

## Perspectives that Influence Thinking and Knowing

How we see the world determines how we interpret new information, how we identify problems and determine how or whether the problems can be solved. This tool describes seven different ways the individuals see the world.

As you read about these different perspectives, think about those people you are currently training, and which of the perspectives they are bringing to the training program. To be effective, your training approach must take these perspectives into consideration, challenging them as necessary.

**"The Observer"** – For the Observer, knowledge is absolute, concrete, and available. The only proof needed for what is true is direct experience. The Observer expects that they can be shown direct evidence for everything that they are told is true, and that they will be able to easily judge the quality of that evidence.

**"The Truster"** – For the Truster, everything in the world that is true is certain and knowable, even if there are knowledge gaps at the moment, and all problems have clear solutions. As a result, some people hold true beliefs, and others don't, and authorities are the best sources of right answers. The Truster is unlikely to challenge what they are told is true by those they identify as an authority, even when presented with counter evidence.

**"The Feeler"** – For the Feeler, authorities know everything that can be known now, but the evidence is incomplete, even to authorities. There is a lot of intermittent uncertainty as to what is true. So, beliefs that feel right are the ones to hold. Ultimately solutions to all problems will be known. The Feeler will advise that 'going with your gut' is often necessary, especially when making complicated, high stakes decisions.

**"The Idiosyncratist"** – For the Idiosyncratist, everyone is limited in their knowledge, and uncertainty is real. External validation of any knowledge is impossible. So-called authorities are just as limited as others. Unlike mathematics, real life problems may not be solvable. In real life, a problem's structure, parameters, and criteria for resolution are seldom clear. The Idiosyncratist believes that it's important to have reasons for key decisions, but they are idiosyncratic as to how they select and evaluate reasons in support of their judgments, and dismissive of reasons that contradict their judgments.

**"The Relativist"** – For the Relativist, facts and truth exist, but only in context. Ill-structured problems abound. Any theory or perspective is as good as any other. What have been judged to be true, depends on one's perspective. Proof and evidence are entirely domain-dependent. Alternative interpretations cannot be compared. The Relativist is often overly tolerant of all perspectives and reluctant to judge any viewpoints as false or even problematic.

**"The Evaluator"** – The Evaluator believes that some arguments, perspectives and theories are better than others, and that it's important to identify and act on those that are better. Uncertainty is real and context is important, but it is still possible to establish criteria to guide evaluation. To form judgments about ill-structured problems, one must compare evidence, opinions, and arguments across contexts.

**"The Sage"** – For the Sage, all knowledge contains elements of uncertainty, and opinion is subject to interpretation. Because we are continuously learning new information, what we believed was certain in the past may become uncertain or even false in the present or future. Yet, justifiable claims about the relative merits of alternative arguments and claims can be made. We (not just I) can assert with justifiable confidence, that some judgments are more reasonable, warranted, justifiable, sensible, or wiser than others.

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A further debrief:

Although there are a number of similar models describing cognitive development, the descriptive terms we use here are closely aligned with model described in the book [Reflective Judgment](#) by Karen S. Kitchener & Patricia M. King. We recommend this work for all who would like additional information.

Many researchers have provided evidence that this list captures a growth trajectory in a person's cognitive development, with growth being categorized by a gradual transition from the first stage, which is here named the "The Observer," to the last stage, named "The Sage". The Kitchener and King study as well as other studies of cognitive development support the hypothesis that most humans move through many or all of these perspectives as they mature from childhood to adulthood, but that movement along this continuum is not universal and that all of these epistemological perspectives are present in an adult population. Various clusters of these different perspectives are present in most groups, and these differences often account for failed group projects. Education is believed to facilitate growth along the continuum. Advancing to the later stages of this pyramid is believed to be important for leadership development and strategic thinking.



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