



A Great Big List of Tests

By Craig Weber | 2 April 2019
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There is no way you can use the word 'reality' without quotation marks around it.

Joseph Campbell

If you've attended my workshop or heard me speak you know I emphatically declare that the first curiosity skill – *testing* your perspective – is the most significant behavior in the conversational capacity discipline. I spend more time explaining it, and providing examples, than with the other three skills combined. It's that important.

Here are excerpts from my first two books that explain why:

From my first book, [Conversational Capacity](#):

The first skill on the curiosity side of the scale counters our brain's natural tendency to interpret things the way it wants—in ego-satisfying, reality-distorting, egregiously self-serving ways. It's also an unusual skill. We weren't taught to do this at home, school, or work. And, due to our brain's proclivity for distorting reality in our favor, we're actually prone to doing its *opposite*.

Remember, when we're committed to informed choice we work to expand, change, and improve our thinking because we know that, to one degree or another, our mental maps of reality are almost *always* wrong. Except for the simplest of things—like our phone number or birthday—the pictures of reality we carry around in our heads are woefully inadequate, even about the most basic and familiar things. If we hold up the back of our hand so we can't see it, for example, and then try to describe it perfectly to a person sitting next to us, we can't do it. And if we lack a perfect mental map of the back of our own hand, how much more imperfect are our views of more complicated, less familiar things?

This begs a question: if we're committed to being well informed, but our perspectives are always riddled with gaps and errors, how do we best detect and

correct them? In our quest to make informed and effective choices, how do we check and improve our mental maps of reality?

One thing is clear; given our brain's self-serving bias, it's impossible to effectively test our thinking *with our thinking*—it always looks good. Our minds, after all, want to be right. If testing our thinking with our thinking worked, we could just sit in the lotus position on a yoga mat correcting our thinking before every decision and we'd be in good shape. But given our cognitive limitations, the best way to test our thinking is by bouncing it off other people—especially people with contrasting perspectives.

“The only way that we can be certain that our map of reality is valid is to expose it to the criticism and challenge of other map-makers,” explains M. Scott Peck. “Otherwise we live in a closed system—within a bell jar, to use Sylvia Plath's analogy, rebreathing only our own fetid air, more and more subject to delusion.” Without conflicting frames of reference, in other words, we remain trapped in our maps of reality, making biased, less informed choices because we can't correct errors we can't see. So rather than treat our views like truths to be evangelized, we put forward our view—our position and the thinking behind it—and treat it like a *hypothesis* to be tested.

A good verbal test not only opens the door to contrasting views, it invites them in. When we test our hypothesis, we don't sit back passively and *hope* others will share a contrasting perspective—we actively *encourage* them to disagree, to share how and where they see things differently.

. . . It's not about being feeble-minded. Just because we're testing our views doesn't mean we don't have strong opinions or convictions, it just means we're treating them responsibly—as hypotheses to check and improve rather than truths to protect and sell. “Yes,” a workshop participant once said, “this makes sense when I'm concerned my view has problems. But what if I *know* I'm right?”

“Well then,” I replied, “if you're that certain your view is correct, you should harbor no reservations about testing it.”

This short paragraph is from my new book, [Influence in Action](#):

With an effective test you're treating your view like a hypothesis rather than a truth; a premise rather than a fact; a provisional point of view rather than a rock-solid veracity. How do you do this in a conversation? Like a scientist publishing her research in a peer-reviewed journal, you subject your point of view to scrutiny.

What does this look like in a conversation? Here is a compilation of sample tests from both books:

- *Is there a better way to make sense of this?*
- *Do you see it differently?*
- *What's your take on this issue?*
- *What does this look like from your angle?*
- *What's your reaction to what I've just put forward?*
- *How does what I'm suggesting feel to you?*
- *That's how I see the problem. What does the problem look like from your perspective?*
- *Right now I feel like my idea makes perfect sense and that makes me nervous. Are you seeing something I'm missing?*
- *I am more interested in making an informed decision than in winning or being right, so I'd like to hear your point of view—especially if it differs from my own.*
- *If I've got a blind spot about this issue, please help me to see it.*
- *I've shared what I think and why I think it. I'm curious to hear how other people are thinking about this problem—especially those who have a different take on it than I do.*
- *To help me improve how I'm looking at this decision I'd really like to hear from someone who has a perspective that challenges mine.*
- *I'd like someone to expand my view of this situation. Who has a different way of looking at it?*
- *I know I may be wrong about this—what do you think?*
- *If you disagree with me, please let me know. I'd really like to hear your point of view.*
- *Push back on me here—especially if you think I am being unfair.*
- *What would our worst critic say about this decision?*
- *I'd like to hear from others on this. But if you agree with me right now I don't need to hear from you. I already know what I think. I'd like to spend the limited time we have hearing from those who don't.*
- *I have strong feelings about this issue, so I really need to hear from people who see it differently. I don't want my preconceived notions to get in the way of making the best decision.*
- *What might be two or three unintended consequences of this decision?*
- *My thinking has betrayed me so many times in the past. Does anyone see how it might be trying to fool me again this time?*
- *Help me find the flaws in how I'm looking at this situation.*
- *This is an important a decision and I want to explore it from all angles, so I'm not ending this meeting until we've heard at least three concerns about what I just proposed.*
- *I want to make sure my idea holds water, so let's try and shoot a few holes in it.*
- *I've been here for twenty years and I have strong opinions about how things are supposed to look and run around here. So I'd like to hear from some of the newer*

people on the team. You're no doubt looking at this decision with fresher eyes than I am.

- *To help me think this decision through in a careful way, let's identify all the reasons we shouldn't do it.*
- *I don't want my presence to get in the way of your ability to tell me what I need to hear. So I'm going to leave the room for thirty minutes. When I come back in half an hour I'd like at least three concerns about what I'm suggesting up on a flip chart and we'll work them through together.*
- *I'm the finance person, so I tend to see everything through a finance lens. I'd like to hear from someone with a different functional perspective.*
- *I know I've got a strong "win" tendency and I've never made it easy for you to challenge me publically before, but this is way too important and I need your input. So let's do this: break into pairs for fifteen minutes and come up with two things you like about what I'm suggesting, and then, more importantly, two things you don't. Then we'll go around and hear what each pair comes up with.*
- *This is really hard to come in here and say, and I am sure it's hard to hear. Push back on my point of view if you think I'm being unfair.*
- *While I am wedded to solving this problem, I'm not wedded to solving it the way I just described. So if you have better ideas, or see problems with mine, I'd love to explore them with you.*

Executives at large international bank see Conversational Capacity as a key part of their "risk management culture." As one executive put it, "If we don't have people willing to raise their hands and speak up when we're about to make a really stupid decision, we're going to make a lot of really stupid decisions." Taking a cue from Ed De Bono's 6 Thinking Hats, we developed a pair of powerful tests they employ with big decisions:

Test 1: (The "Black Hat" test):

- *Let's take thirty minutes to find everything wrong with this decision. What are the risks? Why shouldn't we do this? Why would our competitors laugh in our faces if we made this choice?*

Test 2: (The "Yellow Hat" test):

- *Now that we've kicked the daylight out of the idea, let's look at it again with through a different lens. What do we like about the decision? What are the risks of not doing it? Why would our competitors laugh in our faces if they saw us letting this opportunity slip by?*

Do you have one? If you'd like to share have a good test to add to the list please send me a message on LinkedIn.

And if you—or someone you know—want to build your conversational capacity my two books can help:

- *Conversational Capacity: The Secret to Building Successful Teams that Perform When the Pressure is On*
- *Influence in Action: How to Build Your Conversational Capacity, Do Meaningful Work, and Make a Powerful Difference*