

THE CHAIN OF MISSING DATA

The goal of straight talk is to reach agreements. Once your assumptions have been tested, once you've reframed how you view the situation, you can begin reaching agreements. This is where the Chain of Missing Data comes in. Imagine that you are trying to find some way to get a group of people to agree. Well, if nothing else, you can agree on what you don't know, but would like to know, in order to resolve the issue. Sure, the information may not be easily attainable, but if you can at least agree on the missing data, you will have started to forge a consensus.

For example, if your group is trying to decide whether to close a factory, you may be making financial assumptions about the impact of the closure on your financial performance. The plant manager may argue strongly that the projections under-estimate future production capacity that will be needed. Because of his production experience, people are reluctant to argue with him. So what data can you agree is missing? What if you had hard numbers on the costs and benefits of adding capacity somewhere else? What if the group did some scenario planning with specific projections of sales by product line? If you can all agree on the data you need in order to make a decision, then you've reached a point where the discussion should stop, and the information gathered.

You may find, of course, that he was right. In which case, you will have all benefited. Or, you may find, that you are faced with a dilemma. As the group digs down for the data it wants, it will ultimately be faced with a choice: either agree that you have the data you need, or agree that the data is prohibitively expensive or time-consuming to collect. In the latter case, you may want to make some assumptions to un-block the path. This conscious assumption, made with the agreement of the group, is far different from an assumption made unawares. In this case, you can always retrace your steps once you see where the assumption leads.

Once you get the data – or agree to a set of assumptions – the process starts again. Define the focus of the discussion, clarify assumptions, inquire into missing data, push toward the center of the Circle of Assumptions, and agree on the data you need. The process can be pictured as an upward spiral. You use these tools to reach many agreements, and those agreements, over time, forge a lasting consensus.

If it sounds like hard work, it is. But the results are far more rewarding. Using this process, everyone is a party to the conclusions reached. The organization will be stronger for it.