Adjacent opportunities (9.4)

Deciding to decide

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Ron Schultz


Some of us look out over a landscape and think, what's missing from this picture? Others, myself included, look at that same landscape and ask, what could there be? The first approach views the landscape as a list of possibilities, with a prescribed population filled with specific needs. The latter views the landscape as a dynamic, emergent, and ever changing opportunity. Both views have their place. And in deciding to decide, we get to distinguish if this decision we're about to make is filling a gap with something we recognize is missing or if we are recognizing an emergent or adjacent opportunity for perhaps furthering the dynamic plane with something new.

Recent MacArthur Genius Grantee, Jim Fructerman, has developed a variety of high-tech products for the disabled and disadvantaged, including some of the very first computerized books and readers for the blind and a phone cam that can read signs for the sightless. In bringing these very successful products to market, he wasn't looking for what was missing, but rather what adjacent opportunities were available. As he explains his developments, “They all involve technology serving humanity, where market forces alone aren't going to bring that technology to the people who need it the most, who are often the most disadvantaged people in society. What we're doing is looking for something no one else is doing, where the technology is pretty well developed, where someone has already developed it at great expense, but where that extra little bit takes it to the people who can actually use it.”

When we look for what's missing, it implies a pre-knowledge of all the parts available, which would seem to make a decision along these lines a much safer bet than looking for something that could be there. And, in the land of low-hanging fruit, when making a decision, this path of least resistance is often chosen because the missing piece is so evident and it allows us to make an obvious decision and yet still appear decisive. But what does that say about how we prioritize our decisions?

Prioritizing the decisions we make is not just about making the decision that's right in front of us. Often we make these decisions so we can avoid making the higher value decisions that have more riding on them and might require more work. There are many who think that tough decisions can certainly be left for someone who doesn't care whether or not they succeed, or how much work they have to do, or if they will keep their job if they fail.

But what happens when the safe spaces are all filled? How do we find the courage to decide on something we don't know for sure will work? With all those adjacent opportunities looming all around us, each beckoning us with possibility, how do we separate the good from the great, the disruptive from the furthering?

Mahatma Gandhi once said that when making a decision contemplate the poorest most destitute person you have ever seen in your life and ask, will this decision I am about to make change this person’s life for the better?”

If our organizations operated from this decision making priority, it would certainly be a very different world. Unfortunately, our priority systems have not yet developed to the level of those of Gandhi’s. Perhaps, there is a way, however, to incorporate this thinking into how we bring action onto the emergent landscape we might have in front of us.

If action is a communicative act, as Fernando Flores and Chauncey Bell would tell you, then by moving the conversation to what could be rather than what's missing, would allow us the opportunity and possibility for breaking habitual patterns, and therefore make significant change possible. Prioritizing decisions and the conversations they require to favor those of us most in need requires a consciousness and awareness of change that many of us are not quite ready to assume. Perhaps this is why we often stay stuck in the identifiable lists of the missing, habitually filling holes rather than seeking new answers. And why we see the conversation around difficult societal problems being farmed out to agencies to address rather than being the responsibility of everyone within the community.

But what adjacent opportunities would emerge if we were to enact Gandhi’s criterion for decision-making in the business market? The lives of the destitute would improve, which would improve the lives of those around them, and subsequently the economy as a whole would also get better. Because decisions were routinely made that were not in the interest of those of us most in need, communities strain to deal with decisions that are far more expensive now than if they had not been previously ignored or sloughed off to adjacencies responsible for maintaining this population rather than eradicating the problem. What possible adjacent opportunity could emerge to improve the economy when decisions are made that change the lives of the most destitute? Within any system, when weakness is strengthened, the system as a whole becomes stronger. If our decisions were to first address the greatest need, rather than the easiest to address, the health of the whole system would greatly improve, and subsequently its economy.

Those interested solely in financial and personal return, often see no reason to fill their lives with anything other than what they
see more money. The idea of making decisions based on the neediest among us is something reserved for tax-deductible charitable contributions, because it’s easier that way. And for the most part, people who think like this are good as long as they can pay their mortgage and they don’t have to encounter the destitute. An unseen cancer doesn’t have to be large to bring death to the living organism. Perhaps if we understood the nature of emergent behavior, adjacent opportunities and the function of complex adaptive systems, our landscapes would not be littered with the seemingly intractable situations we have allowed to fester and our decisions might be more foresighted than self-interested.