

# Seven Ways To Be Unreasonable

Here's how to get results beyond your wildest dreams.

BY PAUL LEMBERG

**R**easonable people, to paraphrase George Bernard Shaw, adapt themselves to the world; unreasonable ones persist in trying to adapt the world to themselves. Therefore, all progress depends on unreasonable people.

The very idea of “being reasonable” prescribes something restrictive. It exhorts us to remain “within the box,” to do what sensible people would do: not to over-commit ourselves, to be cautious, to avoid risks, to hold our trump cards.

What is the alternative? To be unreasonable, of course. Here are seven applications of being unreasonable.

## 1 Think beyond what's normal, proper, and appropriate.

Typically, one of the first things prospective clients say to me is, “But you're not from our industry. How can you understand our problems, much less provide solutions?” My response: “The last thing you need is someone from your industry advising you. You already have plenty of people thinking similar and over-used ideas.” What you need is thinking un-bounded by the traditional logic of your industry—ideas that can bring an un-reasoning perspective.

Remove the excuse option.

## 2 Eliminate the reasons why.

There are reasons why people do things a certain way. Challenge those reasons, and ask, “What if we did it this other way? What would happen then? What would work better? What would really rock you?”

## 3 Get rid of the reasons why not.

When people in your organization don't produce the desired results—results to which they've committed themselves—they usually have reasons why not. They act as if those reasons are almost as good as the results. They say, “Well, it didn't work, but here's why not,” or “We didn't get it done, because...” Or, worse still, “We didn't even try because...”

Remove the excuse option. Your whole organization will shift once people know that they can't make excuses—that all they can do is produce the desired result or try another way to get the desired result, or try again in yet another way until they get the desired result.

## 4 Set unreasonable expectations.

Ask people to reach farther than they think is reasonable or normal. Ask them to go beyond cautious commitments that hedge their bets. Let them make risky pronouncements that exhilarate them but might threaten the natural order of things.

Place giant stakes in the ground; then ask people to turn those unreasonable expectations into reality. This strategy will dramatically increase effectiveness and productivity. Why should you settle—why should your clients settle—for what is reasonable and predictable? Why accept the norm, the average, the median? Apply unreasonable thinking. Set unreasonable expectations. Then reward people when they deliver.

## 5 Make unreasonable requests.

This approach will aid every executive when working with vendors and employees. Keep asking for more, better, sooner. Up the ante. Ask people to perform beyond their best.

This is not a negotiating tactic. It is not “nibbling.” It is asking people to perform beyond their own sense of what is reasonable. Sometimes people will fail to meet these unreasonable commitments; don’t beat them up for it. Sometimes you’ll get stellar results you wouldn’t have dreamed of previously.

## 6 Devise unreasonable plans.

Does this sound like an oxymoron? Most nonprofit organizations plan to achieve reasonable results relative to past successes and failures or, even worse, relative to questionable nonprofit lore. Instead, begin with a more profound question: What would make a really big difference? What would cause a breakthrough for the organization? What would dramatically improve your clients’ lives? What would be “worth doing”? The answers may not be reasonable; they may instead take you down a path toward huge success.

## 7 Forecast unreasonable futures.

Most nonprofit organizations forecast their results—revenues, growth rates, and so on—based on prior years’ results. They call this reasonable. Similarly, they assume nonprofit norms and consider them reasonable. But in the twenty-first century, driven by the incredible rate of change in all aspects of our culture, our sector, our workforce, available technology—to think that anything dating from last year remains the same in this one—that’s unreasonable.

A better approach is to bring together everything you know about the situation to date. Take all factors, internal and external, into account, and add all the future changes you can imagine. Then, use those results to forecast unreasonable results and make unreasonable plans.

## What’s next?

So, what to do? Should you give up all pretense of rationality and logic? Should you step outside the norms and ignore the accumulated wisdom of the nonprofit world? “That would be great if it works out,” you say, “but if it doesn’t, my job is on the line.” Right? Well, yes, but...

Unreasonable thinking doesn’t mean un-thinking. Unreasonable thinking is about exploring. Pushing the envelope. Cross pollinating. Intuitive inventing. It may be that the line separating unreasonable ideas from ridiculous ideas lies where thinking is left behind. Or perhaps the line lies only in hindsight.

The fear of failing, the fear of jeopardizing your future, is the biggest obstacle to creating great results. The only way to create breakthrough results is to take the road less traveled—to create ideas and programs that are unreasonable—and go for it. If you fail people will—with perfect hindsight—call your idea ridiculous. But if you succeed. . .wow! ■

### Resources

- Eadie, Douglas, “Master Change, Or Change Will Master You,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 14, No. 4.
- Lemberg, Paul, “What Not to Do, and How Not to Do It,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 19, No. 6.
- Lemberg, Paul, “Why Predict the Future?”, *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 19, No. 3.
- McKay, Shona, “Building Morale: The Key to Successful Change,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 13, No. 3.
- Muehrcke, Jill, ed., *Management and Planning, Leadership Series*.
- Rosenberg, DeAnne, “Eliminating Resistance to Change: The Magic Formula,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 10, No. 5.

These resources are available from the Society’s Resource Center, [www.snpo.org](http://www.snpo.org)

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*Paul Lemberg is the author of Faster than the Speed of Change. To download excerpts from the book, send an e-mail to [bookexrp@lemberg.com](mailto:bookexrp@lemberg.com). To buy a copy, go to [www.fasterthanthespeedofchange.com](http://www.fasterthanthespeedofchange.com). To find out more about Lemberg’s Growth Strategy and Executive Coaching Programs, call 760-741-1747, e-mail [paul@lemberg.com](mailto:paul@lemberg.com), or visit [www.lemberg.com](http://www.lemberg.com).*

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