COMMON SENSE IS NOT SO COMMON

B Y   C H A R L E S   A L D A Y

John, who is 14, and another teenager were passing a football back and forth at youth camp. Since we were inside, and there were other people and breakable equipment in the meeting room, I asked them to go outside with the ball. They willingly complied. John came back to me later. He asked, "Would someone with common sense have known not to throw there?" What an unusual question, I thought.

The question stuck with me. The next morning, I asked John, "What is common sense, and why do you think you lack it?"

John did not have a great answer, but he said that he is often told to use his common sense. So when I asked him and his friend to take the ball outside, he wondered if this was just another example of his lack of judgment. John and I then had a deep discussion about common sense, perception, accumulated knowledge, experiences, and the ways human develop wisdom.

Hindering Problem Solving

Common sense, in my view, is simply the total of our knowledge and experiences applied in practical ways. I remember a manager who was analyzing a serious error made by an employee saying, "That's just common sense. Anyone should know better than to . . . ." Most of us could complete the sentence based on some incident we have either observed or taken part in.

But common sense may not be as common as we think. It varies from person to person, because none of us has identical knowledge and experiences. A group must apply a lot of concerted, intentional, and integrated effort to develop a shared pool of judgment. If a team or its leaders respond to a problem by saying, "That's just common sense…," they likely will never

adequately identify and address its causes.

The best explanation I've encountered about the idea of common sense as a hindrance to problem solving is in a book by Dean L. Gano titled *Apollo Root Cause Analysis: A New Way of Thinking* (Apollonian Publications, 1999). Gano says that, because the way each person perceives the world is unique, the notion of common sense as a cure for problems won't lead us to good solutions. Here's how perception works, according to Gano:

We Receive Data from the Senses. We all have five senses, but they are developed differently in each of us. The environment in which we live and work creates certain neural pathways in our brains and leads to variations in the acuity of our senses. Over time, each person senses the world differently and in turn creates his or her own perception of reality.

We Process the Data We Take in to Form Knowledge. Once we sense certain data, we process it into categories—sorted, prioritized, and stored (or forgotten). Each person has different kinds of knowledge, based on their priorities, interests, and experiences.

We Develop Problem-Solving Strategies. As each person organizes knowledge, he or she develops strategies for acting in different situations. A baby cries when hungry. If the baby gets fed after crying, he or she uses that strategy again. At some point, if crying doesn't work, the baby will develop another strategy. If I'm a manager who screams at people and they do what I want, then I'll use that strategy time and again.

As long as our goals are met with a given approach, we will retain it. As

the old saying goes, if the only tool you have is a hammer, all the world appears to be a nail. Each of us uses the "best" strategies we know, based on our unique experiences.

We Establish Conclusions and Models. An active mind is always open to new possibilities. We find out that things don't always happen the way they did the time before (even when we wish they would). Thus, we learn to react differently and change our conclusions about how to act in similar circumstances in the future. Each of us adapts at our own pace, based on our own circumstances.

These are some of the reasons why you can't train common sense into people—it simply doesn't exist in the ways in which we think it does. Instead of berating those who act differently from what we might expect in a given situation, we need to take the time to understand their point of view. Who knows, we might even find common ground around what makes sense for us all.

Questions for Individuals and Groups

1. What is your definition of common sense?
2. How much common sense do you have and where did you get it?
3. What evidence of a "common sense" do you see in your organization?
4. What strategies and tactics could you use to get a group to develop a common sense? ◘

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