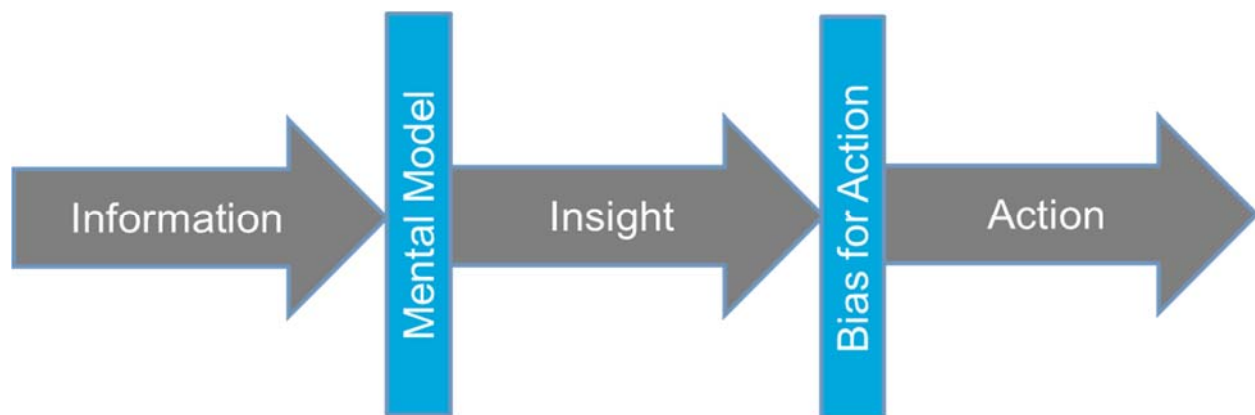


Year-End Reflection – Why don't we deal with our problems?

Every year, we reflect on our organization's capacity and capability to facilitate organizational change. Last year, we reflected on an organization's ability to navigate the early majority through "The Change House." (click here for last year's reflection). This year, I'd like to reflect on what keeps companies from attacking their real issues.

This reflection stems from a client experience in 2018 where a location was assessed, and their biggest problem was uncovered. When asked about the problem, the company admitted that this problem had continued to be their largest obstacle to success for as long as they could recall. An employee that had been with the company for over 25 years had agreed that it was the main issue when he first arrived, and it was still a huge issue over two decades later. After two weeks of a concerted effort, the root cause of the problem was permanently corrected. To be clear, the problem that had affected this client more than any other issue was left uncorrected for over 25 years. To be fair, it was a complex problem. It took a great deal of effort from both our team and theirs to determine the root cause and to correct it. Yet, what had been done over that 25 year period? Why was it acceptable for this company to not deal with this problem with the greatest amount of tenacity and force possible? Is this normal?

The answer to the question is yes – it is normal! This is actually how our brains tend to work. Below in figure one, we see a pictorial of mental models within a systems thinking framework.



We mostly have access to the same information. We have key performance indicators that are telling us what we need to know, and we're constantly focused on making things visual in order to maximize the information that we have. Most companies don't suffer from a lack of information. In fact, most are inundated in information, further affecting their mental model.



The first “gate” that differentiates certain individuals from others is called the mental model. So, we can all “see” the same thing, but we process it differently in our brains; thus, yielding different insights. Based on our experience, we see virtually every client note that their biggest problems are normal. It is what they are accustomed to dealing with and they don’t see their issue as strange. This is contrasted heavily by the Toyota thinking that “deviations from standard are EVIL!” We yield different insights when we think differently. In this case, the client’s insight was to inspect for the issue rather than to eliminate it at its source. This allows us to find problems, but it doesn’t necessarily allow us to solve them.

The second “gate” that differentiates humans from one another is the bias for action. Sometimes we have the same insights and see things exactly the same way. For instance, we can all see that the problem is very real and even that “someone” should deal with it. But we often wait for that someone to actually deal with the problem. I remember times in my career when I would send ten people to a training class. All ten would agree that the class was beneficial and that they learned a lot. However, very few actually applied what they learned upon their return. This was seen readily when one engineer would return from training with a “trip report” on what he learned and what he will do differently in the future based on what he learned from the class. From there, he actually started teaching his team about what was learned to ensure that everyone was acting on the insight. What about the other 90% of students? Where was the action? Well, the thinking was that they went to class to learn something – not to do something! We see this same second gate phenomenon in clients. They work on lower impact initiatives because they believe it will require less effort or that there is a greater likelihood of success.

As we reflect on 2018 with a view towards next year, we would like to encourage every leader and every organization to re-double their efforts to identify the high impact problems and ensure complete alignment to attack these problems with the correct resources.

Do you struggle to fully correct for the root causes of your biggest and most complex problems? We have over 100 years of combined experience in advanced problem-solving. For a no-obligation introduction meeting, please contact Paul Eakle at paul.eakle@driveinc.com or 865-323-3491.

