



Leadership Matters



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Mental Models *What They Mean for UU Congregations*

Mental models have been around since the first time a sentient being noticed the difference between what she expected and what she observed. That might have been when she picked up a piece of rock that looked like flint, but didn't flake off when struck by another rock, or when she went to a tree where she had found a stash of delicious honey the year before, and found it deserted by the bees. As soon as people constructed categories and began sorting things, they also constructed mental models against which their expectations could be measured:

These models serve as tacit "maps" of the world, which serve as guides for people. When humans first left Africa and migrated throughout the rest of the earth, they did so by following herds and water sources, without any expectation of where they might end up. When they returned along the same route and communicated with others

about what they'd found, mental models were created against which they could assess current realities.

Mental Maps in UU Congregations

Unitarian Universalists aren't migrating across continents, or creating flint knives any more, but of course our minds are filled with ideas of "how things should be." Can you imagine the furor if a Unitarian Universalist congregation were to opt for kneelers and confessional booths in a new sanctuary? Or if they were to announce that each family who wanted to be members of the congregation had to pay \$3,000 up front for the privilege of joining? Or if the minister were to present offerings of money and food to a statue placed on a table behind a gauze curtain during a Sunday

service?

These are common practices and furnishings in other religious institutions, but they don't match up with the mental models that Unitarian Universalists have when they think about "church." For one thing, the whole concept of "sin" isn't one that occupies our attention much. For another, we don't believe that

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we should confess our sins to a priest in order to receive absolution. We may be getting better about financial support for our congregations, but we reject the concept that a family must pay a large sum in advance to become Unitarian Universalists. Offering food and money to a statue would be regarded as offensive, or worse, in most UU churches.

The issue isn't whether or not it's a good idea to kneel down during worship or support a congregation financially. The issue is what we do when we gather communally, and the limits we'll go to to make it clear that a church needs money to maintain a building, pay a minister and other professional staff, and offer programs such as religious education and social events. Providing food for a statue brings up questions of what the statue represents, and the role of food in our communal lives.

Shared Ideals – Shared Values

Adapted from *Leadership is an Art* (1989), by Max DePree

Shared ideals, ideas, goals, respect, a sense of integrity, quality, advocacy and caring — these serve as the basis of a congregation's covenant and value system. The system of values must be explicit. The system and the covenant around it make it possible to work together, not perfectly to be sure, but in a way that enables the congregation to have the potential of being a gift to the spirit.

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In a learning community, Unitarian Universalists would gain skills in sharing their mental models, assumptions and expectations with others, especially when a circumstance or event is different from what they had anticipated. They would practice two key skills:

- reflection, to slow down thinking processes and become aware of how our experiences match up with our assumptions and expectations, and
- inquiry, to share perspectives and find out about other people's assumptions.

Reflection

People who are skilled at reflection make sure that they really hear what they thought they heard. They practice active listening skills, paraphrasing and seeking agreement that they can accurately reflect back what another person was trying to communicate. They know the difference between facts, which can be verified independently, and inferences, which are based on unstated assumptions. They make it clear that they have plenty of time to listen and engage in conversation, rather than bringing a dialogue to a hasty conclusion. They would rather delay a decision than force someone to decide too quickly on a complex issue.

Inquiry

People who practice inquiry skills routinely ask about how other people are thinking, asking such questions as:

- Does everyone agree about what the data is here?
- Could you walk me through your reasoning?
- Is this similar to an experience you've had before? Could you tell me about that, and how it's affecting your conclusions now?

- What leads you to that conclusion?
- What's the significance of that to you?
- What don't we know about this? How could we find out? What would happen if we did?

Going Up the Ladder of Inference

Chris Argyris, of Harvard Business School, describes these processes as "going up the ladder of inference." He invites people to slow down, to test out inferences at each level, and not to leap to conclusions prematurely. The visual prop of the rungs of a ladder can serve as a useful reminder of how we should take our thinking processes one step at a time, rather than jumping from the ground to the top of the ladder without a foot resting anywhere in between.

Argyris goes beyond what individuals must learn and practice, however. In a learning community, people would be encouraged to acquire skills in reflection and inquiry, but that's not enough for organizational health and strength. The mental models of the organization must also be open to scrutiny.

Examining an Organization's Mental Models

In any situation where people are pro-

fessing a set of espoused values and behaving in ways that contradict those values, the organization's mental models need to be examined. People need to take a look at their cultural artifacts, including who speaks to whom, how decisions are made, what the physical environment is like, and where authority lies. Then they need to look at the values they claim are important, to see whether the values seem to support the artifacts. Finally, they should engage in dialogue about any inconsistencies they discover, to look at shared underlying assumptions and how they reinforce or hinder desired changes.

Uncovering mental models and underlying assumptions is not easy, particularly since people are usually strongly attached to both. An outside consultant may be needed to help an organization's members explore what they want, what they do, and what they say they want.

If we were to practice these skills in our congregations, we might find ourselves in dialogue about our most deeply held beliefs, and the behaviors and practices that stem from them. This in turn might help us to deal with issues related to our theological diversity and culture of individualism.

Resources

- Argyris, Chris, Putnam, Robert, & Smith, Diana McLain (1985). *Action Science*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
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- DePree, Max (1989). *Leadership is an Art*. New York: Dell.
- Dooley, Jeff (1994). "Bootstrapping Yourself into Reflection and Inquiry Skills." *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*. New York: Doubleday.
- Heider, John (1986). *The Tao of Leadership: Leadership Strategies for a New Age*. New York: Bantam.

Mental Models about Church Governance

Most people who serve as leaders in Unitarian Universalist congregations are familiar with the concept of "congregational polity," referring to the form of governance we use. Since the signing of the Cambridge Platform in the 1640s, UU congregations have operated on certain core beliefs, which in turn reflect our mental models about how churches should be run:

- Congregations ordain clergy. Bishops and other church leaders may not take this right away from UU congregations.
- UU ministers are called by congregations. They are answerable to the congregation, not to the board or a committee, and certainly not to an outside entity such as a presbytery, a district or an archdiocese. No such outside entity could come to a UU congregation and remove a minister.
- We are in covenantal relationships as members of UU congregations.

Congregational Polity vs. Policy Governance

We get into interesting and challenging situations when we try to work with these beliefs to build strong, healthy UU congregations. For example, there is currently a great deal of interest in adapting the policy governance model described by John Carver in *Boards That Make a Difference* to our congregations. The policy governance model provides great clarity about the responsibilities of a board of trustees:

- Establishing policies in certain core areas of governance related to whom the congregation serves, why, and at what cost.
- Making sure the congregation's vision/mission are clear, and measuring decisions against it.
- Exploring relationships with staff and setting clear limitations which staff must not violate.
- Considering the board's own governance processes.

However, the policy governance model also calls for a board to have only one employee, the chief executive officer of the organization. In congregations with more than one ordained minister, this raises questions about the relationships between those ministers and the congregation by whom they were called.

People who make a living in business like the clarity of policy governance. Their mental models about organizations include things like efficiency, clarity of reporting relationships, and avoidance of micromanagement by a board. In the event of conflict between the minister and the congregation, these mental models are likely to result in a call for assessment or evaluation of the minister, leading to action by the board. However, these mental models can lead to a considerable amount of turmoil. Ministry is much more an art than a science, and the questions surrounding how to evaluate a professional minister need careful consideration of such issues as appropriate delineation of responsibility, projection, and influence.

The Group Field

Adapted from *The Tao of Leadership*, by John Heider

Pay attention to silence. What is happening when it seems as if nothing is happening in a group? That is the group field.

No matter how many people are sitting in a circle, it is the climate or the spirit in the center of the circle that determines the nature of the group field.

Learn to observe emptiness. When you enter an empty room, can you feel the mood of the place? It is the same with a vase or a pot; learn to see the emptiness inside, which is the usefulness of it.

People's speech and actions are figural events. They give the group form and content.

Silences and empty spaces, on the other hand, reveal the group's essential mood, the context for everything that happens. That is the group field.

Uncovering Mental Models Crucial to Managing Conflict

If, for example, congregational members evaluate the success of a minister in relation to numerical growth in a particular period of time, they may be placing undue responsibility on the minister's shoulders. Growth should be assessed in terms of spiritual depth, knowledge of the tenets of one's faith, degree of active involvement in the life of the congregation, and other measurements as well as numbers of members. Factors such as crowding in the sanc-

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tuary, parking, and demographic changes may be far more relevant to numerical growth than the minister. Careful consideration of what people believe ministers should be responsible for, and how their work should be assessed, may be crucial in managing conflict in a congregation. Equally important is the consideration of how people came to hold these beliefs: from a history with another faith community? from stories

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they've read about priests, rabbis and pastors? from traditions within their families?

Exploration of mental models may prevent inappropriate blame, heightened levels of conflict, and the creation of factions within a congregation. It may also encourage dialogue and discussion of some of our most deeply-held theological beliefs and their influence on congregational governance and practices.

The purpose of **Leadership Matters** is to provide resources for all UU congregations to explore what it means to be a learning community, and how to do it well.

Leadership Matters is a quarterly publication of the Learning Center for Leadership, a division of The Mountain Retreat & Learning Centers, Inc. The Learning Center for Leadership's mission is to provide programs and resources that enhance skills for transformational leadership.

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