With

The Left-Hand Column

The Fifth Discipline, Peter M. Senge (1990)

INTRODUCTION

Most of what shapes a conversation is never spoken. It sits just beneath the words: the judgement we soften, the worry we swallow, the story we have already written about the other person before they have finished their sentence. This resource is one way in.

Peter Senge's *left-hand column* is a simple and powerful exercise. You write down a real exchange, and alongside it you write what you were thinking but did not say. Then you look at the two columns side by side.

How to use this resource

1. **Read the extract** (pages 1–5). It's abridged from Senge's chapter on mental models, with his worked example. Senge's wider thinking on mental models is in Appendix One (page 9).
2. **Try the exercise** (pages 5–6) using a moment of conflict (a situation energised by competing needs) from your own life or work.
3. **Reflect and bring it** (page 7). You will be invited to talk it through with others. You choose how much of your left-hand column you share.

THE EXTRACT · ABRIDGED

The left-hand column

> *"Generative learning … requires people at all levels who can surface and challenge their mental models before external circumstances compel them to do so."*
>
> Peter M. Senge

This is a powerful technique for beginning to see how our mental models operate in particular situations. It reveals ways that we manipulate situations to avoid dealing with how we actually think and feel, and thereby prevent a counterproductive situation from improving. The exercise can show managers that they do indeed have mental models, and that those models play an active, sometimes unwelcome, part in practice. Once a group has gone through it, not only are they aware of the role of their mental models,

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they begin to see why dealing with their assumptions more forthrightly is important.

The left-hand column comes from a type of case presentation used by Chris Argyris and his colleagues. It starts with selecting a specific situation where I am interacting with one or several other people in a way that I feel is not working – specifically, that is not producing any apparent learning or moving ahead. I write out a sample of the exchange in the form of a script, on the right-hand side of the page. On the left-hand side, I write what I am thinking but not saying at each stage in the exchange.

For example, imagine an exchange with a colleague, Bill, after a big presentation to our boss on a project we are doing together. I had to miss the presentation, but I've heard that it was poorly received.

THE CONVERSATION · WHAT IS SAID

Me: How did the presentation go?

Bill: Well, I don't know. It's really too early to say. Besides, we're breaking new ground here.

Me: Well, what do you think we should do? I believe that the issues you were raising are important.

Bill: I'm not so sure. Let's just wait and see what happens.

Me: You may be right, but I think we may need to do more than just wait.

PAUSE BEFORE READING ON

- Reading only the words, how would you describe this conversation? Where is it heading?
- What do you imagine “Me” is thinking but not saying?
- What assumptions might “Me” be making about Bill? And Bill about “Me”?
- What is the conversation avoiding? What would need to be said for it to move forward?
- If you were coaching “Me” after this exchange, what would you be curious about?

Hold on to your answers. Senge's own left-hand column follows, so you can test what you imagined against it.

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Senge's example · with the left-hand column

What I'm thinking	What is said
Everyone says the presentation was a bomb.	**Me:** How did the presentation go?
Does he really not know how bad it was? Or is he not willing to face up to it?	**Bill:** Well, I don't know. It's really too early to say. Besides, we're breaking new ground here.
He really is afraid to see the truth. If only he had more confidence, he could probably learn from a situation like this. I can't believe how disastrous that presentation was to our moving ahead.	**Me:** Well, what do you think we should do? I believe that the issues you were raising are important.
I've got to find some way to light a fire under this guy.	**Bill:** I'm not so sure. Let's just wait and see what happens.
	Me: You may be right, but I think we may need to do more than just wait.

What the column reveals

The left-hand column exercise always succeeds in bringing hidden assumptions to the surface and showing how they influence behaviour.

In the example above, I am making two key assumptions about Bill:

ASSUMPTION ONE

He lacks confidence, especially in facing up to his poor performance.

ASSUMPTION TWO

He lacks initiative.

Neither may be literally true, but both are evident in my internal dialogue, and both influence the way I handle the situation.

My belief in his lack of confidence shows up in my skirting the fact that I have heard the presentation was a bomb. I'm afraid that if I say it directly, he will lose what little confidence he has, or he will not be able to face the evidence. So I bring up the subject obliquely. My belief in Bill's lack of initiative comes up when we discuss what to do next. He gives no specific course of action despite my question. I see this as evidence of

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laziness or lack of initiative, from which I conclude that I will have to manufacture some form of pressure to motivate him into action – or else I will simply have to take matters into my own hands.

The most important lesson that comes from seeing our left-hand columns is how we undermine opportunities for learning in conflictual situations. Rather than facing our problems squarely, Bill and I talk around the subject. Instead of determining how to move forward, we end our exchange with no clear course of action – in fact, with no clear definition of a problem requiring action.

Why don't I simply tell him that I believe there's a problem? Perhaps because I'm not sure how to bring up these delicate issues productively. Perhaps I imagine it will provoke a defensive, counterproductive exchange, and that we'll be worse off than we are now. Perhaps I avoid the issues out of politeness, or a desire not to be critical. Whatever the reason, the outcome is a dissatisfying exchange, and I resort to looking for a way to manipulate Bill into a more forceful response.

There is no right way to handle difficult situations such as my exchange with Bill. But it helps enormously to see first how my own reasoning and actions can contribute to making matters worse. Once I see more clearly my own assumptions and how I may be concealing them, there are several things I might do to move the conversation forward. All involve sharing my own view and the data upon which it is based. All require being open to the possibility that Bill may share neither the view nor the data – that both may be wrong. In effect, my task is to convert the situation into one where both Bill and I can learn. This requires a combination of articulating my views and learning more about Bill's views.

CASE STUDY · SENGE'S ACCOUNT OF AN AFTERNOON WITH CHRIS ARGYRIS

We invited Argyris to do a workshop with half a dozen members of our research team at MIT. Ostensibly an academic presentation of his methods, it quickly evolved into a powerful demonstration of what action science practitioners call “reflection-in-action.” He asked each of us to recount a conflict with a client, colleague, or family member. We had to recall not only what was said, but what we were thinking and did not say. As he began to work with these cases, it became almost immediately apparent how each of us contributed to the conflict through our own thinking. We all made sweeping generalisations about the others that determined what we said and how we behaved. Yet we never communicated the generalisations. I might think, “Joe believes I'm incompetent,” but I'd never ask Joe directly about it.

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CASE STUDY · SENGE'S ACCOUNT OF AN AFTERNOON WITH CHRIS ARGYRIS (CONTINUED)

I'd simply go out of my way to try to make myself look respectable to Joe.

Within a matter of minutes, literally, I watched the level of alertness and "presentness" of the entire group rise ten notches – thanks not so much to Argyris's personal charisma, but to his skilful way of getting each of us to see for ourselves how we got in trouble and then blamed it on others. We were led to see (sometimes for the first time in our lives) subtle patterns of reasoning which underlay our behaviour, and how those patterns continually got us into trouble. But even more interesting, it became clear that, with proper training, I could become much more aware of my mental models and how they operated.

Extract abridged and lightly edited from Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (Doubleday, 1990; revised edition 2006), chapter 10, "Mental Models." Shared for coaching and learning purposes.

ACTIVITY

The Left-Hand Column Exercise

Allow 15–30 minutes, somewhere you won't be interrupted. Pen and paper works best; the worksheet on the next page is there if you want it.

STEP BY STEP

1. **Choose a moment of conflict, in the broadest sense.** Not necessarily a row. Look for a moment where there were *competing needs*: yours and someone else's, or two of your own pulling in different directions. A conversation that didn't move, that left something hanging, or that you've replayed since. It can be from work, home, a coaching session, or a moment from a group or team interaction that would benefit from reflection. Choose something real but not raw.
2. **Write the right-hand column first.** Recall the exchange as a script, as close to the actual words as you can. Half a page is plenty. Don't polish it.
3. **Now write the left-hand column.** Alongside each line, write what you were thinking and feeling but did not say. Be honest; no one else needs to see this. Include the judgements, the frustrations, the fears, the little stories about the other person, and about yourself.
4. **Leave it for a while.** An hour or a day. Then come back and read it as if it belonged to someone else.
5. **Reflect.** Use the questions for reflection on page 7 to look for the mental models at work.

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WORKSHEET

My left-hand column

The moment:

_____

The competing needs:

What I was thinking and feeling but did not say	What was said the script, as close to the words as you can

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GOING DEEPER

Taking it into conversation

The left-hand column is where the work begins, not where it ends. Senge's move is from *concealing* our reasoning to *sharing* it, while staying curious about the other person.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What really led me to think and feel this way? What did I actually see or hear, and what did I add?
- What was my intention? What was I trying to achieve, and did I achieve it?
- How might my words, or my silences, have contributed to what happened?
- Why didn't I say what was in my left-hand column? What was I protecting – them, me, the relationship?
- What assumptions am I making about the other person? How could I test them?
- What did it cost to operate this way? What did it pay me?
- Which competing needs were in play? Which got voiced, and which went underground?
- If I could rewind, what is one thing from my left-hand column I might have said, and how?

Adapted from the reflection questions in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, Senge et al. (1994).

WORDS TO TRY

"Here's what I'm noticing, and here's what's leading me to think that..."

"I may be wrong about this, and I'd like to check it with you."

"I've been holding back something, and I think it's getting in our way."

"What am I missing?"

"How do you see it?"

"What would you need to hear from me to say what you're really thinking?"

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In your coaching and leadership

- Notice your own left-hand column *during* a session. What do you choose to do with it?
- With a team: ask each person to write one left-hand column from a recent meeting, then explore themes, not individual entries.
- Contract first. Agree what will be shared, and how it will be held.

Links to other topics

Visioning

Senge pairs mental models with personal vision: the gap between the two creates the creative tension that moves us.

Deliberate practice

Practice drives performance to the extent our mental models are accurate and high quality.

Limiting beliefs

Some left-hand columns are about the other person (“he lacks confidence”). Others are about ourselves (“I can't raise this without it going badly”). But not all beliefs are true.

Boundaries and ethics

To work ethically is to work in alignment with our values and beliefs. The left-hand column helps us surface more of what we espouse, and what our authentic beliefs really are (our “theory-in-use”).

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APPENDIX ONE

Mental models: why the best ideas fail

> *"What we carry in our heads are images, assumptions, and stories."*
>
> Peter M. Senge, The Fifth Discipline

One thing all managers know is that many of the best ideas never get put into practice. We are coming increasingly to believe that this stems not from weak intentions, wavering will, or even nonsystemic understanding, but from mental models. More specifically, new insights fail to get put into practice because they conflict with deeply held internal images of how the world works: images that limit us to familiar ways of thinking and acting. That is why the discipline of managing mental models – surfacing, testing, and improving our internal pictures of how the world works – promises to be a major breakthrough for building learning organisations.

Our mental models determine not only how we make sense of the world, but how we take action. Harvard's Chris Argyris, who has worked with mental models and organisational learning for forty years, puts it this way:

> *"Although people do not [always] behave congruently with their espoused theories [what they say], they do behave congruently with their theories-in-use [their mental models]."*
>
> Chris Argyris, quoted in The Fifth Discipline

Mental models can be simple generalisations such as "people are untrustworthy," or they can be complex theories, such as my assumptions about why members of my family interact as they do. But what is most important to grasp is that mental models are *active* – they shape how we act. If we believe people are untrustworthy, we act differently from the way we would if we believed they were trustworthy. If I believe that my son lacks self-confidence and my daughter is highly aggressive, I will continually intervene in their exchanges to prevent her from damaging his ego.

Why are mental models so powerful in affecting what we do?

In part, because they affect what we see.

The problems with mental models lie not in whether they are right or wrong – by definition, all models are simplifications. The problems with mental models arise when they become implicit – when they exist below the level of our awareness.

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Reflective practice

Though highly personal at one level, effective work with mental models is also pragmatic: it is tied to bringing key assumptions about important issues to the surface.

Argyris's long-time colleague Donald Schön of MIT studied the importance of reflection in professions including medicine, architecture, and management. While many professionals seem to stop learning as soon as they leave graduate school, those who become lifelong learners become what he calls *reflective practitioners*.

The ability to reflect on one's own thinking while acting, for Schön, distinguishes the truly outstanding professionals.

Espoused theory versus theory-in-use

> *"Learning is eventually always about action."*
>
> Peter M. Senge

Learning is eventually always about action, and one basic reflective skill involves using gaps between what we say and what we do as a vehicle for becoming more aware.

Until the gap between my espoused theory and my current behaviour is recognised, no learning can occur.

From Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* (Doubleday, 1990; revised edition 2006), chapter 10, "Mental Models." Abridged and lightly edited.

APPENDIX TWO

Further reading

Senge, P. M. (1990; rev. 2006). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization.* Doubleday.

Senge, P. M., Kleiner, A., Roberts, C., Ross, R. & Smith, B. (1994). *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook.* Nicholas Brealey.

Argyris, C. & Schön, D. A. (1974). *Theory in Practice: Increasing Professional Effectiveness.* Jossey-Bass.

Schön, D. A. (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action.* Basic Books.

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