The Creative Problem Solver

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12 smart tools to solve any business challenge

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So he said, 'We promise to get you from A to B at the lowest possible price. And that's *all* we'll promise.' So he did away with huge swathes of comfort and service. They either disappeared completely, or they became options you paid extra for.

Which means no allocated seats, no meal, no movies, the seats don't recline and there are no pockets on the back of seats (to make cleaning and therefore turnaround times quicker). He's also allegedly suggested charging heavier customers more, charging customers to use the toilets and asking passengers to carry their own checked-in luggage to the plane, to cut costs (and therefore prices) further.

And, as I say, it's worked tremendously well. That laser-sharp focus on 'how can we make the price lower – because that's the only thing that matters' has brought Ryanair huge success and great profits. Because Michael O'Leary didn't think the way other airline chiefs did.

'The only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about'

It's also interesting to go back to the criticism O'Leary and Ryanair have received for their practices: the airline has had, it might be said, a fair few unhappy customers. And that would normally be a no-no: most companies would go out of their way to avoid unhappy, complaining, critical customers – especially in the social media age when people are straight onto TripAdvisor or Twitter or Facebook to publicise their displeasure.

In fact, O'Leary has said, 'Short of committing murder, negative publicity sells more seats than positive publicity. Negative publicity generates so much more free publicity that it sells more tickets.'

People may groan and grumble, but when they go online to book their flight . . . many choose the cheapest carrier they can find, so they've got more money for their actual holiday.

An example of phenomenal growth by someone who dared to *think like another*. And in fact Michael O'Leary is someone you can have on your list of people to try and think like, aping his approach of 'This one thing matters and absolutely nothing else. In fact, anything that hinders that one thing or reduces its potential has to go.'

In his case, that one thing was 'the lowest possible price'. For you, it can be whatever you want it to be.

Summary

Think like another is a useful tool for getting your group engaged; for that reason it can be one to try early on. Often it's fun role playing at being a celebrity or a favourite brand or a child, and it will get people enthused and interacting. It's also good for both problem solving and opportunity seizing.

And it's a useful tool when your group involves people who are, shall we say, 'set in their ways' and who always approach things in the same way. This tool gives them a 'safe' way to think differently, because for once they're *not* being themselves. They're not, in that moment, even being people who work at that company.

That also makes the tool effective when the brainstorming group involves people who you suspect might be part of the problem, due to their rigid thinking. Giving them 'permission' to not be themselves with their already-established view can work wonders.

Think like a child is particularly suited to problems where people are weighed down by complexity and intangibles and esoteric issues. Children don't bother with those things, so it sweeps them away at a stroke – often revealing that they were meaningless barriers, not real issues at all.

Finally, to use *think like another* successfully, ask:

- Is the mood of the group a little flat, and so likely to benefit from early use of *think like another*, one of the more 'fun' tools in our thinking kit?

- What brand or celebrity has a trait we think could be useful here?

- In discussion, what brand or celebrity seems to get the group fired up?

- Are we spending enough time using props and media to start feeling like another brand/celebrity or a child, so we're in a different frame of mind *before* we start tackling the problem/opportunity?

- But are we remembering to focus on utilising the trait they have, rather than getting carried away trying to faithfully imitate that person?

iii.
Be contrary

'If we all worked on the assumption that what is accepted as true is really true, there would be little hope of advance.' ORVILLE WRIGHT

Assumptions. Habits. Conventions. Routines.

All anathema to new thinking.

We fall into patterns of doing – and thinking – and miss out on finding a better way. In other words, just because it ain't broke, doesn't mean you can't fix it anyway.

Because when it comes to solving a problem – or capitalising on an opportunity or developing an innovation – there'll be lots of assumptions everyone involved will make, and a great many conventions you'll observe. So let's challenge those conventions. Let's be deliberately contrary and say 'Why does it have to be done that way?'

It's like that idea of travelling to work a different way every day. You travel the same way each day and your brain turns off. Take a new route and you might notice something different which might get your brain thinking. By challenging the conventional route you take, who knows what magic could happen?

Visual

Challenge conventions and remove the barriers from your thinking and suddenly many more new possibilities are opened up.
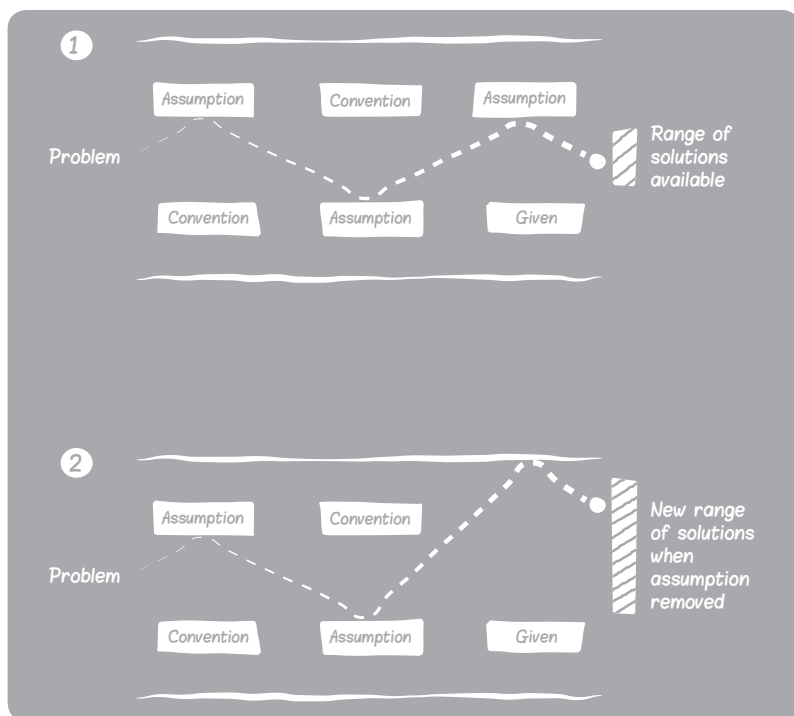
Theory

Be contrary is a direct response to some of the things we looked at in Part I to do with the way the brain works. To survive an absurdly complicated world, we create patterns and follow routines. If we had to consciously weigh up the pros and cons of every decision and consider every alternative – well, we'd be paralysed with indecision. And clinically insane.

So most of the time, conventions are useful. But not always when it comes to problem solving. For instance, in 2005 Microsoft released the Xbox 360 and in 2006 Sony released the Playstation 3. And what did they focus and compete on? Power. How many polygons they could draw at what frame rate. It had become the convention: a games console had to use the latest chips and have

the maximum memory possible. And all the hype and marketing was around their specs. It's baffling to look back and recall how they really did use to talk about polygons.

And then . . . along came the Nintendo Wii. It didn't compete on power. It challenged the convention that 'faster is better'. It dared to be contrary, deliberately releasing a cheaper, more accessible console that was less powerful . . . but which focused on being fun, with imaginative games and innovative controls.

And as a strategy, being contrary worked. Microsoft sold around 77 million Xbox 360s. Sony around 75 million PS3s. While Nintendo has sold over 100 million Wiis – and apparently earns more profit on the sale of its console than either Microsoft or Sony do on their more expensive devices.

So the theory is that by looking at our assumptions and conventions and challenging them, we can free ourselves up to develop radically different answers. Reframe the problem by changing the way you allow yourself to tackle it.

You just have to pause and take a step back to question every element in turn – and you might be surprised how many assumptions are made on every project you're involved with.

Action

BE CONTRARY TOOLKIT

1. Before looking at the problem, look at the assumptions and conventions around the problem.

2. Now dare to be contrary – take the stance that it doesn't have to be like that; you could do things differently; you could ignore those conventions and start with a clean slate.

3. Notice how changing the rules of the game reframes the way the problem can be tackled – and frees you up to come up with exciting, groundbreaking new solutions.

If *think bigger* is, to some extent, about looking at the problem and saying, 'Why is that a problem?', then *be contrary* is about saying, 'Why does the problem have to be tackled like that? What would we do if we didn't have to do it that way?'

For instance, a car company has created a great new advertising campaign. But the legal and compliance department won't sign it off – they think it's ambiguous and could fall foul of the Advertising Standards Authority.

So the company has a problem to solve – amending the campaign to get through legal while still being great advertising.

PROBLEM-SOLVING TIP

Ignore logic. Our internal logic gets things wrong all the time – but we rarely challenge it. We make an instant appraisal and think, 'Oh, that's obvious, of course that's the case'. But amazing breakthroughs have been made by people who tried something that seemed to defy logic and confound the obvious.

A trivial example perhaps, but a supermarket was offering jam tasting to try to increase sales. They found that offering a choice of 24 jams got more people tasting them than when they just offered six. Seems obvious perhaps: more choice, more people interested. Yet interestingly … fewer sales. Logic would suggest that if you're getting more people trying the jam, you'll get more sales too. But actually, while they got fewer 'leads' (tasters) with just six jam choices, they got a much higher conversion rate (buyers). And more sales overall. So try ignoring what seems 'logical' and 'obvious' once in a while. You might be surprised by the results.

But wait: we've made an assumption straight away. That the advertising has to be signed off by the legal and compliance department. What if the business was contrary, and took the decision to ignore the legal beagles, and run the campaign as it stands? Sure, they might get into trouble. But maybe they