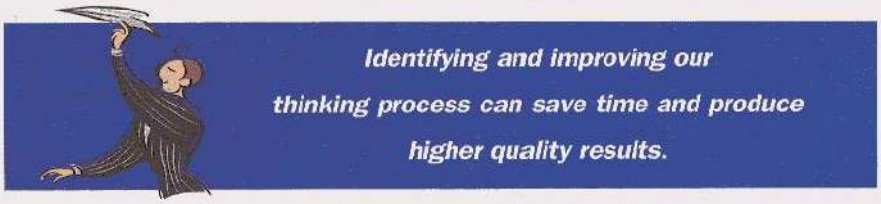
How to find your car keys and other thinking skills

We're always thinking. Even in those moments when we say "Oh I wasn't thinking" - what we really mean is we weren't thinking very well.

Here's a practical technique that you can use immediately to think more effectively. If you use this technique when you are working on a problem, troubleshooting, or making a decision you can solve the problem more quickly or make a better decision.

First let's look at a simple example of thinking...Have you ever misplaced your keys, or your wallet, or your glasses? (Usually it is just as you are about to go out.) You look and look, and cannot find them. Then you mention the situation to someone else, and they say "oh, they're right on the ...."



These situations occur because we make assumptions, which we treat as facts. I have a simple problem to solve: I can't find my keys. I know that I always put them in one of three places - in my pocket, on the kitchen counter, or on my dresser. And of course, I've looked in those places. But if I always put them one of those places, and I've looked there, I would have found them! So it's not true that I always put them there, or I'd have them in my hand. But in my head, I have assumed that they are in one of these three places.

This is an example of me holding a pre-conceived picture or thought in my head of where I put my keys. This type of "picture" has different names - psychologists call it part of our "mental set," others call it a "mental model."

When we make decisions or attempt to solve problems, both consciously and unconsciously our thinking is strongly influenced by our own mental sets. As well, much of the information that comes into our consciousness is filtered by our mental sets.

Our mental sets are very powerful and in most cases useful. When we are good at a task our mental sets are a large part of our expertise. They allow us to do things like pattern recognition - recognizing, identifying and analysing situations very quickly. We couldn't carry out many of our normal functions - such as driving a car - if it weren't for our automatic processing of pieces of information by our mental sets.

When we're problem solving, troubleshooting, or decision making our assumptions are part of the input into our processing. As technical professionals, we often think of our problem solving processing as:

Facts >> Processing >> Conclusions

when in reality it is more like:

Facts >> Processing >> Conclusions
(filtered by Assumptions)

Now, if our assumptions are appropriate, we find correct solutions quickly. That is one way to describe an expert. However, our assumptions are not always appropriate; for example, if my keys are where I normally place them, all is well. But if they are in a different place from the picture in my head, I have a hard time breaking out of my assumption - I may even walk right by them. Someone else who comes along doesn't have the same assumptions, and often can find the keys much more quickly as a result. In the same way, when we're stuck working on a problem or debugging software, someone else who won't make the same assumptions is able to help.

How can we avoid these traps? First we need an awareness of our thinking process. After that, a technique I have found to be very useful is to specifically write down both the "facts" and the "assumptions" I am making. By thinking consciously about the difference between these two, I can identify what I know for sure, versus what I am assuming. When I've done this I've found that I was making a lot more assumptions than I thought.

Looking at how we think and working at identifying and improving our thinking processes can save time and produce higher quality results. But I think one of the biggest benefits of improving my thinking is to reduce my frustration level - the number of "D'oh!" moments I have. Thinking is our most important skill. Spend some time working at improving it. Think about it.

Professional speaker and author Randy Park, B.Sc., M.Eng., helps people achieve their goals and save time, money, and aggravation by understanding and improving their own unique thinking processes. Look for his book "Thinking for Results" in 2003. Contact Randy regarding speaking at rp@ThinkingforResults.com.