The Reasonable Person Model: A brief description*

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We call the framework the Reasonable Person Model (RPM) because we think it is useful in explaining the circumstances that help bring out the best in people (R. Kaplan, 2004; S. Kaplan 2000; S. Kaplan and Kaplan 2003).

The Reasonable Person Model

The dominant economic paradigm would have us believe that people are rational actors, who routinely calculate what's in their own self-interest. This is not the place to expound on the many limitations of the rationality position (Shafir and LeBoeuf 2002). Rather, suffice it to say that the intention of the Reasonable Person Model is to point to a more appropriate framework for understanding humans, their actions, and convictions. We see humans as active organisms, lacking the strength, speed, or size of many others in the animal kingdom, making their way in an uncertain world (S. Kaplan and Kaplan 1989). In contrast to the rationality position, we see people as having deep concern about a wide range of issues extending far beyond the maximization of gain.

People can be reasonable; they often are. But as we all know, there is much that people do that is short of reasonable. They can be destructive, irrational, uncooperative, and quite unpleasant. Interestingly, the same person might be reasonable at one time and difficult at another. And that may well be true of all of us. The Reasonable Person Model posits that the difference is often in the environment, and more specifically, that people are more reasonable when the environment supports their basic informational needs (S. Kaplan and Kaplan 1982, 1989).

Before we turn to informational needs, we should make clear what we mean by information. Information, much more than money, is the stuff that runs our lives. Humans are information-based creatures (R. Kaplan 1995). We yearn for it, we horde it, we are overwhelmed by it, we trade it, we hide it. We ask questions such as "How do I get there?" "How does that thing work?" and "What happened?" While a great deal of our information-rich lives depends on spoken and written material, information is by no means limited to such sources. The environment conveys information. We examine it to learn what is going on. The objects in the environment provide information (e.g., an obstacle in the road, a park, a prowling bear). The arrangement of the objects also provides information. For example, a trail system with no landmarks can be discouraging, and obstructed views can increase fear and apprehension.

The Reasonable Person Model focuses on three domains of informational needs. *Model Building* encompasses the dual human needs for understanding and for exploration. Creating a mental model requires that we make sense of information, but also go beyond what we already understand. *Becoming Effective* also includes two components: being sufficiently clear-headed to be able to respond appropriately to the abundance of information surrounding us, and a sense of competence that comes from knowing how to do things and what may be possible. *Meaningful action* concerns the need to participate, to be an active part of the information-rich world around us. We next briefly discuss each of these as a separate domain; in practice, however, they are strongly interrelated. It is hard to act meaningfully without understanding, exploration can facilitate effectiveness, and being clear-headed can make us more effective in our actions (Figure 1).

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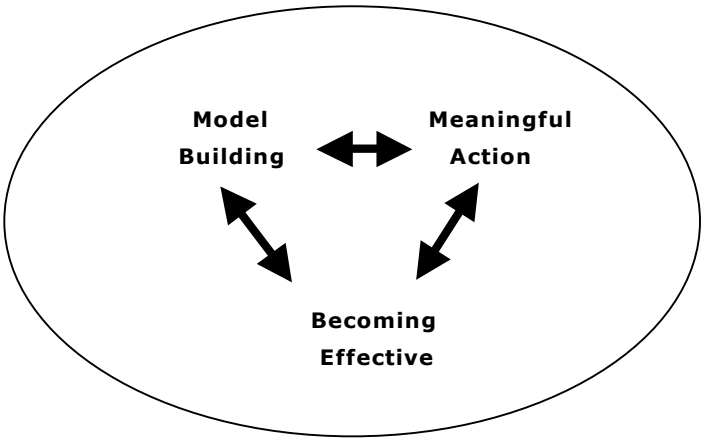

Figure 1 – Reasonable Person Model: Interrelated domains

Model Building

A mental model is a simplified version of reality that one stores in one's head and uses to make sense of things, to plan, to evaluate possibilities, etc. It reduces confusion and provides a basis for understanding. Understanding may be achieved through formal knowledge or education; more often, however, it is gained through direct or indirect experience. Consider arriving in a town or a building for the first time with no (physical) maps or directions. This can be a daunting and confusing experience. There may be cues, however, that make the experience seem more comfortable and familiar. Exploration is about negotiating a space (or idea) to find out more about it. Such exploration can take place in the "real world," or virtually, or in one's mind. Brainstorming can be a group-based exploration; planning may involve exploration of a future time or place. Exploration is essential for extending one's mental models.

For an information-based animal, survival required the mental capacity to recognize what is going on and to figure out what might happen next while there is still time to take appropriate action. This required a high priority on exploration to learn about the environment, while at the same time ensuring that the animal not stray so far that it no longer understands the situation. As a result, humans are eager to explore but quick to retreat to the familiar. They want to make sense of what is going on and have a strong aversion to being confused. At the same time, they prefer and benefit from acquiring, at their own pace, information that is relevant to their concerns. Exploration provides a potent means of achieving understanding.

Becoming Effective

Managing all the information we humans crave, as well as the abundance of information bombarding us that we did not seek, can lead to feeling overwhelmed and exhausted. Strangely, though we may think we could not handle even one more bit of information, there are some kinds of information that are not bothersome and perhaps even enjoyable. While some environments can be the cause of our distress, others can provide the solution.

One way to explain this puzzle is provided by attention restoration theory (S. Kaplan 1995, 2001), which views attention as playing a key role not only in why mental fatigue occurs, but also in how restorative environments can foster recovery. Critical to this analysis

is differentiating between two kinds of attention. One of these is called on much of the time, for example when listening to a challenging lecture, intently pursuing a task (possibly in the presence of irrelevant things surrounding us), juggling concurrent demands (while ignoring what is on our mind), or while hearing what others are saying, while remembering what we do or do not want to let them know. The necessities of acquiring, managing, delivering, and remembering information generally take effort. Humans are capable of sustaining a great deal of such focus and effort, in other words, of using their directed attention. Sooner or later, however, the ability to direct attention becomes fatigued. While such mental fatigue often goes by the popular term of feeling "stressed out," there are important distinctions between reduced attentional capacity and stress in general. The distinctions are particularly pertinent in considering ways to regain directed attention.

Recovering from fatigued directed attention calls on the other kind of attention. This second kind requires no effort; in fact, it is often difficult to turn off. Consider activities and places that are fascinating and compelling, times when one feels in tune with one's surroundings and the demands of the moment. Paying attention to a waterfall or indoor aquarium is distinctly different from paying attention to an uninspired speaker. Exploring things that are intriguing usually seems effortless. Attention restoration theory posits that time spent in such effortless pursuits and contexts is an important factor in the recovery from mental fatigue. In other words, restoration involves activities and settings that are compelling and allow directed attention to rest.

Tending to our attentional needs is essential for achieving clear-headedness. Becoming effective, however, includes a second component, which derives from achieving a sense of competence. Feeling competent depends on knowing how to do things, knowing how things work in the world, and knowing what is possible. While there is satisfaction from being competent, it is often the case that the process of sharpening and extending the competence one already has is even more satisfying.

Meaningful Action

Information is a source of insight, intrigue, and innovation. It can be enriching and wondrous. There are many times, however, when it is none of these. The daily news provides an all-too-common example of an abundance of information that leaves us helpless, and possibly even hopeless. We learn about events of great significance and major consequences, yet the opportunities for our doing anything about them are minimal. Feelings of helplessness, not surprisingly, are harmful and demoralizing (Seligman 1975).

By contrast, opportunities for exercising one's effectiveness serve as important examples of meaningful action. Such actions may involve livelihood or food security, struggles for justice, or efforts to build community. At the same time, meaningful actions may be of modest scale yet of great symbolic and even practical importance. Thus, while one can gain great satisfaction from participating in a stewardship activity, many other forms of participation and public involvement (even voting) can also be meaningful and have an important impact. Helplessness can be greatly reduced by a sense of making a difference, being heard and respected, and feeling that one is part of things.

As we said, the parts of the RPM framework are highly interrelated domains. Both the experience of competence and achieving respect are profoundly important sources of meaningful action. Just as people who feel helpless, confused, or exhausted are often not at their best, when these concerns are minimized people are considerably more likely to be reasonable and constructive. Bringing out the best in people is more likely when their environment supports exploration and understanding, enables meaningful action, and facilitates competence and a clear head.

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