

The Life Coach

Francine Campone

The Oz in Our Minds

Changing the mental models that keep us stuck

IN THE ORIGINAL WIZARD OF OZ MOVIE, THERE'S A WISTFUL SONG which is sung by the Tin Man, the refrain picked up by the Scarecrow and the Cowardly Lion. "If I only had a brain", the Tin Man sings. The Scarecrow wants a heart, the Cowardly Lion, courage. Following the yellow brick road of ordinary, non-movie life I sometimes find myself singing my own version of this song: "If I only had more money/time/creativity/garden tools....." The implicit message is that if only life were different, if only I were different, I'd be happy. There's a mental model at work here that is as scary as those flying monkeys. It's a way of thinking in which we equate success, worth, value with what we don't have.

Mental models are habitual lenses we use to interpret and frame the world and our place in it. There's a Hindu story about a rich man who encounters a beggar on his way into the city one day. He recognizes the fellow from his village and, taking pity on the beggar, invites him home for a meal. The beggar is well fed and he falls asleep after enjoying the meal. While he's sleeping the rich man slips a precious jewel into the folds of the beggar's garment, believing that the fellow will find it and be able to change his life. A few weeks pass and once again the rich man goes to the city. He's surprised to see the same beggar sitting by the gate asking for pennies and he confronts the fellow. "Why are you still here? What did you do with the jewel I gave you?" The beggar protests that he's never had any jewel. The rich man reaches in and pulls the jewel out of the beggar's twisted rags. The beggar, stunned, realizes that he had been completely unaware of the fortune he had been carrying. Even beggars have life routines and habits of mind which affect how they go about in the world. This one expected to be poor and so didn't consider that his life could be otherwise. The beggar, like the Scarecrow, Tin Man and Cowardly Lion, had fixed his vision on what was missing.

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The right model at the right time can be helpful, as in the case of an organizational leader whose consistent optimism, faith and encouragement keeps the staff moving forward during challenging times. When confronted with adversity, however, many of us are likely to view the situation through limiting lenses. Take, for example, this modern refrain of the Scarecrow's song: "If I only had more time". I've heard this from so many clients that I could easily write an entire verse (readers who remember the tune from the movie are welcome to sing along): "I could have some time for sleeping, appointments I'd be keeping, my "in-box" I could mine. If the day had more hours I could stop and smell the flowers, if I only had more time." Readers who find themselves singing a similar tune might want to look at the thought patterns that keep vocalizing in a minor key.

1. Ask "what are the assumptions I am making here?" Limiting assumptions often focus on part instead of all of the information available about a problem or challenging situation. They assume only one outcome is possible and often entail a fair amount of psychic projection – assuming one knows exactly how others will respond and what they're thinking. In exploring the mental model of the perpetually time deprived, for example, there are several assumptions consistent with a limiting framework. The first is that the time actually required for the tasks on an individual person's plate equals or exceeds the standard 168 hours of a week. I sometimes have a client list out all of the items on the to do list and calculate how much actual time is required and when the task needs to be done. The perspective many people take on time is a very compressed one. Instead of looking at a larger block - a week or a month or even six months- we tend to narrow down the potential hours available to a cramped 1440 minutes. A common pair of assumptions is that all of the work tasks are equally important and that the stressed individual is the only person capable of doing the job right. Thus, there's only one possible outcome- doing it all yourself. Creating priorities based on goals and actively building a support network are only two of many possible strategies to apply.
2. Play the "what if..." game with options. A client whose national nonprofit organization is currently engaged in a strategic planning process was discussing the need to encourage more efficient use of resources in the local offices. He

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felt stressed because the strategy that was recommended to relieve some of the local financial pressures couldn't be implemented until some other aspects of the planning process were underway. So we applied the "what if" question, leading him to create a parallel process instead of a linear one. Exploring that possibility out loud, the client identified three steps he could take which wouldn't upset the political or chronological apple cart and which would allow a quicker implementation of the new financial process once all of the approvals were in place. Playing "what if..." is different from the Scarecrow song. It allows thinking outside the box, playing with alternatives until there's an insight or breakthrough that's feasible and viable but which had not been apparent because of a limiting mental model.

3. Construct experiments with life. Some people see life as a constant test; others proceed as if it were all an experiment. I prefer the latter model to the former. In the "life is a test" framework, there's only one right answer, someone else is giving a grade, and there's a penalty for guessing. If life were an on-going test, I'd have a deadline for writing an article, sit down at the computer on D-Day and write, despite feeling distracted by the sun, the pile of laundry that needs attention, the client calls that were unexpectedly rescheduled, the notes that are overdue, tomorrow's class for which I need to prepare..... In the experimental life model, I can set up a hypothesis (e.g. I can schedule writing this article for Friday and play in the garden while it's sunny today), carry out the experiment (playing in the garden while it's sunny and blocking off an hour on Friday's schedule, observe the results and adjust as needed (blocking off an additional half-hour on Sunday to finish writing).

Next time you find yourself singing the "if only life were different song", consider reading deeper into the pockets of the mind. Assume there's some unexpected solution already in there, the jewels of options and alternatives. Unlike Dorothy and her friends, who are stuck for all eternity in the same story, it's never too late for us to change the tune.

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Francine Campone, Ed.D., PCC is a Coach and Consultant. She specializes in coaching mature professionals who want to make sustainable changes in the quality of their personal and professional lives. You are invited to contact Francine at fcampone@rushmore.com or via phone at 605-390-5308 for more information about coaching. Visit her virtual office at <http://francinecampone.interfaceias.com> to find out more about current programs and teleclasses.

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