

1 VICTIM, NEUTRALIZER, & TRANSFORMER

Our starting relationship with constraints

THIS CHAPTER FOCUSES ON:

1. How can we best assess our own starting relationship with constraints?
2. What are the keys to moving to a very different kind of relationship with constraints, one that would make us more able to take advantage of them?
3. What can a broader group of us learn from people who see constraints as inherently beneficial?

Constraint and ambition

Imagine you could develop a new system that enabled your business to use 50 percent less of your most precious resource, while at the same time driving 20 percent growth. Not a promise of future growth, but immediate growth. What would that be worth to you?

To increase output by double digits while halving inputs in one year—even in today's efficiency-obsessed economy—this, surely, is almost impossible. If a team had found a way to achieve it, we would know about it; they would be on the cover of every business magazine.

And yet, somehow, they are not.

But while modern drip irrigation may so far have failed to set the dinner tables of the Twitterati alight (you are welcome to try it this evening), it remains a remarkable and ongoing story of growth in the face of constraints.

Until the mid-1960s, the Kibbutz Hatzetim eked out a living farming in the Negev desert of Southern Israel (Negev is the Hebrew word for dry). Though committed to farming, they realized that to thrive they would need to bolster their fragile existence with a business alongside their agriculture. Determined to find an industry that leveraged their expertise as farmers, they partnered with an engineer, Simcha Blass, to build and sell a new kind of irrigation system. Years earlier, Blass had noticed a line of trees, all planted at the same time, in which one tree stood considerably taller and fuller than the rest. Investigating, he discovered a small leak in a pipe that dripped constantly near the roots of the tree. Experiments led him to realize that drip irrigation, giving as it could just enough water at regular intervals, was both superior in growth effects to flood and even sprinkler irrigation, and vastly more efficient in water consumption. But it wasn't till plastic tubing became commercially available that he and the farmers of Hatzetim were able to commercialize his insight.

During initial trials of the dripperlines, their new plastic piping system, on Hatzetim's own crops, water use fell by 50 percent, while yields of peaches, pears, and apricots improved so dramatically that some of the kibbutz argued excitedly that they should keep the technology a secret, and just use it for themselves; many of them still, after all, simply thought of themselves as farmers. But there was a greater ambition at play—it was clear that this was an opportunity to launch a new industry, with much



bigger benefits for the kibbutz than simply boosting their own crop. The joint venture between Blass and the kibbutz was called Netafim.

Netafim is now an \$800 million company. Its success has been driven by the tension between ambition and constraint, above and beyond the initial need to grow crops in a desert. The company's growth put a strain on the resources of the kibbutz, who refused to compromise on one of their founding principles: that they wouldn't use hired help. So with only fourteen full time people assigned to work in the factory where they manufactured their drip systems, the only way to handle Netafim's growth and simultaneously maintain their principles was for everyone in the kibbutz to put in one shift a week on the production line, in addition to their other jobs. This in turn meant that everyone in the kibbutz became more connected to, and knowledgeable about, this new initiative that would be so critical to their future.

The new drip irrigation system boosted the kibbutz's (and the country's) fruit and vegetable production so much that they could begin exporting. But political tensions in the region meant that their neighboring countries wouldn't buy from them—a constraint requiring them to develop and grow fruits and vegetables with longer shelf lives, for export to Europe. And, finally, the challenges of clogging within the drippers forced a continuous quest for superior pressure-compensation and self-cleaning technology within the dripperlines themselves; what may look like a hosepipe with holes is a deceptively brilliant piece of engineering.

Netafim is now ambitious to have greater global impact. Their systems can contribute to food security in countries that must use less water but feed growing populations on finite arable land. They can help lift subsistence farmers out of poverty, and help solve gender issues: with drip irrigation, women in rural communities spend less time each day walking to collect water, and can spend that time instead developing new skills as well as being with their families.

Yet today only 5 percent of the world's irrigated fields use drip irrigation, in part because the system's initial cost is a barrier for the world's 500 million smallholder farmers. This tension between global ambitions and the constraint of price has driven the next stage of innovation for Netafim. Now they are aiming to produce cheaper systems, while developing programs with the Indian government to subsidize them with grants. Once they are able to demonstrate the impact of their systems, not just

on yields and water use, but on the wider community, they believe they will be able to open up many more new markets.

Keeping the ambition high in the face of a succession of constraints, it seems, has been at the heart of much of Netafim's fertility.¹

Stages or personalities?

Michael Bierut routinely deals with constraints, although lack of water has yet to be one of them. A partner at the design firm Pentagram, he is one of the world's most successful graphic designers, creating elegant, inventive solutions to challenging briefs for the *New York Times*, Saks Fifth Avenue, Disney, and The Clinton Foundation.

When we met with him, the importance of the relationship between ambition and constraint had already become clear. Those who refused to scale back ambition in the face of constraint, like Netafim, seemed to be the ones most likely to find a way to make the constraint beautiful, whereas those who reduced their ambition were more likely to find the constraint constricting.


For the first group, the ambition was the vital, even dominant, part of their mindset. While they might not always know how to make the constraint work to their advantage, they used the tension between the scale of the ambition and the nature of the constraint to fuel the search. They had to make it work.

For the less ambitious, the opposite was the case; the constraint was the dominant dynamic. They looked to reduce the tension between the ambition and the constraint by trimming their ambition in line with the severity of the constraint. The constraint was allowed to limit them.

Our hypothesis at the time was that there were three kinds of people:

1. **Victim:** Someone who lowers their ambition when faced with a constraint.
2. **Neutralizer:** Someone who refuses to lower the ambition, but finds a different way to deliver the ambition instead.
3. **Transformer:** Someone who finds a way to use a constraint as an opportunity, possibly even increasing their ambition along the way.

But listening to us describe these different types, Bierut offered an alternative interpretation based on his own experience. He recognized, he said, all three types in himself; even



today, despite his track record, he still finds himself passing through each of those stages when facing a brief with tough constraints.

His reaction each time was initially as a victim, bristling at the constraint and at the person who had put it there; he noted the spark one could get from kicking against that a little. Then as he spent more time with the brief, he passed into the neutralizer stage (“Wait a minute—maybe there’s a way through this”); and finally, while exploring the possibilities, he moved into the transformative stage, where the ultimate solution lay. Indeed, making this journey was part of the energy of the problem-solving process for him.

These were not three kinds of people, then, but three stages that problem-solvers went through—even the most talented and experienced of them. And this was an important shift in our thinking: if we have a tendency to initially react one way to the imposition of a constraint, we need not see this as fixed and final. We all have the potential to move from victim to neutralizer to transformer. Bierut’s suggestion, which our experience in working with the model seems to confirm, is that most of us are already proficient neutralizers, even transformers in other parts of our lives (perhaps in a hobby, or sports, or making music); we just haven’t recognized that we can move through these stages in other areas of our lives, too.

Michael Bierut’s insight changed the question that drives the rest of this project. It takes the more optimistic view that some people are not inherently victims, for example, but are instead temporarily stuck in one stage, needing to find a way to progress to the next.

So the key questions then become “Why are we stuck in the stage where we are? And how do we progress beyond it?”

Progressing through the stages

One might argue that it is relatively easy for a creative professional such as Michael Bierut to proceed through the stages, armed as he is with experience, skills, methods, and a strong motivation to succeed. Once the victim mindset has released its temporary grip on him, he can address the situation more constructively.

But those of us not so used to finding the opportunity in constraints will need to be a little more rigorous in assessing our mindset, methods and motivations, all of which are important determinants of how well we will do in progressing through the stages.

Greater self-awareness yields valuable insights into where we might need the most help to progress from one stage to the next, and how best to use this book to get it.

So, think of a constraint-driven challenge of which you could be on the receiving end. Take an important and specific goal in your professional life: a revenue or share target, for instance; or the number of clients you need to add, throughput rates at the factory, and so on. Now impose a new constraint on that. Say you have to hit your target within six, not twelve months, or with half the budget, or a smaller team. The more real you can make this, the better.

A handful of questions can now help assess our mindset, method, and motivation with regard to that challenge.

Do we believe it is possible? (Mindset)

We will only be open to exploring ways to make a constraint transformative if we believe it is possible. Some of us will see this naturally, through experience or an optimistic outlook; others will be more cautious, and some even cynical about the possibility. Questions that will help us better understand where we are and how to progress include:

- Have I done something like this in the past?
- Is that a key part of the way I think about myself?
- Has my organization done something like this in the past? Is it a story we tell about ourselves?
- Do we celebrate people who do this? Do we value it?
- Am I aware of others making these kinds of breakthroughs in areas that I can identify with—inside or outside my own organization?

At the outset, there needs to be an honest assessment of what the dominant narrative is—either your own, or that of your organization. It may be that some surfacing or reframing of hidden stories is needed to raise the initial level of self-belief; believing we tend toward a victim mindset can easily become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Yet it is rare to find a situation without any evidence for transformation. When pressed, most people can find a time in their lives when they have responded as a transformer, and the history of any successful company will have moments of inventiveness that can be harnessed for ongoing inspiration and belief.

And the world is full of people like us transforming constraints. We need to look up and look around. They are not hard to find.

Do we know how to start to do it? (Method)

We can be open to the possibility of success, but not know how to get started, because this situation, this kind of challenge, may not yield to the methods we use for more conventional problem-solving. The emphasis is on “start” rather than “complete,” because we will not know how to answer the brief yet and will have to iterate our way to solutions. Questions to answer include:

- Do I understand how and why the usual ways of problem-solving may not work here, and may hold us back? (Chapter Two: Break Path Dependence, addresses this question.)
- Do I understand the best way to frame the challenge to be most productive? (Chapter Three: Ask Propelling Questions, answers this.)
- Do I understand how to best structure the search for solutions so we can maintain momentum in the face of such a difficult challenge? (We look at this in Chapter Four: Can-If.)

People and teams not accustomed to working with constraints will benefit from a shared sense of how to approach them, especially at the start. Chapters Three, Four, and Five introduce some of the tools that will make it easier to do this.

How much do I want to do it? (Motivation)

We can believe that it might be possible, and know how to start doing it, but if we aren't driven to do it, then progress is unlikely. To get to the transformer stage, we will need to put our hands up to answer questions we don't know how to answer, and persist on a journey that will be frustrating. We'll need to be highly motivated to do so. Questions to answer include:

- How do I feel about this challenge? Is it emotionally charged for me?
- Is it important enough to me that I am prepared to push through the challenges that will come? Or does the organization see it as more important than I do?

- How can I (or we) understand this challenge differently so we will want to push through all the barriers and obstacles that come our way?

These kinds of questions will inevitably engage us with the larger issues of the organization, if we work in one, and the issues of scarcity and abundance in the wide world in which we operate. What's our purpose and how connected to it are we? How connected is this project to our purpose? Is our organization succeeding or in crisis, and does that lend extra motivation to this assignment? Am I excited about the opportunity we are going after? And so on. Personal motivation is crucial to the transformation process, and that can be sourced from the larger narrative of the organization, as well as our own makeup.

Reflecting on the questions in each area, we can arrive at an assessment of where we are in terms of

mindset, method, and motivation. Figure 1 helps us to map our answers from low to high (illustrated as red crosses in the example below).

If we have a strong belief that the constraint can be made beautiful—say we have a strong team, with agile minds, that doesn't quit easily in the face of tough challenges—we would mark ourselves as high in that column. But if we then aren't sure how to get started, as we've never worked on something quite like this before, we'd mark ourselves as low in the second column. And if we have a reasonable degree of motivation to do this—we get why this is important, but are cautious about taking on something this hard, perhaps—we mark ourselves medium on the third question. So we are High/Low/Medium. HLM.

Get the members of the team to do it for themselves as individuals, and then for the group or organization as a whole. This will be a useful foundational understanding, both for beginning the

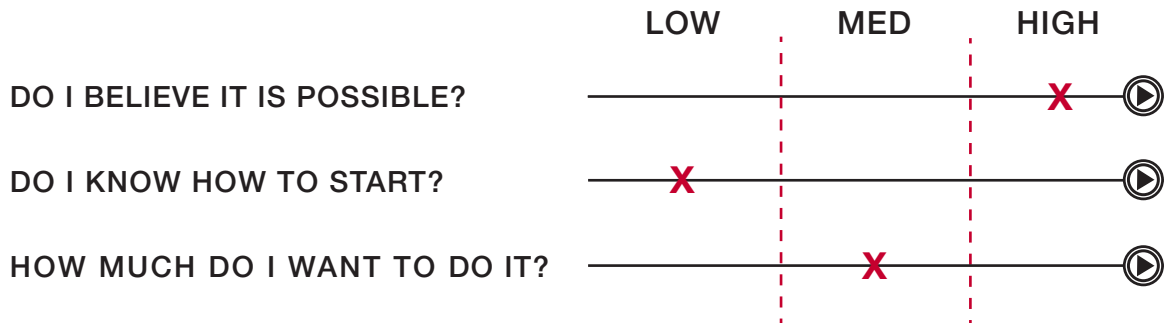



Figure 1: What is our starting point in terms of mindset, method, and motivation around transforming this constraint?



ABC approach—we'll be working as a team, after all—and also potentially outside the process (one client of ours has begun exploring it as a tool for professional development within their organization, for instance).

Simply scoring high on any one of these questions does not make us a transformer; we are only as strong as our weakest answer. If I am HLH, I am still at the victim stage; no matter how great my sense of possibility and my desire to make it happen. If I don't know how to start doing it, then I will not be able to find possibility and opportunity in the constraint. Moving from a victim to a transformer stage will only occur when we are HHH: with a high degree of belief, high degree of confidence in our own ability to lead the initial stages of a process, and high personal motivation to do so.

But is it possible, or even desirable, to create an environment that is high across mindset, method, and motivation all the time? Is that how cultures that repeatedly make constraints beautiful need to operate? And, if so, what can we learn from those who work this way about how they stay at that level?

We flew to Oregon to ask a man who would know.

A gift in Portland

Dan Wieden, the legendary and charismatic co-founder of the global communications company Wieden+Kennedy, describes a gift that his fledgling agency was given as it started out—a gift that precipitated the beginning of a thirty-year sequence of famous, even iconic creative ideas on Nike, their founding client, and made both of them famous.

The gift was a constraint: the complete denial of everything they already knew about how to produce great advertising.

In giving them the Nike advertising account in the early 1980s, Phil Knight, Nike's CEO, briefed them personally, and was very clear on what he didn't want: he didn't want anything that looked or felt or smelled like “advertising.” Knight didn't like or believe in advertising: a competitive college middle-distance runner himself, he had built his business selling footwear out of the back of his Plymouth Valiant at athletics meetings in the early days, and he wanted communications that spoke to the athletes with whom he had enjoyed that early relationship. They were not to run the

same ad twice—you wouldn't write the same letter to a friend two weeks in a row, so why would you show them the same ad? And no models—definitely no models.

Wieden, a copywriter as well as the co-founder of the agency, was initially thrown: with this brief, there was no path he could follow. Nothing in his experience could help him. And the pressure to find a good solution did not simply come from a desire to meet Knight's brief; Wieden had started his new agency in Portland, Oregon, a long way from the business hubs of New York, Chicago, or San Francisco. Nike was a big opportunity, and it was the only big opportunity. Wieden needed this to work for himself and his agency, as well as for Knight.

Wieden+Kennedy's location presented another constraint. Few advertising stars would leave Madison Avenue for Oregon, and Wieden couldn't afford them anyway, so his initial team was made up of "kids right out of school and people who'd been fired everywhere else—a ship of fools" who didn't know how to do conventional advertising very well. The opportunity in that constraint would soon become apparent.

Prompted by Knight's challenge to connect with the athletes, Wieden tore out a picture of the Finnish Olympic runner Lasse Viren, taped it to the wall above his desk and sat down at his typewriter to answer a new kind of question: What could he say to the Finn that wouldn't make him laugh?

The first advertising created wasn't the mold-breaking work Nike became famous for. That took

The gift was a constraint: the complete denial of everything they already knew about how to produce great advertising.

time. But it didn't feel like conventional advertising, and it connected with athletes. The client liked it enough to want more.

Wieden's band of misfits seized the opportunity to blend Nike's authentic connection to athletes with Knight's own irreverence and a sense that sport deserved to be center stage in culture. They were soon stirring up controversy using the Beatles' "Revolution" as the soundtrack to the new fitness boom, pairing up-and-coming filmmaker Spike Lee with emerging megastar Michael Jordan, and showing a bare-chested, toothless octogenarian running seventeen miles every morning. The world had never seen advertising like this before.

So, from this "gift" of denying the agency everything they thought they knew about how to do successful advertising, harnessed to Wieden's own constraint of not having talent to do that kind of advertising anyway, the most widely admired and consistently successful communications campaign in the world was born.

And with it a culture that came to believe that it could answer any impossible brief.²

Transformers and their cultures

Over the last fifteen years, Wieden+Kennedy has defined its culture to ensure that the mindset of its early days is nurtured and developed as it grows. Some of that definition describes a method. They encourage each other to “Walk In Stupid Every Day,” acknowledging that each problem is best solved from a place of humility, even ignorance of what is supposed to work. And a mantra to “Fail Harder” acknowledges that, while no one wants to fail, it is an expected part of the process when aiming for a breakthrough, and is not to be stigmatized or used as an excuse to quit. This method, enshrined in a culture code, and reinforced by success, instills belief. And Wieden credits culture as the main source of strength for his business.

Wieden understands how to motivate. One of the key factors in his own success has been a sense of crisis and urgency, with the best ideas coming right before deadlines, when the logical mind stops screening out novelty for want of something to put on the page. The line “Just Do It,” for instance, was written during a long night right before the presentation of the first big TV campaign for Nike; the line itself taken from the final words of condemned murderer Gary Gilmore to his firing squad: “Let’s do it.”

One of his roles as leader, Wieden says, is to use the same dynamic to dial up motivation in his people. You need to keep telling them what a tough brief this is, he says, and what an incredible opportunity it is, “to create that sense of importance and urgency.” While the internal contest for doing the best work is motive enough for many of his people, breakthrough comes from dialing up the intensity on a particular assignment.

A solver of different kinds of problems, Yves Behar is celebrated by *Fast Company* magazine as a superstar of the design world for his game-changing work with Jawbone, Sodastream, and the Ouya gaming console.³ The One Laptop Per Child initiative sought out Behar’s fuseproject in 2005, when seeking to bring the price of a laptop down to \$100 from \$1,000, in order to make it affordable enough to provide to children in developing countries. When pushing hard on so many complex and overlapping constraints of hardware and software necessary to make a tenfold impact on cost structure, he and his team were constantly confronted with “No.”

The reality, on a project like this, is that you hit a million snags and a million people tell you “it can’t be done like this” or “it doesn’t make sense,” or “you shouldn’t try this,” or “the cost of this or the engineering of that is something that we can’t do.” And every time you are presented with one of these challenges that potentially are crippling for the project, you say no. You go back to the big idea. You go back to the belief. You go back to what got you to work on this in the first place.⁴

There were times, Behar confesses, “I myself thought it couldn’t be done.” When faced with that doubt, he goes back to the importance of a project. “The more noble the endeavor,” he reflects, “the more, in a way, the constraint goes away.” He dials up the motivation of his team time and again, using the power of the purpose.

One by one, in the case of One Laptop per Child (OLPC), solutions were found: The guts of the machine were all placed behind a small, one-color screen, in order to allow for a simple, durable, low-cost keyboard to be used. This necessitated a stand, which became where the battery was housed, and also a handle, which proved to be one of its most popular features. Flash memory was used instead of a hard drive, and a Linux Operating System developed. While there has been debate over the ultimate success of this program,⁵ there’s no doubting the inventiveness of the team that developed the XO-1 model. Behar’s belief that he and his team can solve any problem is summed up by his tongue-in-cheek remark at the end of our interview: “We can bend the laws of gravity,” he said. “We can do that.”

Marissa Mayer, now CEO of Yahoo!, was at one time responsible for Google’s search product and user experience. She understood well the positive impact of constraints on innovation and spoke about it often: “We need constraints in order to fuel passion and insight,” she said, believing that the difficulty inherent in constraint enlivens her best engineers.⁶ The Google Toolbar her team developed presented a number of challenges: it had to be restricted in size to just 625kb (back in 2005) to ensure it could work for any screen resolution, be downloadable fast, yet had to allow for user customization. She would add further constraint to this brief, deliberately limiting the size of the development team to three people and giving them a day to create the first prototype. She understood the need to create urgency and action in the face of potentially debilitating constraints that might lead to procrastination.

While Mayer understands that the interaction between constraints and a disregard for the impossible is where unexpected insights and inventiveness are born, she also understands how difficult this might be for a mere mortal. “Constraints alone can stifle and kill creativity,” she observes. “They can lead to pessimism and despair, so . . . we also need a sense of hopefulness that keeps us engaged and unwaveringly in search of the right idea.”

It seems that the victim made an occasional appearance even at Google.

Knowing when and how to peak

Not even the superstar athletes featured in W+K’s Nike campaigns operate at peak performance all the time. That leads to injury and burnout. In fact, many athletes carefully calibrate their training regimens to peak at the right time for the big events, and there’s an art and science to that. The same is true of the transformer cultures we’re highlighting here. They aren’t operating at the highest level of belief, capability and motivation all the time. There are plenty of projects at Google, fuseproject and W+K that don’t come with an onerous set of constraints. Few, if any cultures could live permanently in a transformer state.

But these individuals and cultures have developed the capability through conscious efforts over time, and have a base-level “fitness” that allows them to step up when needed. They have put in the work and they know they have methods to take it up a level. They understand how to dial up the emotional intensity, too. And they believe they will succeed when they have to, despite the “impossibility” of the assignment. They live at a threshold level, at the border of “medium” and “high” across mindset, method, and motivation, able to push to the critical stage when the right challenge is presented.

A mindset that sees opportunity in constraint

A fundamental difference between these inventive people and teams and the rest of us is their core relationship with constraints. While we may see constraints as punitive, restrictive, and to be avoided, they see constraints as necessary, beneficial, and to be embraced.

Michael Bierut says he is incapable of working without constraints or limitations. The result of a completely open brief for him is simply paralysis. Now it might be

tempting to think that an open brief would be liberating—imagine how exciting it would be to do anything one liked for a client like Nike. And yet Dan Wieden is candid about the one time they tried this, for the launch of the Nike 180 shoe in 1991, when they were given the shoe specs and full creative freedom:⁷

It was a disaster. There was no theme to anything; there was a bunch of weird filmmakers that came in and did their own little things and it added up to nothing. It was a failure for us as an agency, and we didn't live up to the relationship we had with our client, Nike.

Todd Batty, the Canadian Creative Director for video game giant Electronic Arts, offers an interestingly counterintuitive perspective on the result of complete freedom in his field. The absence of any constraints on video game designers, in his view, somehow leads not to an infinite range of possibilities, but the opposite: a predictable sameness, where everyone comes up with something like a massive, online multiplayer game where the city of New York has been turned into a Mafia playground.⁸

How do constraints help, then, for this group? What are they seeing in them that we are not? Trevor Davis, one of IBM's Distinguished Engineers, notes the fundamental importance of constraints in problem definition.⁹ The reason a completely unconstrained project is the most challenging is because it is so difficult to grasp what it is that you're really trying to solve. To be very good at problem-solving, you need to be able to very clearly articulate the problem you are trying to solve, and constraints are key parameters of that definition (David Ogilvy's "tight brief"). Marissa Mayer shares this view. She needs the shape and focus of constraints to provide clear challenges to overcome, she says. This makes it easier for the problem-solvers to know where to direct their energy.¹⁰

What we are seeing in the experience of leaders in design, gaming, software engineering, and communications is confirmed in *The Blank Page*, a study of the effects of constraints on creativity. Dr. Caneel Joyce conducted a number of studies, both in the lab and with 43 new product development teams, to test the effect of choice on the creative process. Previous studies showed that giving people too much choice limits creativity, just as giving them no choice at all does. Her study explored the continuum between these two poles and found the sweet spot: just enough constraint incites us to explore solutions in new places and in new ways.¹¹

Joyce uses the analogy of a playground.¹² Researchers found that when you put up a fence around a playground, children will use the entire space—they'll feel safe to play all the way to the edges. But if those walls are removed, creating a wide-open playground, the space the children choose to play in contracts: they stay toward the middle and they stick to each other, because that's what feels safe. This, Joyce suggests, is what happens in the creative process. When there are no clear limits in the brief itself, we aren't sure what boundaries to explore and push against. We end up without the necessary focus and passion of which Marissa Mayer speaks. In fact, one of Joyce's surprise findings was that in the absence of explicit constraints, the unconstrained teams created more conflict, stemming from all the different unarticulated assumptions and implicit constraints that team members created in their own heads, as if to fill the void.

There is, it could be said, one other key difference between most of these creative professionals and the rest of us, and that is their relationship with solving problems. Many of this group are, by their own admission, problem-solving junkies; they love the difficulty of the problems they solve. They like constraints because they like solving problems, and constraints make problems easier to solve.

But even if we don't enjoy solving difficult problems, we need to become more confident in how to approach them. Which means we need to get comfortable and confident in dealing with constraints.

Deliberately imposing constraints upon ourselves

The power of constraints to force us beyond the familiar is a core part of comedian Jerry Seinfeld's approach. If Seinfeld is in the business of comedy, it is a very successful business, with syndication rights for *Seinfeld* alone bringing him over \$30 million a year. Part of what makes his comedy different, Seinfeld has observed, is that he deliberately denies himself sources of the easiest laughs, such as sex or swearing—or for that matter, any topic people are interested in talking about. Seinfeld's comedy is deliberately about the humdrum minutiae of life:

*I do a lot of material about the chair. I find the chair very funny. That excites me. No one's really interested in that—but I'm going to get you interested It's the entire basis of my career.*¹³



Jerry Seinfeld in NBC's Seinfeld

Up to now, we have been discussing constraints as those imposed on us by circumstance or by someone else. But Seinfeld is an example of a creative professional so confident in his ability to transform constraints into something positive that he proactively imposes them on himself, to make his content more original and fresh. Seinfeld is this good because he has performed live a couple of times a week every week since 2000, trying out new material each time. He sees his disciplined approach to practicing transforming his chosen constraints as having more in common with an exacting athlete than a creative artist.

Seinfeld's story highlights a crucial distinction between situations where we respond to a constraint that was not of our making, and situations where we impose constraints on ourselves to stimulate us to see

new possibilities and opportunities; he is a proactive, rather than reactive, transformer. We will look later at cases of organizations that have moved through each of the stages we have discussed in this chapter as they became more confident in their ability to turn constraint into opportunity.

Nike, for example, responded initially as a victim when singled out by labor activists for alleged sweatshop practices. But they developed a growing sense of confidence in their ability to turn these lemons into lemonade when a series of product improvements resulted from changes they were forced to make. Nike now sees its ability to define and transform constraints as a competitive advantage, and has moved into this proactive transformer stage. Michael Bierut was right, it seems: we are not by nature one or the other of these types. Even very large organizations can learn to move between them.

**We are not by nature victim
or transformer; even very
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to move between them.**

The stages and strategies in response to constraints

Table 1 below summarizes the different attitudinal stages we need to move through in order to evolve our mindset and approach towards constraints.

	Foundational Premise	Types of Strategies
Victim Stage	This constraint will necessarily inhibit our ability to realize our ambition.	Avoidance strategies: denial of the constraint or Reduction strategies: reduce level of ambition to fit perceived impact of constraint.
Neutralizing Stage	Our ambition is too important to allow this constraint to inhibit it.	Workaround strategies: neutralize the effect of the constraint by finding another way around it.
Responsive Transformer Stage	This constraint that we need to respond to could catalyze arrival at a better solution.	Transformative strategies: use the constraint to prompt different, potentially breakthrough new approaches and solutions.
Proactive Transformer Stage	What constraints should we impose on ourselves to stimulate better thinking or new possibilities?	

Table 1: Stages in response to constraints

Having defined the different stages, we'll now explore the first part of catalyzing that movement, and why we need to frame the challenge to ourselves not purely in terms of the constraint itself. We'll see what happens to our cognitive response when we link the constraint to a bold ambition.

VICTIM, NEUTRALIZER & TRANSFORMER: CHAPTER SUMMARY

- To unlock the potential of a constraint, we need first to increase our level of ambition with regard to the constraint, not decrease it. The tension this creates is invaluable.
- We need not be defined by our initial attitude towards constraints. It is natural to adopt a victim mindset at the beginning; even the most experienced and skilled transformers of constraints can find themselves with this mindset at first.
- Moving from victim to transformer will require strength in mindset (Do we believe this is possible?), method (Do we know how to start doing this?), and motivation (How much does this matter to us?).
- To find the potential in a constraint, we need to reach a transformative threshold on each of these dimensions. It is only when we are at a high level in each of these that transformation is likely. And we are only as strong in this as our weakest dimension.
- Professional problem-solvers have a different relationship with constraints from the rest of us: they see them as inherently beneficial, because they provide clear problem definition and focus the problem-solver's energies; they set the boundaries to explore and push against.
- The most confident of these kinds of problem-solvers, in fact, will impose constraints on themselves to force them to unearth different, possibly transformative strategies and solutions.