

ICI VIEWPOINTS

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Amy Herman Makes Order out of Chaos with the Art of Perception

By Melanie Cohen

Art might not be the first topic that comes to mind when discussing the mutual fund industry, but lawyer and art historian Amy Herman, who has worked with organizations ranging from Fortune 500 companies to the FBI, showed that there is a connection to be found after all.

Art is another vehicle for people to learn how to reframe questions in ways to elicit information necessary to do a job, Herman told attendees at ICI's recent [Operations and Technology Conference](#), held concurrently with ICI's General Membership Meeting in Washington, DC, from May 22–24. She explained that analyzing paintings, sculptures, and photographs requires stepping in closely and asking questions from every angle—a style of observation that also is important for the fund industry.

"Sometimes, you have to make order out of chaos," said Herman, the author of *Visual Intelligence: Sharpen Your Perception, Change Your Life*. "You have to come up with a coherent narrative [even] where there is no middle, no beginning, and no end."

Using visual exercises such as the [Renshaw cow](#), in which an overexposed image of a cow appears ambiguous until the image is explained, Herman demonstrated how no two people see anything exactly the same way. She also facilitated team-building exercises in which some attendees described images on slides while others, with eyes closed, tried to form mental pictures only from the words that were being communicated to them.

"There are so few things that are 100 percent in your control," Herman said, "but choice of words [is] one of them. Every word counts." Gathering information from multiple perspectives helps people make better decisions, she said. "It's not just the way *you* see it," she added. "There's always another way."

The Four A's

For every new client, every new project, and every new problem, Herman prescribes a simple methodology that she calls the four A's:

- Assess—ask "what do I have in front of me?"
- Analyze—ask what is needed, what is important, what can be discarded, and how everything should be prioritized
- Articulate—describe what's going on by, for example, sending an email, speaking to colleagues, sending a memo, or calling a meeting
- Act—make a decision about how to proceed in any given situation

There are two other A's in the methodology to consider, Herman cautioned. There's accountability, meaning people must take responsibility for every decision made. And there is anchor bias, or the human tendency to tend to believe the first thing one hears or sees. But another "A" can help with this, she said. The same skills one uses in observing and describing art can be used in a business setting to more effectively communicate.

Shifting Perspective

To balance what you know and what you're willing to learn, you must be able to shift perspective, Herman said. The world can be so

complicated that yesterday's solutions may not be able to solve tomorrow's problems. And because the world moves so quickly, people need to be able to change perspective with it—meaning that it might be necessary to speak about what *isn't* there, along with what is present. In a situation where even the smallest decisions may have big impacts, it is important never to underestimate the effect that a seemingly simple idea or a gesture can have on one's work.

"Do not reach for what you *want* to see," Herman said. "Don't reach for a conclusion you think you need to get to, to finish the deal, to end the meeting. You are accountable every step of the way."

Using words such as "clearly" and "obviously" is detrimental to progress, she said, because "nothing is obvious, and even less is clear." Using Giuseppe Arcimboldo's [*The Gardener*](#)—a painting that at first appears to be vegetables in a bowl but that looks like a face if the painting is turned upside down—Herman showed how every single person brings something different to the table. "Change the way you look at things, and the things you look at change," Herman said, quoting author and motivational speaker Dr. Wayne Dyer.

Herman wrapped up by explaining that it takes more than just talent and mastery of work to be a great leader. A leader must be a great listener who also has the ability to express their talents in many different ways and scenarios. Picasso, for example, learned how to master all of his tools in every medium—from paint, pencil, and pastel, to wood, plaster, and bronze. In other words, she concluded, "It's not enough just to know how to paint."

Melanie Cohen is web editor at ICI.