The Obviousness Trap

What's obvious about obviousness?

The human brain is wired for speed and survival, not accuracy. We naturally gravitate toward what is visible and tangible, and we dismiss the abstract. Why? Because it is easy to understand, not necessarily because it works better, but because it is easier to see, point to, measure, and control.

Visibility creates the illusion of effectiveness. We often mistake what is concrete for what is causal. As a result, we spend our time optimizing what is obvious instead of understanding what is actually driving the outcome.

The obvious is not a measure of truth; It is an energy-saving shortcut of attention.

What's Obvious About the Obvious?

The paradox is surprisingly simple:

1. The obvious requires little attention.
2. The obvious is assumed rather than examined.
3. The obvious is hidden by familiarity, not complexity.
4. The obvious feels self-evident, so it escapes scrutiny.

Two Fundamental Truths

- What is obvious depends on what you are attending to.
- If the obvious isn't working, chances are you're attending to the wrong thing.

The Obviousness Trap

If the obvious isn't working, chances are you're attending to the wrong thing; yet, failure rarely causes people to search for new variables. Instead, they double down on familiar ones. Why? Again, the primitive brain is wired for survival and speed, not accuracy. The obviousness trap is the strong primitive emotional urge to think in ways that require the least effort. Our brains prefer cognitive ease, which can leave us feeling trapped in familiar assumptions and unable to see

alternatives. What feels obvious feels right, causing us to be trapped in familiar patterns of thought and making new ideas difficult to recognize even when they are right in front of us.

The trap explains:

- When the obvious isn't working, it's usually because we're looking at the wrong thing; yet, we keep looking harder at the same thing instead of looking elsewhere.
- Failure doesn't send people searching for new variables; it sends them doubling down on familiar ones.
- When results don't change, attention rarely shifts; it becomes more focused on the problem. When outcomes break down, people don't question the frame; they reinforce it.
- We don't attend to what matters; we attend to what is visible.
- What feels actionable often replaces what is actually causal.
- When the solution fails, attention clings to behavior because it is the only thing we can see.
- The wrong variable survives not because it explains anything, but because it is easy to observe.

In the end, the obvious just feels right. And because it feels so self-evident, we never think to question it, even when the obvious isn't working.

Tangible Misattribution

For our purposes, tangible misattribution is attributing an outcome (causality) to something tangible, visible, concrete, including visible behavior when the outcome was the product of something intangible. Cog-Erg helps correct this phenomenon.

A mother and a student were sharing struggles after the first semester in college. It was clear the student benefited from direct oral conversation. At one point, the mother stated that her son had a time coach. I replied, "I bet he is able to manage time when meeting with the coach but fades quickly when the time coach was not around." The mother's eyes widened. I explained my bet was that it wasn't the planner, the watch, or the notifications that were helpful; it was the oral discussion about the day or week ahead. Often, we look at the planner as the reason for success when, in reality, it's the oral conversation.

A mentee of mine was confident she couldn't get anything done without a deadline, implying that the deadline was the reason for her success. I challenged her a number of times, asking specific questions around her behavior in the hours before the deadline. Adamantly, she resisted engaging in the conversation.

Finally, one day she gave in. She said, "I freak out from the stress, burst into tears, and call my mother."

I asked, "What do you talk about with your mother?"

I could see the aha in her eyes. "OMG! I talk about the paper, the presentation, the project, etc."

Water runs downhill because that is the path of least resistance. She would break down and call her mother at deadline because it was cognitively easier. This is tangible misattribution. It wasn't the deadline; it was the oral conversation. Within a year of that realization, she became a published author, speaker, and presenter. being prepared days before the deadline but engaging in oral conversation in advance.

This is one story of dozens I've coached. It isn't the deadline; it's the urge to seek the intangible accommodation that provided relief for the impairment that enabled her to achieve the deadline and goal