



## Why Don't Managers Think Deeply?

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### **Executive Summary:**

Online forum closed. Summing Up. According to Gerald and Lindsay Zaltman, nearly all research techniques commonly used today probe humans only at their conscious level, though it is the subconscious level that really determines behavior.

### **About Faculty in this Article:**



James Heskett is a Baker Foundation Professor, Emeritus at Harvard Business School.

### **Summing Up**

A since deceased, highly-regarded fellow faculty member, Anthony (Tony) Athos, occasionally sat on a bench on a nice day at the Harvard Business School, apparently staring off into space. When asked what he was doing, ever the iconoclast, he would say, "Nothing." His colleagues, trained to admire and teach action, would walk away shaking their heads and asking each other, "Is he alright?" It is perhaps no coincidence that Tony often came up with some of the most profound insights at faculty meetings and informal gatherings.

This story captures much of the sense of the responses to this month's question about why managers don't think deeply. The list of causes was much longer than the list of proposed responses. But in the process, some other questions were posed.

## Original Article

**Jeffrey** Immelt, GE's CEO, has received a lot of publicity recently for fostering "imagination breakthroughs" by encouraging managers to think deeply about innovations that will ensure GE's longer-term success. He has vowed that he will protect those working on the breakthroughs from the "budget slashers" focused on short-term success. Questions that this effort raises include: (1) Why so much publicity? (2) Isn't "deep thinking" what leaders are paid to do? and (3) Why do these kinds of effort require so much protection?

In their new book, *Marketing Metaphoria*, Gerald and Lindsay Zaltman suggest some answers to the questions. In decrying the lack of what they call "deep thinking" among managers and especially those responsible for marketing, they suggest some things that get in its way. Among them are: (1) reluctance to take risk, especially when short-term performance is at stake, (2) the fear of disruption resulting from "thinking differently and deeply," (3) the potential psychological cost of changing one's mind resulting from deep thinking, and (4) the lack of information providing deep insights on which to base deep thinking.

According to the Zaltmans, while nearly all research techniques commonly used today probe humans only at their conscious level, the subconscious (offering deep insights) really determines behavior, and that explains why humans don't behave as they say they will, whether in buying or other behaviors. As a result, for example, four in five product introductions perform below expectations.

The Zaltmans expand on ideas they have been studying for some years, namely that strategies of all kinds can be based on insights gained from listening in a disciplined way for metaphors that relatively small numbers of people (consumers, managers, public servants, etc.) use in the course of extended, probing interviews. In these interviews, the object is to use "surface metaphors," like "I am drowning in debt," to identify "metaphor themes," like "Money is like liquid," and the associated "deep

metaphor," in this case "resource." They claim that just seven deep metaphors—balance (equilibrium), transformation (changing states or status), journey (as in life), container (keeping things in and keeping things out), connection (feelings of belonging or exclusion), resource (providing survival), and control—describe 70 percent of our inner feelings. The objective is to find deep metaphors that individuals share in common (a true market segment or a basis for resolving a conflict) rather than differences. If we would just take the time to explore them we would be able to realize such things as more substantial, farsighted, successful new product introductions (such as the hybrid auto ten years ago at Toyota); more successful conflict resolution; and more significant innovation, à la GE, in general.

This raises several questions: Have the Zaltmans hit on a basic problem of leadership and management today? Are there appropriate responses other than the one that GE is pursuing? What is your organization doing to combat the absence of deep thinking in decision-making? What are you doing to combat it in thinking about your own life inside and outside the organization? What do you think?

To read more: Gerald Zaltman and Lindsay H. Zaltman, *Marketing Metaphoria: What Deep Metaphors Reveal About the Minds of Consumers* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2008); Gerald Zaltman, *How Customers Think: Essential Insights into the Mind of the Market* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2003)