

Estimate of the Situation

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Paradigm Blindness

A paradigm has been defined¹ as “a set of assumptions, concepts, values, and practices that constitutes a way of viewing reality for the community that shares them, especially in an intellectual discipline.” All of us apply paradigms every day in our work and private lives.

Paradigms are important tools of the mind. They enable us to react quickly and efficiently to changes within the operating environment. However, when the environment changes radically, the current paradigm may prevent us

from recognizing that profound change is occurring requiring corresponding changes of us. For example, it has been controversially claimed that ancient Aztecs couldn't see the Spanish conquistadors' tall ships when they sailed into the harbor—because their paradigm did not include a template that permitted them to identify these never-before-seen objects as ships—and things turned out rather badly for them.

Hospital management teams and governing bodies share a long-standing paradigm that defines hospital and medical care reality for them. Important elements of that paradigm include the role of insurance (which is deemed to be essential), and the perceived need to protect health care from the vagaries of market forces. Although it is now clear beyond argument that many of the current paradigm's defining elements have become dysfunctional, establishment defenders of the status quo remain powerful and committed. It may consequently be useful to reflect upon the rock solid certitude with which a few other establishment paradigms have been defended in the past.

"There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home." -- *Ken Olson, President, Chairman and Founder of Digital Equipment Corp., 1977.*

"Everything that can be invented has been invented."-- *Charles H. Duell, Commissioner, U.S. Office of Patents, 1899.*

"The concept is interesting and well-formed, but in order to earn better than a "C", the idea must be feasible." -- *A Yale University management professor in response to Fred Smith's paper proposing reliable overnight delivery service. (Smith went on to found Federal Express).*

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¹ <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/paradigm>