The problem with jumping to conclusions at work

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In school, after asking questions, teachers usually turn to the student who puts their hand up first. Speedy answers have similarly been the essence of TV quiz shows such as *Reach for the Top*, *GE College Bowl* in the 1960s and *Jeopardy*.

But San Francisco–based consultant Daniel Markovitz says it's a dangerous approach in the workplace, instilling a sense it's better to be quick than thoughtful. And that leads to the biggest mistake he sees—repeatedly—in companies: jumping to conclusions.

Everybody makes wrong decisions, and he says that's inevitable, the price of doing business. "But what's not okay are rash decisions based on insufficient effort to understand the real problem. What's not okay is jumping to conclusions and implementing 'solutions' that jeopardize your organizations," he writes in his new book, *The Conclusion Trap*.

You probably have heard the famous Einstein quotation: "If I had an hour to solve a problem, I'd spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and five minutes thinking about solutions." Makes sense, right? When was the last time you did that, however? Indeed, kicking the problem around—analyzing it—might be considered wasting time in some meetings or organizational cultures.

Mr. Markovitz takes economist Daniel Kahneman's two modes of thinking—System 1, fast and essentially unconscious; and System 2, slow, logical and conscious—and labels them more memorably as the Jumper and the Analyst. He says we like to see ourselves as the Analyst, but we would be miserable and overwhelmed if we analyzed everything. That means most of the time we're a Jumper, which can get us into trouble. So beware.

The Jumper instinct shows up when we typically leap to solve problems in three ways: with shiny new technologies, reorganization or money. Sometimes those can be the right solutions. But often he sees organizations reach for them hastily rather than digging into the true roots of the problem. We also often jump to conclusions when we blame others for our problems.

To avoid falling into this trap, you need to leave your desk and actually go to see the problem – like a detective, or like Taiichi Ohno, the industrial engineer who made that an essential step in the famed Toyota Production System he developed. Go and see for yourself. Ask questions humbly to aid your understanding.

You then need to frame the problem properly. Too often we approach situations with lazy thinking, setting out symptoms—or preferred solutions—rather than carefully defining the problem. Consider these two problem statements he offers:

- Our sales team needs more administrative support.
- Our sales team spends six hours a week on low-value administrative tasks.

The second statement opens up avenues for discussion, which is what you want, whereas the first statement closes down alternatives and "quickly sends you into a cul-de-sac of facile thinking," as he puts it. If you see your problem statement has just one solution, rethink it because you have been jumping to your preferred conclusion.

Think backwards, looking for the issues that underlie the observable symptoms. Keep asking why, over and over again—commonly called the "five whys" approach—to understand the problem in its totality. Example: Why did the machine stop working? Answer: Because the machine overloaded, blowing a fuse on the control panel. Next question: Why was there an overload? Each answer produces another question until you have dug deeply enough, perhaps before five whys or perhaps after—the exact number doesn't matter.

Overall, watch yourself. Don't jump to conclusions. That instinct was instilled in your school days and can land you in trouble.

Quick hits

- What do you make? "It's possible that your job is to make decisions," says entrepreneur Seth Godin. "If we make decisions all day, how can we do it better? Because that's the question every other professional asks about the work."

- One of the best to-do apps you are probably not using is Checklist, suggests tech writer Doug Aamoth. You can get it free for iOS, Android or your web browser.

- The five best books on productivity, according to productivity guru David Allen, are *The Organized Mind* by Daniel Levitin, *BrainChains* by Theo Compernolle, *The Checklist Manifesto* by Atul Gawande, *The Inevitable* by Kevin Kelly and *The Antidote* by Oliver Burkeman.

- Tim McCarthy, founder of the Business of Good Foundation, says he excels at feeling sorry for himself. And he says, within reason, pity parties – complaining to others – is helpful: "I allow my sadness, anger, resentment to unfold openly until I get sick of hearing myself and decide to get on with my life."

- The most useful form of patience is persistence, says blogger James Clear: "Patience implies waiting for things to improve on their own. Persistence implies keeping your head down and continuing to work when things take longer than you expect."