

FIRST DRAFT February 16, 2005 I have a concept for a book of one or two page stories or articles with questions that can be used by individuals or groups for looking at various issues.

“Common Sense is Not So Common”

John, who is fourteen, and another teen were passing a football back and forth. Since we were inside, and there were other people and breakable equipment in the meeting room for youth camp, I asked them to go outside with the ball. They willingly complied, and John came back to me later. He asked, “Would someone with common sense have known that?” What an unusual question, I thought.

And the provocative question stuck with me the rest of the day and all night. The next morning, I had a question for John. I asked, “What is common sense and why do you think you lack it?”

John did not have a great answer, but he said he is often told to use his common sense or asked, “Don’t you have any common sense?” So when I asked him and his friend to take the ball outside, he wondered if he should have known that already or was this just another example of his lack of common sense.



John and I then had a deep theological and philosophical discussion about common sense, perception, accumulated knowledge, experiences, and the ways human develop wisdom.

Common sense, in my simple view, is the total of our knowledge and experiences applied in very practical ways. And hardly any of us have identical knowledge and experiences. I remembered that a manager, who was analyzing a serious error made by an employee, had said, “That’s just common sense, anyone should know better than to... .” Almost any of us could complete the sentence based on some incident we have either observed or done.

Common sense may not be as common as we think. And it likely takes lots of concerted, intentional, and integrated effort for a group to develop common sense. If a group or leaders of a group resort to the problem solving statement of “that’s just common sense...,” it’s likely that the causes of the problem will not be adequately addressed.

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](#). Gano says that, because each person is unique, and the ways each person perceives is unique, the notion of common sense as a cure for problems won’t lead us to a good solution.

Here's how perception works, according to Gano:

We receive data from the senses - All of us have five senses, but each of us has different degrees of how well-developed those senses are. A blind person can't receive the visual cues to establish patterns that make neurological connections in the brain. The environment in which we live and work helps develop the senses and their acuity. Over time, each person senses the world differently and creates his or her own sensory perception.

We process the data in the mind to form knowledge - Once that data is sensed, it is processed into categories -sorted, prioritized, and stored(or forgotten). Each person has different levels of knowledge based on their priorities, interests, and experiences.

Develop problem-solving strategies - As each person organizes knowledge, he or she develops strategies. A baby cries when hungry. If the baby gets fed after crying, the baby uses that strategy of crying until fed. At some point, that strategy didn't work, so the baby develops another strategy. If I'm a manager who screams at people and they do what I want, then I'll use that strategy. As long as our goals are met with a given strategy, we will retain it as part of our belief system for solving problems. (if the only tool you have is a hammer, all the world appears to be a nail) Each of us uses different strategies and it is unlikely that there is a common strategy. Each of us uses the "best" strategy based on our experiences.

Establishes conclusions and models - an active mind is always open to new possibilities. We learn that things don't always happen the way they did the time before, (even if we wish they would). Thus we learn to react differently and we change our conclusions about similar events. Our models for life and work adapt, change, and hopefully give us a richer life.

These are some of the reasons why I said you can't train common sense into people. And we can hardly expect a teenager to exercise an adult's "common sense." If we all believed in a single reality or had a single point of view, then there would be hope for a group of people who work together to have "common sense."

Questions for Individuals and Groups:

- 1. How much common sense do you have and where did you get it?**
- 2. What evidence of common sense do you see in others in your family? In your organization?**
- 3. What is your definition of common sense?**

4. What strategies and tactics would you use to get a group to develop common sense?

5. What do you think about Gano's ideas about perception?