

Working from the Mind's Eye

Published on Sep 09, 2014 by Niko Canner



On a flight back from South Africa, reading John Reader's panoramic *Africa: A Biography of the Continent*, I came across a passage that evoked the irreducible essence of what it means for a person to do work.

Homo habilis had been fully capable of making tools from cobbles, and that talent served its need for more than a million years. The technology remained virtually unchanged throughout and while such conservatism may demonstrate the complete adequacy of the tool to the task, it could also demonstrate the lack of a capacity to make any improvement. *Homo habilis* made tools according to an arbitrary "least effort" principle: take a cobble, knock off some flakes, use whatever is produced. *Homo erectus*, by contrast, made bifacial cutting tools according to a predetermined pattern.

The toolmakers selected suitable pieces of stone, knocked flakes from both sides and consistently produced tools that were longer than they were broad, pointed at one end and rounded at the other; they had a sharp edge all around, were perfectly symmetrical, and curved from end to end and from edge to edge on both sides. There was nothing arbitrary about this manufacturing process. The long axis, the cutting edge, the point and the symmetry of the carefully controlled curves were imposed on the stone, they did not arrive by chance. Each blow struck on the stone opened up too many possibilities for that. The process could be controlled only by constantly comparing the work in hand with an image of the finished product that is fixed "in the mind's eye." (page 79)

Work begins in the mind's eye, with a visualization of how something could be some way that it currently isn't. This could be as mundane as seeing how a set of groceries should be bagged or as expansive as imagining a cheaper, more reliable, more scalable way to deliver space flight.

In guiding our own work, there is great value to being clearer than people generally are about a set of critical questions:

- How well can I picture in my mind's eye what the outcome is that I'm striving to achieve? How crisp is my picture of what things look like when I'm there?
- How clearly or vaguely can I see an arc from here to there? What are the unknowns that I

need to fill in; when and how might those become clear?

- What kind of adjusting do I expect I'll need to do along the way? What will it take to do that well?
- Looking back - from a point of completion or in the middle of things - how did this visualization in my mind's eye fit reality? What were the gaps, and what caused them? What can I learn?

These questions one might ask oneself are also at the center of good management. Great managers sharpen the way their people can picture in their mind's eye what's needed, assess how well their teams can visualize how to get from here to there, help them navigate what to do about the gaps, and ensure learning from the inevitable gaps between pictures of what will or should unfold and the reality of what happens.

Image by Tiffany Franke - <http://tiffanyfranke.tumblr.com>