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Looking through a different lens

One great benefit of expertise is that, when similar situations recur, less brain power is needed to deal with the event. More brain power is available for other cognitive processes.

A downside of this is that we tend to start seeing those parts of our environment in a fixed way. All good when we need the same response every time, but it's bad news when innovative approaches might deliver better outcomes.

Here are a few ways you can harness the power of using different lenses.

1. Think of the problem you're trying to solve (or even the status quo you never challenge) from different perspectives. How might your boss see things? How might your subordinates evaluate the same situation. What about a customer or competitor?
2. No matter how unlikely, imagine that a core assumption supporting your current way of doing things changes significantly. How might you adapt and deliver similar or better outcomes than at present?
3. Use multiple lenses to consider a problem and then combine all of these perspectives to think more creatively about a better solution.

BUSINESS INSIGHTS FROM BMG

Blending in and standing out

Imagine a busy street in New York in the late eighties. Three long-time friends observe the diverse array of 'characters' diligently getting on with daily life. Among the crowd, three punk rockers complete with massive Mohawks, safety pins in the cheekbone area, leather and chains. They walk between another small group – three men dressed in Armani suits, carrying alligator skin briefcases.

The three observers are astounded when none of either group even blinks in acknowledgement of the vast differences between the two groups. Interestingly, other than the observers, no one else in the vicinity seems to notice the starkly contrasting figures either. "What," ponder the three friends incredulously, "would surprise people?"

A short while later, when their bald 'Blue Man' creation wandered those same New York streets for the first time, they knew they had their answer. People definitely noticed! At the same time, they also experienced how, when becoming the Blue Man character, they seemed to be freed from their egos. They were also free to see things differently.

The group wondered if they could create a character that represented humanity but at the same time was sufficiently outside of it, to be able to shine a light on it. In particular, they wanted to make a strong statement about the power of groups and community, contrasting it with the individualist mentality dominant in the US.

Matt Goldman, Chris Wink and Phil Stanton developed Blue Man into the timeless, "little bit futuristic" character, simultaneously both beautiful and comical. Having drumming central in their shows, as it is today, highlighted a sense of tribe and co-creation.

Journalist, John Moore, describes the current show as "an absurd and wondrous blend of music, painting, science and technology, as the Blue Men silently engage in a variety of set pieces that run the gamut from primitive and childlike to witty and sophisticated". With concurrent shows in a number of venues around the globe, there are over 50 Blue Men and a couple of hundred supporting cast and crew associated with what has become Blue Man Group (BMG).

Innovation at the core

The interest in sharing something about BMG in a briefing came about as a result of seeing one of their shows. It was unlike anything the author has seen before. It was seriously energetic and immensely creative. Yet, rather mystically, the show prompted reflection on every-day, even mundane, aspects of the human condition often not given much thought.

All said and done, BMG oozed innovation, something all businesses could benefit from. In some ways, having audiences form that impression is 'mission accomplished' for the show's creative director of character development and appearances, Puck Quinn. Speaking with journalist John Moore, Quinn observed matter-of-factly: "If someone asks, 'What does Blue Man Group do?,' my answer is simple: 'We innovate.'"

A few insights for business

First, numerous online reviews point out that the BMG show connects extremely well with people of all ages and backgrounds. It's obvious that great care has been taken to develop material that is inclusive. For example, the audience of all ages seem to enjoy the music played on an instrument made from PVC piping. Up a level, and there's an appreciation of how, in Sydney, they played 'Australian' tunes. Up another level and there's reflection on how music promotes connection.

Another way in which BMG creates a strong experience is by engaging with the audience - audience members powerfully feel they are actually contributing to the show. One example is when four enormous 'beach balls' are bounced around the theatre by the audience. At other times, everyone is out of their seat, clapping and dancing.

Some of the deeper insights during the show occur because BMG provides a different lens for reflecting on everyday events. For example, simply eating and sharing a meal. They demonstrate how eating a meal is a cultural construct we often taken for granted. It spurs thinking about many other cultural constructs we never give a thought to, especially in the context of people that are different from us.

A fourth insight is that while much of the audience surprise and delight is spontaneous, aspects of the show that trigger these responses are deliberate - carefully planned, rehearsed and executed. Countless hours must have been invested in putting together 120 minutes of high impact entertainment. New ideas are no doubt tested over time, with different audiences, and only the best retained.

Finally, since the show prompts reflection on the human condition generally, it does raise the question of why it hasn't modernised and achieved gender balance. None of the current content would prevent that from happening. After all, this is one of the important 'cultural challenges' of our time.

Using a different lens

Of all the interesting insights gained from the excellent and thought provoking BMG show, the power of looking at things through a different lens stands out as offering the greatest value. How could you apply that to add value to your business?