

Stepping Outside the Box: The Importance of a Different Perspective

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I recently received an e-mail that was thought-provoking. Given the speed with which material on the internet crosses the world, a number of you may have seen it. The e-mail presented the following situation:

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You are driving along on a wild stormy night. You pass by a bus stop, and you see three people waiting for the bus:

1. An elderly woman who will die without medical treatment.
2. An old friend who once saved your life.
3. The perfect man or woman you have been dreaming about.

Which one would you choose, knowing that there could only be one passenger in your car?

This is a moral/ethical dilemma that was once actually used as part of a job application.

You could pick up the elderly woman because she is going to die and thus, you should save her first; or you could take the friend because he once saved your life and this would be the perfect chance to pay him back. However, you may never be able to find your perfect dream lover again.

What would you do?

The candidate who was hired (out of 200 applicants) had no trouble coming up with his answer.

(Before you read the answer, once again think about what you would do.)

What did the candidate say? “I would give my car keys to my old friend and let him take the elderly woman to the hospital. I would stay behind and wait for the bus with the man/woman of my dreams.”

Sometimes we gain more if we are able to think “outside of the box.”

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The metaphor of thinking “outside of the box” overlaps with the concept of “changing negative scripts” that I have described in several of my website articles and

that Dr. Sam Goldstein and I have illustrated in our book “Raising Resilient Children.” All too often we become stuck in a particular way of thinking or behaving even when these thoughts and behaviors prove self-defeating or counterproductive. Or, as I have frequently witnessed in my clinical practice and consultations, we may fall prey to a “naysayer’s script” and quickly dismiss a novel idea even before it is fully reflected upon. Simply stated, the naysayer’s script reads “It won’t work.” The naysayer is correct in predicting “It won’t work” but only if one remains shackled to existing ways of perceiving problems and solutions. It may work if one has the insight and courage to say, “There may be other ways of solving the problem but I will never discover them if I keep dismissing them.”

In his book “A Whack on the Side of the Head,” Roger Von Oech advocates “reversing your perspective” as an effective technique for expanding your thinking. He provides the following example:

“For many years, 19th century English physician Edward Jenner worked to find a cure for small pox. After studying many cases, he reached an impasse in his thinking. Then he reversed his perception of the problem. Instead of focusing on people who had small pox, he switched his attention to people who never had small pox. He found that dairy maids rarely got the disease. It turned out that most dairy maids had had cow pox, a similar but usually nonfatal affliction. Cow pox had served to ‘vaccinate’ its victims against the more dangerous small pox. This led to Jenner’s concept of ‘vaccinating’ people.”

To capture the importance of assuming a new perspective, Von Oech offers a wonderful quote by innovator Andrew Mercer.

“You can’t see the good ideas behind you by looking twice as hard at what’s in front of you.”

Another illustration of stepping outside the box and adopting a new script was described in an e-mail I received last year from a mother who had attended one of my presentations. In my talk, while discussing the topic of discipline, I had raised the question, “How do you respond when your child spills a glass of water or milk?” I frequently use this question as a catalyst to encourage parents to reflect upon the purpose of discipline and on their disciplinary practices. This mother provided a poignant

example of the positive results of taking a different perspective and changing the script. She wrote:

“A benefit of your lecture was the question of spilled milk and how it was handled. On Saturday my son had an accident in our driveway involving not one but two of our vehicles! When he came in very up upset my first reaction would have been to say, ‘How bad is the damage?’ After your lecture I was able to say with little effort, ‘You are my most prized creation, not the cars. Let’s go look together and figure out how to tell your dad.’ He immediately hugged me and said thanks for loving me even when I’m stupid. Talk about breaking my heart.”

While I believe that stepping outside the box and viewing situations and problems from a new perspective is an essential feature of emotional and physical well-being, many people experience it as a Herculean task. For some, it appears to be the equivalent of climbing Mt. Everest. A number of obstacles stand in the way of considering and adopting a new script. I would like to highlight two closely related roadblocks with the hope that the more aware we are of these obstacles, the better equipped we will be to overcome them.

The first is the belief that one lacks the creativity to think from a different perspective. For instance, during one of my workshops audience members were engaged in describing examples in which they had journeyed outside the box and changed ineffective scripts in their lives. The mood of the group was very upbeat. One of the participants, listening to these success stories, sadly said, “I’m just not creative enough to come up with new scripts. I could never come up with some of the solutions I’ve just heard.” Unfortunately, I have heard this refrain from many people.

I know that each of us thinks and learns differently. I know that the particular learning style possessed by some individuals lends itself to thinking more easily of alternative scripts and solutions than the learning style of others. However, I believe that all of us have the capacity to think creatively. When one labels oneself a “noncreative” person, a self-fulfilling prophecy is set in motion, often prompting a person to retreat from considering even small changes in one’s script. It is for this reason that I suggest that people not attempt to make major alterations in their behavior all at once but rather to take small steps. Each successful small step serves as a reinforcer for taking the next

step. Success breeds success. Remember, a creative step need not be measured by its length.

We can nurture a thinking outside of the box, problem-solving perspective in our children. Parents and teachers can model thinking in a novel way when faced with challenges. Adults can also involve children in the task of considering different options to solve problems. For instance, in reading a story we can wonder with our children what would have happened if a character in the story took a different path or what other paths might have been available. There are countless opportunities for parents and teachers to develop in children the skills that are necessary to assume different perspectives that permit a richer view of the world.

The second obstacle to moving outside the box occurs when one assigns responsibility for making changes to other people rather than focusing on what is within one's own control to change. This obstacle is related to the first since it often represents a way of coping when faced with the belief that one is not creative and one does not have the ability to change. Rather than experiencing the pain of seeing oneself in this negative light, it is easier to cast blame for a problem on others and assume that for the situation to improve, these others must modify their behavior. I have frequently observed this mindset in my clinical work, especially with individuals who feel helpless about altering a situation. Von Oech offers a vivid example of this self-defeating pattern of thinking. He writes:

“Several years ago I did a seminar with the direct sales force of a large pharmaceutical company. Prior to the session, I had the opportunity to talk to the people in the bottom 25% of sales performance. I asked them, ‘Why aren’t you more successful?’ They answered with such comments as:

‘Our products cost too much.’

‘I’ve got a crummy territory.’

‘I don’t get along with my manager.’

‘The moon is in Sagittarius.’

What was their problem? They weren’t taking responsibility for their own performance. They spent their time creating excuses rather than thinking of innovative sales solutions.”

Von Oech contrasted this more negative perspective with that of the mindset of successful salespeople. He noted that the latter group said, “If I get turned down by a physician or a nurse, I think of a second way to get the business, a third way, and sometimes a fifth way.”

If we find ourselves caught in a negative trap, I believe it is essential that we not resign ourselves to this condition. Rather we must have the courage to think and act differently, to move outside the box, to pursue new paths. While the first new path we take may not lead to success, who is to say that a third or fourth path will not prove successful—certainly, the effective salespeople interviewed by Von Oech discovered that many paths must be kept in view if one is to be rewarded. Discovering and traversing these different paths is often very challenging but what will help in the journey is to consider the alternative of remaining on a path that goes around in circles, leading nowhere.

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