

The guru, the magician and the Ping Pong Player

Submitted by Kellie Mundell on Fri, 2015-11-27 14:50

Here is a photo of Edward De Bono — the lateral thinking guru. He's thinking. Quite possibly sideways! The magician Derren Brown has a card trick that illustrates exactly why lateral thinking is so important, as it shows how we are hot wired to seek evidence to support what we already think (known as confirmation bias). This is vital as it's when we challenge our beliefs or are open to them being challenged that we progress most rapidly as people and collectively as organisations.



In a fascinating new book, *Black Box Thinking*, the former table tennis champion (now esteemed writer) Matthew Syed suggests that as a species we progress most rapidly when learning from failures and critical thinking is maximised and defensive rationalisations minimised.

A classic historical example would be Galileo. When he suggested that the earth revolved around the sun and not the other way around, it went down badly. When he protested “but if you’ll just look through my telescope I can prove it beyond doubt” the powers that be declined the learning opportunity and placed him under house arrest for the rest of his life.

The card trick Derren Brown uses is to try and set people up to learn from a simple failure. To

do this he lays out four cards on a table and explains that each card has either the letter A or the letter D on one side and either the numbers 3 or 7 on the other. (Just to be clear — it can be confusing — cards A and D have either 3 or 7 on the reverse and the cards 3 and 7 have either A or D on their reverse).

A D 3 7

He explains that the rule is that if there is an A on one side then there will be a 3 on the other and the challenge is how many cards do you need to turn over to see if that's true or not? And, crucially, which cards? Under time pressure most people will go for two ... please have a go before reading on!

There's a very strong likelihood you first went for A ("better make sure there is a 3 on the back!") and then for 3 ("and I'll just double check that").

The actual answer is A and 7. Obviously we can ignore D but we do need to turn over A as if there isn't a 3 on the back the rule is disproved. However, whether there is an A or a D on the back of the 3 tells us nothing. It doesn't double check anything about a rule that says "if A then also 3" as rules like "if D then 3" or "if D then 3 or 7 or a duck" could also be true. However, if we turn over the 7 and find an A on the other side then it disproves the rule.

To paraphrase a famous book about **unlikely but devastating incidents** [1], if I see a million white swans it does not prove that all swans are white but if I see just one black swan it's proof positive that not all swans are white.



Using this principle of course means that we must fight away from confirmation bias by always critically challenging assumptions, especially our own. Similarly, when going into a debate or negotiation it's a good idea to not just think of my strengths and your weaknesses (that comes naturally) but to force yourself to think also of my weaknesses and your strengths.

Challenge: If De Bono, Brown and Syed form a three man audit team, how impressed would they be with your organisation's lateral and critical thinking ability?

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