

The Irony of Paradox

It's ironic that the truth is often wound into a paradox, like: the less you try to make things happen, the more you accomplish; letting go gives you more control; when the situation is urgent, slowing down saves you time.

One of my favorite paradoxes is that when things aren't working, the counter-intuitive choice usually makes the most sense. This was artfully illustrated in a classic *Seinfeld* episode where perennial loser George Costanza decides to "do the opposite" of his first inclination. Instead of ordering his usual tuna on toast, he orders chicken salad on rye, which attracts the attention of a gorgeous blonde. They begin dating even though George admits to her that he's living with his parents. She gets him an interview with the New York Yankees, and he lands his dream job after yelling at George Steinbrenner.

"Doing the opposite" of what we've always done can reveal possibilities that we'd never thought of, and bring deeper issues to light. One company, facing a decline in sales, increased both the number of products it produced and the frequency of marketing messages it sent to customers. Several months later, it was discovered that large numbers of customers were opting out of the email, fax, and other marketing channels. Paradoxically, more marketing led to a shrinking pool of prospects.

While there were a number of other factors contributing to the sales losses, a few daring managers did suggest such counter-intuitive notions as developing fewer new products and devoting more energy to maximizing sales of existing, successful ones; sending fewer marketing messages to smaller groups of more tightly qualified prospects; and scaling back growth expectations within the current market, while looking for new ones to enter.

On an individual level, deciding to "do the opposite" can expand your creativity and effectiveness. Since many of my clients incorporate the Enneagram personality tool into their coaching, I routinely suggest challenges that specifically go against the patterns of their personality type. Here is a brief roundup of some development needs for each personality style, and ideas for testing the "false assumption" that underlies each.

- For Type One individuals, the development need is to accept people and things the way that they are, without feeling compelled to "fix" them according to personal standards of right and wrong. Try intentionally arguing an opponent's point of view when you notice yourself locked into rigid, black and white thinking.
- The development need for Type Two individuals is giving only what is truly required, without expecting a certain outcome. Often, when Twos feel compelled to offer assistance, it is an attempt to meet a need that *they* have, but are afraid to voice. When feeling very obliged to help, ask, "What do *I* want?"
- Type Three individuals challenge their Enneagram stress pattern when they allow their authentic selves to emerge. This means resisting the temptation to exaggerate one's abilities, contributions, and accomplishments in order to gain the admiration of others. Step back and let someone else lead a project and get the credit for its success.
- Fours need help in balancing their emotions. They have a tendency to believe that how they *feel* about a situation is the *reality* of the situation, and get swept away by euphoria or anguish.

Visualizing oneself as an impartial observer of an emotionally charged situation can help restore objectivity.

- For Fives, the challenge is to be generous with oneself and others, instead of hoarding and holding on to whatever is needed to live an independent life. Being munificent with one's time, attention, and knowledge, in addition to material resources like money, helps to break the habit of withdrawing and withholding.
- Trusting your inner knowing and ability to meet life's challenges is the hurdle for Sixes. Noticing patterns of second-guessing decisions, and projecting power onto authorities can reveal the anxiety that drives this personality style. Experiment with going with your gut on small matters to begin building self-confidence.
- When optimistic, fun-loving Sevens are in their personality stress pattern, energy is too focused on future happy experiences, at the expense of being present in the now. More and more activity typically indicates a high stress level for these individuals. Slow down, and be mindful and thorough in whatever you are doing right now.
- Behind the bravado of Eights is a tremendous vulnerability, and developing more compassion and understanding of others is usually a development need for people of this Enneagram style. Instead of operating on the principal that "might makes right," admit when you are wrong. Force yourself to find a compromise position that you and an opponent can both live with.
- Setting a personal agenda and taking action on it is the challenge for Nines. Note your readiness to merge with significant others or groups, or to engage in pleasant diversions like shopping, while critical decisions about your career path, business direction, etc. remain on the back burner. Practice stating a preference instead of going along with the wishes of others.

June's Coaching Challenge: Do the opposite. Become more aware of repeating patterns and situations that you experience, and your usual ways of responding to them (hint: our first inclination is usually to do more of what we know and what has worked in the past). Then, try a counter-intuitive approach. Keep the risk manageable at first by choosing a benign situation, or soliciting feedback from individuals you trust before implementing your ideas. The irony is that the more you "think differently," the more of a habit thoughtful and creative problem-solving will become.

*The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*¹ is filled with exercises to get you thinking about issues in a broader way. In "The Five Whys," for example, you state a recurring situation, and then ask, "Why is this happening?" Write down each answer you or your group come up with. Then, for each response, ask "why" five more times, and see what emerges as a cause.

¹ *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook, Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization*, © 1994, Peter M. Senge, Art Kleiner, Charlotte Roberts, Richard B. Ross, Bryan J. Smith

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