STRATEGY

| Doubt the Obvious |
Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow.

T. S. Eliot, “The Hollow Men”

All too often, we feel captive to the world we live in. We convince ourselves that we have no control, no authority. We tell ourselves, “You can’t fight city hall ....” or “That’s just the way it is.”

In truth, these statements only limit our search for solutions; they absolve us of the need to make changes. The philosopher Albert Camus once said, “At thirty a man should know himself like the palm of his hand.” Bertrand Russell claimed, “Real life is, to most men ... a perpetual compromise between the ideal and the possible.” I believe that these messages of resolve—the suggestion that things are as they are and can’t be changed—are among the most damaging we give ourselves. They are powerful words that teach us to accept and embrace our own powerlessness.
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This first strategy attacks the idea that there are things in life that simply can’t be changed. It is the foundation for the six remaining strategies, and if we don’t accept it, none of the other strategies will be as effective. It teaches us to question some of our long-held beliefs, and to understand that things aren’t always what they seem. If we accept without question everything we’re told, creativity cannot thrive. And without creativity, progress grinds to a halt and common sense goes out the proverbial window.

Truth versus Myth

In this world, there are two kinds of truths: real truths and notions that you have convinced yourself are truths. This first strategy helps you distinguish between the truth and any firmly entrenched beliefs—that is, myths—that limit your ability to use your common sense.

Before you begin to look for the truth, however, you must first understand how preconceived notions can cloud your vision. These notions are often a roadblock to change. If you accept them as truths, you severely limit your chances of harnessing your common sense.

We all know some of these firmly held beliefs: men are strong, women are gentle; hard work is always rewarded; governments will protect us;
call the police if you’re in trouble. Sometimes these beliefs can be misleading. Not everyone who is supposed to be good and trustworthy, for instance, actually is. The system isn’t always foolproof. And sometimes blind faith can lead to complacency and even disaster—innocent people end up wrongfully imprisoned; established companies suddenly go bankrupt; seemingly solid relationships fall apart.

An ancient Chinese proverb says, “A familiar sight provokes no attention.” We get familiar with messages we listen to daily and don’t give them the attention they need; rather we accept them with blind faith. And yet the more obvious the situation the more clouded the solution until it reveals itself and says, “See, I’ve been here all along.” It is like a magician’s sleight of hand where you see what you want to see instead of what is there.

So what is truth and what is myth? Take a moment and look at yourself in the mirror. What do you see? A face: nose, eyes, and a mouth. Put your business in the mirror and you will see a sign at the front door, offices, computers, desks, chairs, or a financial statement. Is all of this real? Of course. But is that all there is? If you conclude that you are just an assembly of body parts and your business is nothing but bricks and mortar,
you’ve accepted a myth—there is more than that. The truth is that you and your business are complex organisms, and most of it is hidden from view. But your physical appearance is the package you present to the world. That’s why you feel bad when someone says your nose is too big. Your body often represents everything—both the tangible and the intangible.

Strategy #1 says you must learn to distinguish the tangible from the intangible, myths from the truth. If you don’t challenge the myths you encounter, you will reinforce them. That is how myths get incorporated into the fabric of your daily life (hence the old expression, “Tell a lie often enough and it becomes the truth”). And the more commonplace these myths become, the more absolute they seem. This simple premise becomes the basis for our first strategy.

Here’s an example. There was once a successful baseball player who was adored by millions of fans and had an astronomical batting average. He had signed a multi-year, multi-million-dollar contract, and was the toast of the town. But his life had not always been blessed with such success.

In his youth, he lacked self-confidence, even though he was supremely talented. But one day, he met a young woman who had been admiring him from a distance. She gave him a medallion
on a chain and asked him to wear it around his neck for luck. The first game he played wearing that medallion was the best game of his life. He and the young woman began seeing each other regularly, and soon she asked him to wear the medallion again. He agreed. Once more he played a spectacular game. He was a star in the making and his confidence soared.

The young ballplayer began to believe implicitly in the power of the medallion; in his mind, wearing it meant winning. This belief was reinforced with each additional win, and eventually it became an obsession so strong that he would never play a game without the medallion. But did it really improve his play?

The answer is yes. The medallion did improve his game, though not because the simple amulet possessed magic powers. No, the necklace improved his game because he believed—a conviction borne of repeated experience—that it, even more than his talent, was the key to his success. Would he have been able to perform just as well without it? The answer to that is no—at least not as long as he continued to believe in its power. If he lost the medallion, would that mean the end of his career? Perhaps. Our ballplayer put his fate in the hands of a myth rather than an absolute, his talent.
The television show *Cheers* provides another example. Sam Malone, the owner of the bar where the show is set and a former major-league pitcher, is a recovering alcoholic. In one poignant episode, a fellow pitcher who’s in a slump borrows Sam’s lucky bottle cap. When his slump miraculously lifts, he refuses to return it. Sam panics. The cap came off the last bottle of beer he ever drank. He fusses and frets throughout the episode because, like the ballplayer with the medallion, he believes his bottle cap is a talisman, the one thing that prevents him from drinking. Without it, he’s convinced he will fall off the wagon.

At the end of the episode, Sam stares intently at an unopened bottle of beer with an opener in hand. He snaps the bottle open, holding the cap in one hand and the beer in the other. This is Sam’s moment of truth; he realizes that what he needs is another bottle cap—not the bottle.

What are some of the messages that you accept as truths?

- We have always done it this way.
- It might be unethical.
- What can I do? I am just one small player in a really big game.
- It’s just the economy; all I can do is wait it out.
- Everyone else is doing it so why shouldn’t we?
Perhaps you can add a few of your own.

What Sam did with his bottle cap you must do with your messages—step back and re-evaluate them by asking yourselves hard questions.

Asking the right questions is the guiding principle behind our legal system, where the accused must be proven guilty beyond any reasonable doubt. The defense attorney’s job is to look at the evidence of a crime and interpret it in a light favorable to the client. The prosecutor’s job, on the other hand, is to gather enough evidence to prove that the accused did in fact commit the crime. The defense attorney and the prosecutor are looking at the same scene, the same crime, the same circumstances, and even the same “truth.” But where the prosecutor sees guilt, the defense attorney must find reasonable doubt. Each is looking at the same story from an opposite perspective. A person’s intentions can affect his interpretation of events.

Here’s another example. The Canadian Diabetes Association recently reported that 80 percent of those diagnosed with late-onset diabetes also suffer from obesity. Overeating and stress often worsen symptoms to the point that they can become fatal. All those with this disease know this, so they will usually embark on a careful examination of their daily habits, especially
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their eating habits. Often, they follow a ritualistic weighing of every morsel of food consumed. Every ingredient in every meal is scrutinized to the nth degree. People don’t want their condition to get worse, so they do what they must in order to survive—that’s common sense.

But a short time into this regimen, a strange thing often happens. Many diabetic patients, faced with a desire to satiate their cravings, start to make trade-offs. They say, “I can have this and skip something later.” Or, “I will just cheat a little. After all, I have been good so far.” One cheat leads to another, of course, and soon they are back to their old habits and back among the obese 80 percent of diabetics.

So why the change in behavior? The answer is that there is perhaps some secondary gain that is not being confronted. Secondary gains are unconscious needs and are as significant to a person’s perceived well-being as his or her primary gain, survival. In this case, people may worry about the loss of an activity (eating) that is related to many of their social and cultural events. “If I change my eating habits,” they say to themselves, “I will have no way of socializing with my friends.” So a diabetic’s need to lose weight ends up conflicting with another need. And as long as intentions and behavior are at loggerheads, the internal conflict
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prohibits people from using their common sense. This is also why smokers, to use another example, continue to puff away in spite of irrefutable evidence of the associated health risks. Many of us never figure this out.

Where does this conflict come from? Well, it usually arises when our behavior is based on untrue information. (“There are three sides to every story,” the saying goes, “mine, yours, and the truth.”) Of course, it’s not always easy to determine when information is true and when it is untrue, partly because every situation has more than one interpretation. Are the Rocky Mountains one of the world’s most breathtaking wonders, for example? Or are they a place fraught with danger, where avalanches kill and destroy? When we change our minds while disciplining our children, do they see flexibility and a willingness to listen or inconsistency and thus a bad precedent? These are examples of the same information resulting in different interpretations. So which answer is the truth?

So often, the real truth of a situation is only hinted at, revealed “through a glass, darkly.” That is why, when you’re faced with a difficult predicament, you must look at all the surrounding information (especially any secondary gains) before you act. Unfortunately, when we fail to look
beyond the surface, accepting only part of the truth, we limit our possibilities—and our growth.

The Lesson of Copernicus
This leads us to the downside of this strategy: the risks. When you begin to question commonly held beliefs, you risk ignoring valuable conventional wisdom. And sometimes you may find yourself the victim of personal scorn, even physical injury. Back in the early 1500s, the astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus turned the scientific world upside down. Until that time, the Ptolemaic theory of a geocentric universe had prevailed. Copernicus changed all that by announcing that the universe was in fact heliocentric—that is, that everything rotated around the sun. Suddenly, the earth was nothing more than a planet spinning around a ball of fire. Copernicus’ theory rocked two thousand years of scientific tradition and used mathematics to prove that everyone had it all wrong. His heliocentric model successfully explained astronomical irregularities, and today it is an absolute truth. But Copernicus risked ridicule, ostracization, and even death to advance it.

So what can we learn from Copernicus? He was able to look at the same evidence available to everyone and draw different conclusions—
conclusions that have stood the test of time. But he did so at great personal risk. And who knows? Perhaps someday his ideas will seem as primitive to future generations as Ptolemy’s did to him.

Through the centuries, others have also braved the storm of challenging traditional thought. Christopher Columbus, Sir Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein, Pablo Picasso, and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart were but a few. The failure to look beyond the obvious can create a loss (or a postponement) of opportunities. In 1943 Thomas Watson Sr., chairman of IBM, proclaimed, “I think there is a world market for maybe five computers.” In 1957 the editor for business books at Prentice Hall said, “I can assure you that data processing is a fad that won’t last the year.” Then in 1977 Ken Olsen, chairman and founder of Digital Equipment Corporation, said, “There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home.” With hindsight it is easy to shake our heads and wonder how captains of industry could have been so short-sighted. The answer comes to simply asking, “WHY?” By listening to statements and asking WHY, you remove your blinkers and look with a 360-degree perspective that would otherwise be obstructed by faulty messages.

The poet Percy Bysshe Shelley claimed that “creative thought derived from the linking of
everyday concepts in untried or unusual ways.” The author Edward de Bono calls this “lateral thinking.” In his book *Serious Creativity*, de Bono says that lateral thinking is “very much concerned with possibilities and what might be.” When we think laterally, we are looking for different answers. “In this sense,” de Bono continues, “lateral thinking has to do with exploration.” You must ask the right questions and get the right answers to be able to differentiate between the truth and a myth.

Our failure to ask the proper questions has created many of the major problems of our planet: contamination of our water, air, and soil; loss of animal species; deforestation; the greenhouse effect; holes in the ozone layer; and accumulation of toxic waste. In the 1930s, for example, we introduced chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) to aid in refrigeration. This was seen as a great advancement, and the world endorsed CFCs wholeheartedly. But no one asked about—or foresaw—the danger CFCs posed to the ozone layer. By the time the problem was uncovered, considerable damage had been done. As with so many of the world’s ecological problems, the consequences have been devastating. And yet, if we had only asked some common-sense questions, we might have avoided creating many of these problems in the first place.
Remember our credo: nothing is absolute. Your task is to try to see every side of every situation. This means posing the right questions, gauging when your behavior is in conflict with your intentions, and recognizing your own agenda. You must accept this principle before you can understand and implement the other strategies outlined in this book.

Of course, sometimes this strategy appears to contradict itself. I mean, there are some things we just know to be indisputably true, right? If you stay under water for too long, for example, you will drown. If you jump out of an airplane without a parachute, you will die. If you press your skin to something hot, you will be burned. These statements must surely be absolutes, and therefore the strategy must be wrong. But what do we say to all those people who have survived drowning, fallen from airplanes and lived to tell the tale, walked on hot coals without getting burned? Once again, nothing is absolute.

Many teachers in the early part of the twentieth century taught their students that mankind could never slip the bonds of earth, that everything that could be discovered had already been discovered, that some diseases were incurable. If all those students had accepted such statements as indisputable truths, they would not
have grown into today’s scientists and thinkers. There would never have been a space program. We would not have found fossilized life forms on Mars. We would never have had computers and the Internet, and there would have been no new medical discoveries.

Those who claim that there is only one right way to do things are closing the door on other possibilities. These people often limit themselves by their “shoulds”: “I should accept this as true because everyone says it is,” or “It should be done this way because that’s the way it has always been done in the past,” or “I should accept my disability because my doctor tells me my condition will never improve.” These messages put a powerful brake on our creativity, our understanding, our will to succeed where others have failed. You must avoid them at all costs. Instead, embrace this first strategy: be skeptical, explore new mysteries, and find new ways to bring common sense into your life.
Making Sense of Strategy #1

1. Be sensitive to the word “should.” Keep a small notebook handy and mark down every time you include it in one of your sentences.

2. For each item on your list, ask yourself whether the “should” is a truth or a myth. Consider the risks and the benefits of ignoring the “should” message.

3. As soon as you have ten items on your list, substitute an alternative belief for each one. Let’s say, for example, that your “should” message was this: “I should stay up all night to finish this report because I won’t have time tomorrow at the office and nobody else can do it as well as I can.” What are the risks of avoiding this message? Well, someone else may have to complete the report, and that person may not do it as well as you would. But what are the benefits? You will get a good night’s sleep and be well prepared for tomorrow’s challenges. So what kind of alternative belief can you substitute here? Perhaps you can solicit the help of other staff members, getting them to work on sections of the report and consolidating their labour. That way, you will end up with both a good night’s sleep and a comprehensive report.
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4. If you repeat these exercises for a few days, you will probably conclude that this first strategy is correct, that there are several ways of looking at every situation. Soon you will begin to realize that your abilities are limited only by your beliefs about what is true and what is not true.

Conclusion
If nothing is absolute, how can you move on to better things? If you trust no one and nothing then you have a hole of belief that needs to be filled. You are ready to move on to Strategy #2.