

# Tools for Making the Tacit Explicit

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# Cultural skills in leading sustainable change

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This is #2 in a series of briefing decks designed for those who want to develop cultural skills for leading sustainable change.

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This briefing deck—**Tools for Making the Tacit Explicit**—introduces a number of ethnographic tools and approaches for seeing culture with new eyes by making what is often tacit and “taken for granted,” explicit and discussable.



**Why make the tacit explicit?**

# Most knowledge is tacit— we don't know we know it

**Explicit.** People can talk easily about the explicit.

**Tacit.** The vast bulk of knowledge is tacit—assumptions, mental maps, beliefs about why or how things happen.

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We don't even realize we know these things; **they just take them for granted.**



**Like an iceberg, most knowledge is below the surface.**

# The most difficult part is making the familiar strange enough to notice

Anthropologists notice things because they seem **so different**.

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Working in our own culture, we have a harder job—making the familiar **strange enough to notice**.

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Some of those “familiar” things will turn out to be **very different**—and we can **learn a lot from them**.



# “Ethnography” is a research method to understand how people see their world

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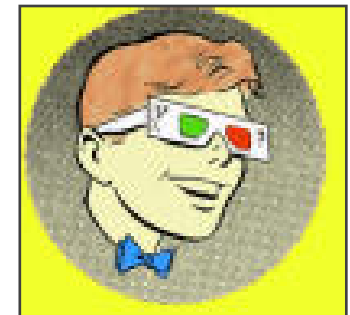
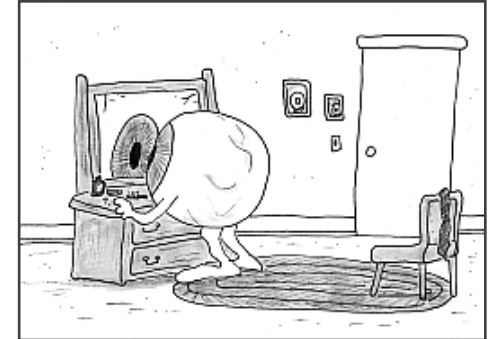
“ Ethnography is a research method whose goal is to understand the world **as perceived by those within that world**, to understand what activities mean to the people who do them.

- Simon Roberts

# In ethnography, we are the instrument

In ethnographic research, we are the **primary instrument** that makes sense of the scene we're in.

Our biggest job is **surfacing assumptions**—the expectations, unspoken rules and mental frameworks that govern organizational life.



# Our own assumptions are usually the most difficult to surface

As the “primary instrument” for making sense of what we see, we have to be **careful that our own frameworks don’t get in the way.**

Our own expectations and experiences **shape what we see** and how we understand it.

If we get trapped by our own assumptions, we won’t learn much.



**It helps to have two heads.**

Keep one eye on your subject and one eye on yourself.



# Unspoken rules can be large or very “small” indeed

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Small things make a difference—perhaps the biggest difference—in how culture works.

*Seinfeld* (the “show about nothing”) was really a show about small unspoken rules:

- ▶ The “it’s-too-soon-in-our-friendship-for-you-to-ask-me-to-take-you-to-the-airport” rule.
- ▶ The “buying-me-soup-doesn’t-get-you-off-the-hook-for-the-dinner-you-promised-to-treat-me-to” rule.



## **Mini-tools for making the tacit explicit —a sampler**

# 1 Tell me about a time when ...

Asking for information in story form can surface unspoken rules.

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It helps people notice things they **wouldn't otherwise consider worth mentioning.**

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It helps you understand the **texture of work practices.** And it highlights where to probe further.

## It's the difference between asking:

“How do you facilitate a group?”

Vs.

“Tell me about a time when things got out of hand?”

“Tell me about a time when you were embarrassed?”

“Tell me about a time when things didn't work the way you expected?”

“Tell me about a time when you felt really effective?”

## 2 Tell me about “them,” [which tells me about “you”]

Ask someone to describe another group, role, or organization—listening carefully for what that person **reveals about his own group, role or organization** in the telling.

Pay attention to things like:

- ▶ What she notices and doesn’t notice
- ▶ What he complains about
- ▶ How he uses his own experience to make sense of the other group

“Tell me about the people over **the mountain,**” the anthropologist asks, knowing the person she’s talking to knows very little about those strangers, but will reveal a lot about her own group in the comparison.”

“Tell **me how the finance group is treating this,**” you might ask an IT manager, listening for comparisons with his own group and the way it thinks and behaves.”

### 3 Look for what people do (not just what they say)

As our mothers taught us,  
**“actions speak louder than words.”**

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The real insight is often in the comparison. The words aren’t “wrong”; they tell you how people see (or want to see) themselves. But comparing deeds to words can help you understand both.

One of CFAR’s strategy clients had long considered itself in the construction business, with a sideline in gravel. **“We are a construction firm,” the founders said,** and built the business, hired staff, and viewed the world from that perspective.

By looking more closely at where they actually made their money, it turned out that most of the firm’s profit came from improving and selling property they acquired along the way.

With this contrast between the members of the firm told themselves and the story the numbers told now explicit, the firm began to focus more explicitly on real estate strategies and development.

## 4 What's the nearest analogy?

Asking for the “closest analogy” can help people put things into words.

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By comparing their situation to something “similar-but-different,” they can surface assumptions about what's essential or how things work.

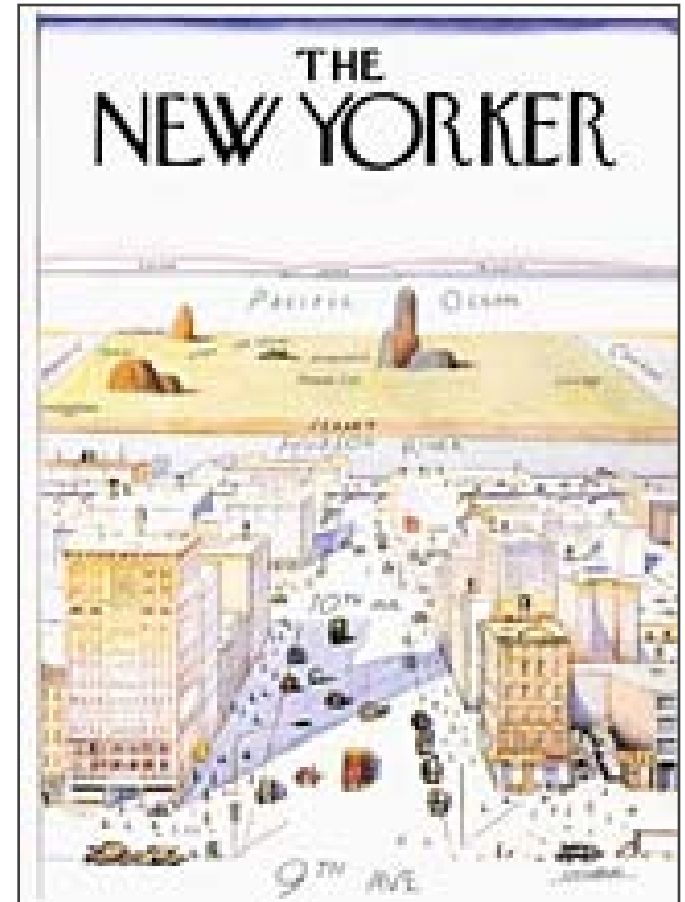
At Cannon a **photocopier development team** was struggling with defining requirements for a cheap, disposable cartridge that would eliminate the need for maintenance. **One day they looked at a beer can** and started thinking about the similarities and differences of manufacturing between the aluminum tube and the disposable cartridge they were trying to design.

Source: Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995

## 5 Make it visual to surface hidden beliefs and assumptions

At a major foundation, CFAR asked people to draw their **mental map of the top team**. Surfacing assumptions showed that only two team members agreed on how leadership and authority worked.

At a large hospital system, CFAR asked the Board to draw images of their greatest hopes and greatest fears about an upcoming acquisition. Making them explicit surfaced unspoken assumptions influencing Board members' decision-making—**it turned out that most were manageable**.



# 6 Categories and card sorting

Write out a **set of actions, roles, or objects**—each on a separate card.

Then ask people to **sort the cards into piles** by what's the same and what's different. Probe for things like, "How is \_\_\_ the same as \_\_\_?" Or, "what makes \_\_\_ different from \_\_\_?"

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Sorting the cards and talking about the categories help people **unpack their assumptions.**

**"Things that get you into trouble."** An anthropologist might ask someone to list out on separate cards "things that get you into trouble." Sorting those cards helps people identify "rules" they might not otherwise know they have.

**Beyond stakeholder mapping.** You might ask someone to write the names of key stakeholders on separate cards. Sorting them by "same" and "different" could help come up with strategies for engaging the different kinds of stakeholders.



# 7 Learning the rules by breaking them

In many cases, people don't know they have a cultural rule **until it's broken.**

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Pay careful attention if it seems that you, yourself, have **tripped over an unspoken rule.**

**"Make no ugly aircraft."** An aerospace company lost a major bid because, in the words of a member of the proposal team, they didn't realize the funding agency had an **unspoken rule that wasn't spelled out in the RFP:** "Make no ugly aircraft."

**Being "helpfully wrong."** In the spirit of prototyping, CFAR often puts something on paper in the early stages of a project, knowing it won't be "right," but that it will give people something concrete to react to. By seeing what is "wrong," people are better able to figure out what is "right."

# 8 Pay attention to your own strong reactions

Pay attention when you feel irritated, angry or frustrated. You may have stumbled on a different set of **beliefs about how the world should work.**

## Irritation as “Geiger Counter”

An anthropologist in the field learns to pay close attention to her own irritation. It’s often a sign that there are unspoken rules in the culture she’s studying that differ from her own.

“Intrusive” questions about how much money the anthropologist makes, for example, or about the pimple on her face, may signal different views of what’s public and what’s private, or different ways of showing interest in someone’s well being.

# 9 The “weirdness factor”

If something seems “weird” to you, it may mean that you need more information in order to understand **why it makes sense to “them,” but not to you.**

Many Jehovah’s Witnesses **refuse blood transfusions**, even if it means they will die. Their decision is part of a larger belief system based on their interpretations of Christian scripture.

**Turning a question on its head can help get you past your own assumptions:**

**From**

Why won’t they do what’s best for themselves?

**To**

What do they believe is best for themselves, and why?

# Takeaways

Most knowledge is tacit—**we don't know we know it.**

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The hardest part of surfacing those assumptions is **making the familiar strange** enough to notice.

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“Ethnography” is a research method to **understand how people see the world, from their perspective.**

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In ethnography, **we are the instrument**—and **our own assumptions** are the most difficult to surface.

## Mini Tools for Making the Tacit Explicit

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|---|--|
| 1 | Tell me about a time when ...              |
| 2 | Tell me about “them”                       |
| 3 | Look for what people do                    |
| 4 | What's the nearest analogy?                |
| 5 | Make it visual                             |
| 6 | Categories and card sorting                |
| 7 | Learning the rules by breaking them        |
| 8 | Pay attention to your own strong reactions |
| 9 | The “weirdness factor”                     |