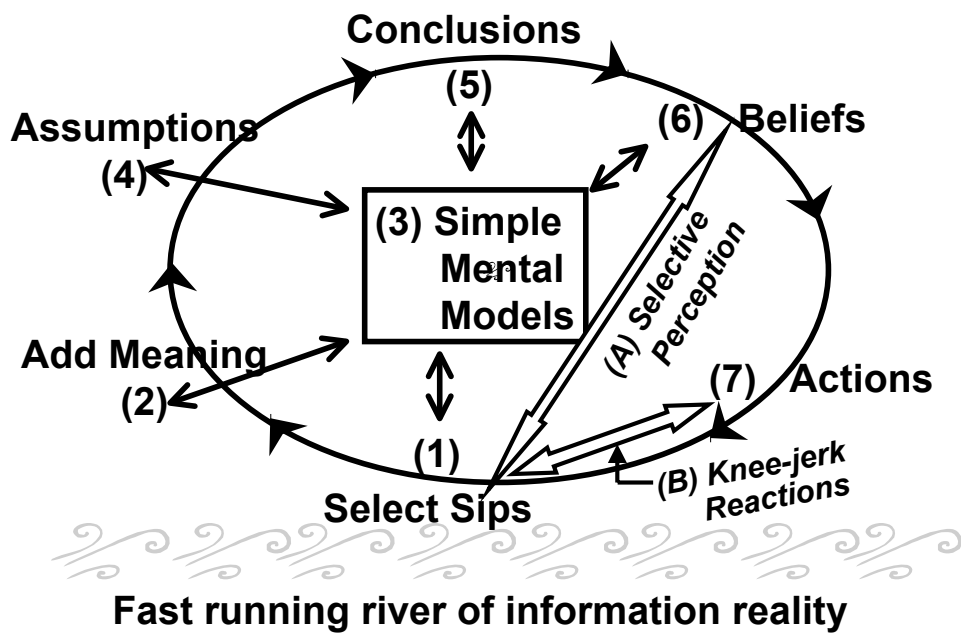
This slide is a more complicated derivative of the “ladder of inference” first named and explained by Prof. Chris Argyris in Theory in Practice published in 1974 and popularized by Peter Senge in The Fifth Discipline published in 1990.

The story of this slide starts at the bottom with the fast-flowing river of change and digital data that is generated by our global, innovating economy. From this river, we (#1) take tiny self-selected sips of information. Our information intake is limited by our: curiosity, observation skills, job niche, etc. We then (#2) add meaning to the data and start to create in our head (#3) simple mental models for what we think is going on in the world. While world reality has many complex systems – each made up of many inter-dependent variables – all interacting with one another, our mental models are:

- Simple with a few operating variables that are often guided by a few linear, cause-and-effect variables (if A, then B type thinking.)
- We tend to over weight those variables that are closest to us that have the most personnel impact on us at the moment. (Buy this item you really want now, pay later. Don't do the net present value benefit versus math, because it would prove to be a dumb deal.)
- We tend to see things in an all-or-nothing, win-lose, black-or-white, two-dimensional ways which are all mental logic traps.
- Etc. (Nobel prizes are now being given to economists who prove that humans make consistent, predictable, irrational choices in certain types of situations.)

Once we start to create mental models, those models, in turn, will interactively effect all of the other steps of the cycle. Our models can start building and interacting with input from any part of the cycle. Learning religion from our parents, for example, starts with our parents and our religious creeds stating, “here is what we believe”. We can later go find facts, assumptions and conclusions to further support and build on those beliefs. Brainwashing is, in a way, the installation of fully developed mental models from “trusted” superiors particularly when we are 0 to 8 years old or total rookies in a new situation. (Think boot camp training in the military or some large, strong culture companies.)

CYCLE OF MENTAL MODEL THINKING



What's really insidious about this total process is how automatic, knee-jerk reactions will eventually happen (steps A and B). Because of our beliefs and our fully grown mental models or mindsets, we start to (A) only sip or "see what we want to see and ignore the rest" (a line from a Simon and Garfunkel song) and then (B) re-act in a knee-jerk fashion. We short circuit steps 2 through 5 without any reflection or questioning. This see-and-respond capability was important for survival in the wilds where simple mental models worked reliably for a simple, slowly changing world. But, the metabolic rate of change in our business environment is picking up and if we don't change as fast as it does we are toast.

How should we use this model as a strategic conversation tool? Look at the living and dying edges of your business under new, more powerful analytical lenses to raise as many questions as we can. Have questions that touch on each step of the cycle as it relates to the customers, products, services and resources being discussed. Raise new hypothetical theories and thought experiments in these questions. Then, organize all of these questions into a "question-map" for some "new, frontier conversation". Examples of question-maps are in exhibits 14, 15, & 30 - 33 at <http://min.isisit.com/merrifield/exhibits>.

During a subsequent strategic conversation, listen for personal resistance to new ideas or perspectives, and then say something like:

"Great! I love your energy (it has some emotional conviction). Where does it originally come from? May we use the Cycle of Mental Model Thinking to unpack your mental model because you are also speaking for the emotional convictions of many of us who have been working here or in this industry for some time. All of us form our mental models for the way our business and industry work in our early years. This could be quite dated for veterans. Our collective goal should be not to protect the past completely, but to find what might still be good about old mental model thinking and what might be dated. Then, we can blend the best of the old with the possible new mental models to all move together successfully with unanimity."

But, do this identification and unpacking of old mental models patiently and reverently. Yesterday's fortuitous accidents have become today's religion and our reasons for being successful.