

Planning for Serendipity

Frank Barrett isn't the first writer to compare good leadership with the flexible mindset of a jazz musician. But the lessons he enumerates in *Yes to the Mess* (Harvard Business Review Press, hbr.org) add a great deal to the literature of improvisational leadership. This advice includes:

Approach leadership tasks as experiments.

Rather than over-relying on plans, constantly test your assumptions and approaches.

Provide people with minimal structure and maximal autonomy. Give them guidelines without weighing them down with fruitless rules.

Deliberately design for serendipity by breaking routines and giving people plenty of chances to come together in informal, unexpected ways – what Barrett calls “hanging out across boundaries.”

Master the art of unlearning. It's as important to unlearn old habits, routines, and strategies as to learn them in the first place.

Take turns leading and following. Give everyone a chance to do both on a regular basis. Reward people for being good followers as well as good leaders. And remember that true followership is an active, not a passive, activity. Good followers aren't sheep. They continue to think creatively while listening carefully and supporting others as they experiment and explore new ideas.

Are you leading in the most creative way possible? Ask yourself the following questions to determine if you're kindling an improvisation-rich culture – one in which people are led naturally to self-discovery.

QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS


Where in your organization are the open times and places that allow for fruitful conversations and serendipitous exchanges?

How are you making it safe for interpersonal risk-taking?

When is the last time you praised someone who disagreed with you, demonstrating to others that alternative perspectives are valuable?

Should you be sponsoring open forums for people to discuss ideas freely and analyze nascent ideas? What else could you do to foster informal, in-house learning?


How are people in your organization “playing it safe” by repeating what has worked in the past?

Can you imagine an incremental disruption that might dislodge people's habits and demand that they respond in new ways? 

The Individual versus the Community: Finding the Balance

People and societies thrive when each person is valued within an environment of interconnectedness. Too much emphasis on individuality can result in self-absorbed greed; too much emphasis on community can lead to conformity and oppression.

In *Commonwealth and Covenant* (published by Eerdmans, eerdmans.com), Marcia Pally shows us the one-dimensionality of the Western Christian immersion into religion via the individual. She also takes a look at more relational communities that show the effects of too little emphasis on individual uniqueness. Reconciling the two, she argues, is the key to a meaningful life.

Her book is a lesson for nonprofit organizations about the importance of balance — of the value of each person and each organization *amid* networks. That she considers this from a religious perspective doesn't diminish the book's significance for the nonprofit sector. After all, nonprofit values have deep roots in religious beliefs, and religion is deeply embedded in civil society. If religion is considered one way to seek balance between the individual and the community, then this book offers important guidelines and support for doing so, for both individuals and organizations. 

—reviewed by Terrence Fernsler

How to Be Unreasonable

Reasonable people will tell you all the reasons you can't and shouldn't try something new and unproven. Instead of listening to them, you need to embrace the power of unreasonable thinking. Here are some unreasonable principles to propel you forward (from *The Art of Being Unreasonable: Lessons in Unconventional Thinking* by Eli Broad, published by Wiley, wiley.com):


“Why not?” is the first step to success. Ask it throughout the day, as part of your routine thinking. You'll find dozens of ways to improve the status quo.

Clinging to safety is more irrational than taking risks. When you're thinking of undertaking something risky, ask yourself two questions: What do I have to lose? And what's the worst that can happen? Your answers will clarify the potential cost of a risk you shouldn't take — and help you move forward when doing so is worth it.

Unreasonable persistence produces big payoffs. Be willing to keep trying, even in the face of pushback, if something is truly important to you.

Just because there's a winner doesn't mean there's a loser. Always seek ways to collaborate and reach win-win conclusions.


Disagreement is healthy. Learn how to distinguish it from dissent.

Whether you succeed or fail, keep moving. If you miss a goal, figure out why, and move on. And if you meet your goal, use what you've learned and quickly take on a new challenge. 

Seeing the Best Fundraisers in Action

Successful fundraisers come with all sorts of characteristics. They can be professional staff or volunteers, well trained or novice. Jerold Panas has seen them all in his decades of advising nonprofits on major gift fundraising. In *The Fundraiser's Measuring Stick* (Emerson & Church, emersonandchurch.com), he highlights some of the best through vignettes demonstrating their success. Panas argues that they share some fundamental attributes.

Foremost, successful fundraisers advocate for what they're passionate about. They have a vision about what their organizations can achieve. They want others to share in that vision. To include others means listening to them, learning their interests, and understanding their reasons for giving. The successful fundraiser's commitment is deep enough to work for the long haul, persistently cultivating relationships with supporters.


Panas shares his insights regarding successful fundraisers so that you can learn to measure up to them. Major gift acquisition is his area of expertise, and it shines through in this book. The attributes, attitudes, and abilities he highlights are valuable to becoming successful cultivators. He insists these skills and knowledge can be learned. If you're passionate enough about a cause, you'll find a way to practice the necessary skills so that you'll become a fundraising measuring stick for others. 

—reviewed by Terrence Fernsler

Don't Recruit: Create a Succession Plan Instead

Recruiting is broken. It's become an outdated, misused, and costly model, according to management consultant Michael Timms. The future, he says, is succession planning.

In *Succession Planning that Works* (availeadership.com), he presents examples, tools, and an evidence-based approach to create a formula for succession planning that makes sense. Succession planning means much more than a CEO selecting a successor, explains Timms. Succession planning involves carefully selecting and preparing the right people to fill key roles when vacancies arise throughout the organization. When the right people are prepared in advance, organizations save a tremendous amount of time and resources.

The book contends that succession planning is the answer to the greatest talent management predicament of the 21st century: How will organizations fill the void left by the baby boomers? It provides a clarion call to organizations that aren't currently developing a plan to deal with the increase in retirements and offers a roadmap for any organization that wants staying-power and a more potent workforce. 



Obstacles Welcome


When you can't know the future with much certainty, your usual reasoning and forecasting tools aren't of much use. That's the premise behind the fascinating book *Just Start* by Leonard A. Schlesinger, Charles F. Kiefer, and Paul B. Brown (Harvard Business Review Press, hbr.org).

Instead of trying to use predictive methods, the authors recommend a practice they call creaction – acting and creating rather than thinking and analyzing. Thinking is often a part of creating, they explain, but without action, nothing is created.

How does creaction play out in practice? How can it help you deal with uncertainty? The process has three parts:

- 1. Identify** what you want.
- 2. Take a smart step** as quickly as you can. When you take a smart step, you use the means at hand – who you know, what you know, and any other resources available. You make sure you're not risking anything more than what you're willing to lose (in terms of time, money, reputation, and so on). And you bring others along to help you acquire more resources, spread the risk, and confirm the quality of your idea.
- 3. Build on** what you learned from taking that step. Whenever you act, reality changes. Each time you move forward, you can learn something. Ask yourself: Did your action get you closer to your goal? Do you need additional resources to draw even closer? Do you still want to obtain your objective? Pay close attention and you'll learn something. Then it's time to act again.

If you're surprised by what you learn, that's a good thing. You acted and got evidence, which puts you ahead of those who are still just sitting, thinking, and predicting. You already have some answers, which you can put to use as you take the next step, which is to start all over.

The heart of creaction is to turn the unexpected to your advantage. Treat each difficulty as a gift. Embrace each problem you face. Turn it into an asset – something that gives you more information and resources to draw on. Whatever happens, tell yourself, "This is good news!" And then try to make it so. 

Resolving Wicked Problems

Progress on tough issues like poverty, income inequity, and climate change is slow and often seems at a standstill. Is change even possible?

Yes, if we leverage power within the disenfranchised, use our resources to be more thoughtful about change, and see every action as an opportunity to learn. These are the principles behind resources published by the United Kingdom's Barefoot Guide Alliance (practicalactionpublishing.org). This transnational alliance brings together leaders in social change to share their experiences and help nonprofits learn effective practices.


For example, although there is much academic literature about the importance of learning organizations in accomplishing change, there are few practical guides for developing a culture of learning. That's why the Alliance put together *The Barefoot Guide 2: Learning Practices in Organizations and Social Change*. This book explains how to develop relationships among diverse types of learners, which helps us unlearn old assumptions and adopt new, more useful behaviors.

Another guide, *The Barefoot Guide 4: The Real Work of Social Change*, explores how organizations learn through reflection and how success in one place can inform other communities. The writers start by explaining the value of history: Knowing how we got to where we are can help us learn how to get where we want to go.

Poor People's Energy Outlook focuses on the energy poor – the over one billion people who have no access to electricity. This guide examines the needs of those without access and shares implications for energy planning that social change organizations need to understand. Being inclusive in planning for the most disenfranchised proves more useful than current top-down methods, as these findings show. This book demonstrates how participatory action creates new models and reframes solutions, such as bottom-up planning and decentralization – valuable lessons for all organizations that intend to reach the most excluded people.

Organizations help us accomplish things we cannot do alone when facing intractable problems and vital social decisions. Organizing especially makes a difference for those living in poverty or denied basic rights, as a fourth Barefoot guide, *The Role of Organizations in Social Change*, makes clear. Today, eight people have as much wealth as the poorest 50% of the world's people. Such inequities insure that elites will win contests because they define the contests. Instead of competing against elites, communities must learn new ways of thinking and create spaces for alternatives.

Transformation begins by asking the right questions, which arise from community needs and wants, not the desires of elites. Organizations are complex systems, and often “messy.” People working to build capacity within them must learn that coaching is more effective than top-down consultation. Innovative opportunities open up when community members share their skills.

These four guides (and others at barefootguide.org) offer a wealth of tools to sustain organizational learning. The lessons come from experienced practitioners, who provide plenty of solid examples to help transform organizations into effective social change agents. 

–reviewed by Terence Fernsler

Understand People's Brains in Order to Persuade Them

The groundbreaking discoveries neuroscientists have been making about the brain make it clear why a reasoned argument can be a waste of time. To be successful persuaders, we need to appeal to the brain's automatic, nonconscious mental system that acts without deliberate thinking.

Armed with those insights, *Seven Secrets of Persuasion: Leading-Edge Neuromarketing Techniques to Influence Anyone* (Career Press, careerpress.com) offers a wealth of helpful advice:

Aim at the act, not the attitude. Changing someone's attitude shouldn't be your key objective. The real goal is to change behavior – to get someone to act differently. Start by gaining the commitment of your target audience. Once you have their commitment, behavior change will come more readily. One experimenter asked half of participants to put small signs saying “Be a Safe Driver” in their windows. Later, the experimenter asked all the participants to put large signs on their lawns. Those with small signs in their windows were three times more likely to comply with the second request.

Don't change desires, fulfill them. Successful persuasion shows people a more promising way to get what they already want. Talking about what they don't want makes what you say about what they do want less persuasive. So talk only about what they want, and show them how to get it.

Unearth the motivation that changes a behavior such as smoking, voting, buying, or donating money, even though people don't know why they do what they do.

Make a promise more compelling by making it immediate, certain, and emotional.

Create experience with expectation. People see what they expect to see. Creating the expectation can change their perceptions.

Note that communication may not be the best way to change people's behavior. Changing the situation will often be more effective in getting your target to act differently. 