

What Am I Missing?

Author : Vaughn Upshaw

Categories : [Collaborative Leadership](#), [Group Process](#), [Implicit bias](#), [Leadership Development](#), [Tools and Practices](#)

Tagged as : [citizen involvement](#), [civility](#), [collaboration](#), [decision](#), [engagement](#), [leadership](#), [leadership development](#), [productive work groups](#)

Date : September 1, 2016

Pierre-Auguste Renoir -La Grenouillere (1869)

Try an experiment. Grab three or four people and ask them to look at this painting for 30 seconds then close their eyes and describe what they saw. Don't be surprised if each person sees the painting in ways others do not.

If we see things so differently, what might each of us missing? Leaders need to be continually aware of what they and others may be missing. Our brains are constantly painting a picture of the world around us. Leaders need to understand what others do and do not see in order to tap into and shape a common picture of the future—whether that means convincing people to launch a new business or take action to protect the environment. Effective leaders look for ways to bridge their own and others' mental pictures so everyone shares a sense of why their work is important, how they will get things done, and what they will accomplish.

We start constructing an understanding how things work as soon as we are born. Early in life, we see the world as it is. Imagine a 2-year-old child's jaw dropping as grandpa pulls a coin from behind her ear; children exist in the moment. As our brains develop, we learn things may not be as they first appear. When we aren't looking the coin is hidden behind a finger. We become aware that words and actions are not the same—I'm not really going to "pull my hair out!" **We build a mental model to explain why things are as they are and how the world works. Each of us believes our model is right.** Uh oh. Now what?

As leaders we first need to accept that our own mental models may be wrong and incomplete. As Kathryn Schulz writes in *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error*, this is really hard—first, it's hard to accept you're wrong most of the time (trust me, I'm working on it) and, second, it's hard to help others recognize what they may be missing. That doesn't mean it's not important. In fact, it's an essential leadership skill.

Every day we see leaders who are afraid of admitting their mistakes. Does anyone not make mistakes? Who has all the information they could possibly need before making an important decision? Still we decide things everyday. Should I be writing this blog post or doing something else? It's always a choice and, if I miss something because I'm writing this, in retrospect, I may have made the wrong decision.

I admire leaders unafraid to make mistakes and curious to learn what they don't know. I challenge you to be a leader who learns from others and the world around you. **Going around having to be right all of the time is exhausting. Try asking yourself, "What am I missing?"** I'll bet you look at Renoir's painting differently after hearing other people's perspectives. Just imagine how asking what you're missing might change your picture of the world.