Personal Construct Theory

Idea In Short

According to Personal Construct Theory, people develop their own rules / constructs to interpret events based on their previous experiences. People develop internal models of reality, called constructs, based on observation and experimentation. Constructs help people understand and explain the world around them. Constructs start as unstable conjectures, changing and stabilizing as people gain more experience and proof. Constructs are often defined by words, but can also be non-verbal and hard to explain, such as the feeling you experience when your favourite football team wins the world cup. When constructs are challenged or incomplete, people experience anxiety, confusion, anger or fear. For consultants, understanding your clients' individual constructs helps build rapport and emotional capital with your stakeholders. Hence, consultants should master this theory to, not only better understand clients' concerns, but also choose the appropriate messaging and structure your recommendations in a way they can relate to and take action.

George Kelly suggested that the differences between people result from the different ways that we predict and interpret events in the world around us. According to his Personal Construct Theory, people develop their own personal mental models or theories about the world to understand and negotiate their environments in the roles of personal scientists. Like scientific theories, personal theories help people to anticipate future events, guide behavior and shape attitudes. People test these theories against their experiences and discard ones that fail to provide meaningful interpretations of the world.

Empirical research analogy to behavior

According to this theory, people anticipate and explain events in their world through organization of perceptions, called constructs. People use constructs to test and validate hypotheses that form the basis of their individual theories. People continually revise their constructs when they change or evidence suggests the need for further thought. Kelly's fundamental assumption of man the scientist recognizes a dynamic and reflective role for

humans as constructors of knowledge. Hence, the term personal scientist. Just as scientists conduct experiments, so people engage in behaviors that test their hypotheses and expectations. Similarly, as scientists adjust their theories in the light of new facts, so people improve their understanding of reality based on their experiences. While a construct might work at a point in a one's life, one might need to adapt or change as the underlying context changes. In his 1964 article, The Language of Hypothesis, he wrote:

> It is not so much what man is that counts as it is what he ventures to make of himself. To make the leap he must do more than disclose himself; he must risk a certain amount of confusion. Then, as soon as he does catch a glimpse of a different kind of life, he needs to find some way of overcoming the paralyzing moment of threat, for this is the instant when he wonders who he really is — whether he is what he just was or is what he is about to be.

Personal Construct Theory Organization

Kelly organized his theory into a fundamental postulate and 11 corollaries. His fundamental postulate says this:

> A person's processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which he anticipates events.

This and all subsequent quotations are from Kelly's 1955 publication 1. This is the central movement in the scientific process: from hypothesis to experiment or observation, i.e. from anticipation to experience and behavior. He followed this with eleven corollaries.

The construction corollary

We conservatively construct anticipation based on past experiences. For example 2:

> if a man's mother has given him a birthday present for the last thirty years, his prediction that he will receive another present from her on his next birthday makes sense. Similarly, if one has watched a particular television program at 11:30 p.m. on weeknights for the past several years, one's prediction that it will again be on

> television at the same time next Monday night is a reasonable one.

The experience corollary

When things do not happen as expected, we change our constructs (thus reconstructing). This changes our future expectations. When things don't happen the way they have in the past, we have to adapt, to reconstruct. This new experience alters our future anticipations. We learn.

The dichotomy corollary

We store experience as constructs, and then look at the world through them. This states that all constructs consist of pairs of opposites. In ancient China, philosophers made yin and yang the opposites that, together, make the whole. One important aspect of the dichotomy corollary is that each construct must include three members or items, with two of the members having the same characteristic and the third member having the opposite characteristic. For example:

> A college course may be either interesting or uninteresting, but it cannot be both at the same time. For example, breathing and not breathing would not be a legitimate construct in evaluating three friends. Because all of them breathe, the proposed construct would not tell how the three individuals are different as well as alike. Therefore, it would not reduce uncertainty in the future.

The organizational corollary

Constructs are connected to one another in hierarchies and network of relationships. These relationships may be loose or tight 3. For example:

> When you are talked into a blind date, and your friend spends a great deal of energy trying to convince you that the person you will be going out with has a great personality, you know, you just know, that they will turn out to look like Quasimodo. How do you get from "great personality" to "Quasimodo?" Organization!

The range corollary

Constructs are useful only in limited range of situations. Some ranges are broad, whilst other ranges are narrow. For example:

> Apples, bananas, yogurt, and Cholesterol Clusters are all within the range of convenience of the dichotomous construct nutritious food versus junk food, but cement is outside of it. Examples with personal constructs are more problematic because each of us has somewhat different constructs. Most people, probably, would agree that Saddam Hussein, Adolf Hitler, and Mother Teresa are within the range of convenience of the construct villain versus saint. They might disagree about whether other individuals fall within its scope.

The modulation corollary

Some construct ranges can be modulated to accommodate new ideas i.e. are permeable. Others are impermeable. For example:

> Imagine that a person thinks of many people as able to read my mind and of others as not able to read my mind. Among his friends and acquaintances, each is categorized as a mind reader or not. Now the person meets someone new. Will he or she apply the construct of mind reader or not to the new person? If so, the construct is permeable. Permeable constructs can be used to construe new experiences.

The choice corollary

We can choose to gain new experiences to expand our constructs or stay in the safe but limiting zone of current constructs. For example:

> Commonly, our choices are between an adventurous alternative and a safe one. We could try to extend our understanding of, say, human heterosexual interaction [partying] by making the adventurous choice of going to more parties, getting to know more people, developing more relationships, and so on. On the other hand, we might prefer to define our understanding by making the security choice: staying

> home, pondering what might have gone wrong with that last unsuccessful relationship, or getting to know one person better. Which one you choose will depend on which one you think you need.

The individuality corollary

As everyone's experience is different, their constructs are different.

> Each person is unique and constructs events in his or her own way. Because of such individuality in their natures, people are not likely to create identical systems. In later years, Kelly went even further to explain that it would also be unlikely that particular constructions represent identical events. Just as important to recognize is the fact that it is highly improbable that any two people would have joined together their construction systems by the same logical relationships, he noted.

The commonality corollary

Many of our experiences are similar and/or shared, leading to similarity of constructs with others. Discussing constructs also helps to build shared constructs. For example:

> A man sitting himself down at the local bar and sighing "women!" does so with the expectation that his neighbor at the bar will respond with the support of his world view he is at that moment desperately in need of: "Yeah, women! You can't live with 'em and you can't live without 'em." The same scenario applies, with appropriate alterations, to women.

The fragmentation corollary

Many of our constructs conflict with one another. These may be dictated by different contexts and roles. For example:

> A man might be a cop at night, and act tough, authoritarian, efficient. But in the daytime, he might be a father, and act gentle, tender, affectionate. Since the circumstances are kept apart, the roles don't come into conflict. But heaven forbid

> the man finds himself in the situation of having to arrest his own child! Or a parent may be seen treating a child like an adult one minute, scolding her the next, and hugging her like a baby the following minute. An observer might frown at the inconsistency. Yet, for most people, these inconsistencies are integrated at higher levels: The parent may be in each case expressing his or her love and concern for the child's well-being.

The sociality corollary

We interact with others through understanding of their constructs.

> Even if you are not really similar to another person, you can still relate to them. You can, in fact, "construe how another construes," "psych him out," "get inside her head," "see where he's coming from," and "know what she means." In other words, I can set aside a portion of myself (made possible through the fragmentation corollary) to "be" someone else. This is an important part of role playing, because, whenever you play a role, you play it to or with someone, someone you need to understand in order to relate to. Kelly thought this was so important he almost called his theory role theory, except that the name had already been taken. These ideas, in fact, came from the school of thought in sociology founded by George Herbert Mead.

Applying PCT in consulting

You look at a client stakeholder and consider him arrogant and thoughtless. All of these are constructs that you have created or learned in order to explain the behavior of that client stakeholder. So what? Listen to his criticisms. Hear the constructs he uses. Then talk to him using their constructs. They will be amazed at how much you understand him. You can also lead him in building new constructs. To destabilize the other person, attack their constructs. As consultants, clients expect us to come up with creative solutions to their challenges. When we are being creative, we first loosen our constructions - ideating and brainstorming alternative formulations of the client's issue. When we find a novel construction that looks like it has some potential, we focus on it and tighten it up. We conceive the idea, then give it form.

Summary

Personal Construct Theory [PCT] has a lot to offer consultants. It invites them to understand client''s personal meanings by measuring their constructs. Instead of making assumptions, the PCT concepts help understand client stakeholders in their own terms. De-constructing the constructs client stakeholders employ to make sense of themselves will help consultants understand clients as they understand themselves. Instead of relying on technical diagnostic language that fails to take into consideration how clients themselves make sense of their challenge, this tool helps consultants view their clients' challenges by immersing themselves in their clients' constructs.