



THE BLIND MEN AND THE ELEPHANT

BY JOHN GODFREY SAXE



The parable of the blind men and the elephant illustrates how our individual perceptions (what Peter Senge calls our “mental models”) can lead to miscommunication and conflict. Pegasus Communications president Ginny Wiley has a small sculpture of an elephant on her desk to remind her of how easy it is to be seduced by the “rightness” of our own views; by gathering data about a particular situation from different perspectives, we get a better sense of the whole and can make more robust decisions. John Godfrey Saxe (1816–1887) wrote the following poem based on the famous Indian legend.

It was six men of Indostan,
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.

The *First* approach'd the Elephant,
And happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side,
At once began to bawl:
“God bless me! but the Elephant
Is very like a wall!”

The *Second*, feeling of the tusk,
Cried, —“Ho! what have we here
So very round and smooth and sharp?
To me 'tis mighty clear,
This wonder of an Elephant
Is very like a spear!”

The *Third* approach'd the animal,
And happening to take
The squirming trunk within his
hands,
Thus boldly up and spake:
“I see,” —quoth he— “the Elephant
Is very like a snake!”

The *Fourth* reached out an eager
hand,
And felt about the knee:
“What most this wondrous beast is
like
Is mighty plain,” —quoth he,—
“'Tis clear enough the Elephant
Is very like a tree!”

The *Fifth*, who chanced to touch the
ear,
Said— “E'en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most;
Deny the fact who can,
This marvel of an Elephant
Is very like a fan!”

The *Sixth* no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope,
Then, seizing on the swinging tail
That fell within his scope,
“I see,” —quoth he,— “the Elephant
Is very like a rope!”

And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!

MORAL,
So, oft in theologic wars
The disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean;
*And prate about an Elephant
Not one of them has seen!*