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### 3.5.

# Flex Your Flexibility Muscle

As I wrote in chapter one, reaching a goal almost always requires a measure of endurance. But this does not mean that you should work yourself relentlessly. That is being too hard on yourself. Determination and endurance are not the only important qualities to nurture. Flexibility and the ability to change directions are equally important.

You may have noticed in this book that I often write about contradictions. This is because the world around us is so complex. If we are to meet our personal challenges, then we must employ a variety of strengths. In fact, we must make use of several personal qualities at once. We must be generous *and* stingy, energetic *and* calm, optimistic *and* pessimistic, smart *and* crazy, and so on.

The more room we have for contradictory qualities within ourselves, the easier we will find it to handle the complicated world around us. It is a common misconception that one must have one predominant quality to successfully navigate through life. Decisiveness, for example, is a highly respected character trait that is considered a prerequisite to success, but careful contemplation is equally important. Over-decisiveness can lead to rash decisions that may hinder success.

As with everything else in life, we have to find a well-balanced way of using our skills and talents. If you have a tendency to be stubborn, maybe it's time to practice a little more humility. If you can do so, you will discover new ways of finding solutions to your old problems.

But I wonder over all if you can make a fair distinction between different personality traits this way. It is much easier, for example, to talk about how a car engine works. It is easy to describe one part at a time and then to explain

exactly how each part works in conjunction with the others.

It is not easy to do this for a person. It is tricky to make exact distinctions between human character traits. Any particular problem may require you to be creative, stubborn, curious and goal-oriented at the same time. It may require you to exercise trust and good stress-management skills as well.

Even though we use a mix of these character traits, it is not as simple as mixing a fruit salad, because the different ingredients influence one another. The truth of it is that one plus one sometimes equals four, and sometimes something as unpredictable as 0.0000001.

Every situation we find ourselves in is unique and requires a unique style of approach if we are to move forward in our lives. This is why you can't use books like this as recipes that tell you how to live your particular life.

Especially, when facing difficult situations, it is crucial to find several alternate solutions. We often take the first solution that pops up, whether or not it is the most suitable. Thinking about the problem just a little longer often leads to a much better answer.

While writing this text, I experienced something that can illustrate this. I needed to put paper into my typewriter, and had to do this on my own because there was no one nearby who could help me. Since I was traveling the paper was tucked inside a plastic folder so tightly that it was stuck. At first, I tried to pull out a sheet of paper with my mouth. When that didn't work, I tried grabbing the folder with my teeth and shaking the paper loose. This didn't work either, so I got a grip on the folder with one hand and shook it above the sofa. This worked.

In this case, both perseverance and flexibility were needed to solve the problem. My irritation also worked to my advantage. In my growing irritation, I shook the folder more violently the second time than I had the first time. It was this energy that led me to shake the folder hard enough to dislodge the paper. In addition to this, I had a clear goal in focus: I had something I wanted to write!

This is one example of the physical obstacles large or small that have challenged me since childhood. They are a part of what has made me the person I am today. They have probably contributed more to my perseverance than to my flexibility. I don't like to give up just because a task is difficult. I usually expend more energy than necessary. I would probably do better by giving up more often and by trying other routes towards my goal.

Obviously, I am conscious of this. That is why I try to channel my stubbornness into flexibility. One way of doing this is to practice trusting others instead of trying to maintain complete control myself. I have written more about trust in a section of its own.

I also try to develop my trust by practicing something called lateral thinking, which I wrote about in the section on creativity. Lateral thinking is a method of learning how to force yourself into new ways of thinking and thereby avoid falling into the trap of seeing your problems from only one angle. As I said before this may be crucial in order to find a new solution. Sometimes, however, it won't lead you to new solutions. If that is the case you may benefit from a different approach anyway. It may help you accidentally to come up with new ideas in a totally different field of life.

Consider the following example: Today I went into a store to get a photograph developed that I considered important for my website. I asked my assistant to unload the camera and give it to the worker for development. He opened the camera and discovered that the film hadn't been rewound. I had had this in the back of my mind, but hadn't thought to warn my assistant beforehand.

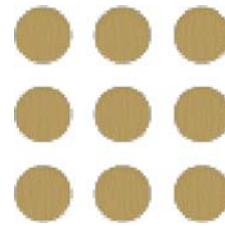
The photo I wanted to use was destroyed. Other photos on the roll survived, but that particular one was useless. At first, I was quite upset. I had felt that just that photo would have been perfect for the site. But my disappointment slowly transformed into other thoughts. My brain was spinning with these thoughts:

*Aren't these the kinds of blunders and misfortunes we all experience every day? Isn't it partly fear of such hassles that keeps us from trying new things? Isn't it that fear that traps*

*us inside our routines and prevents us from living out our dreams?*

*Yes, this is probably how it is for many people. That is why I find it so important to help others learn to see their lives from new perspectives, to help others become brave enough so they don't have to get stopped dead in their tracks. If they learn to do this, they will find it easier to realize their innermost dreams.*

These are the ideas that presented themselves to me because my photo was destroyed. I could have spent hours mourning the loss of the photo, but I came up instead with new ideas to use in my daily work as a mentor. Had I done the former, I would have been practicing a non-productive way of thinking. Instead, I wound up thinking more creatively. This is what I mean by the tremendous value of lateral thinking. When you come to a roadblock, before trying to move on, take the time to figure out what can be gained by the situation. Search for the positive in the midst of the negative!



Are you flexible enough to figure out a way to connect these dots with one straight line? The answer can be found at the end of the chapter. Source: *Conceptual Blockbusting* by James L. Adams

Developing flexibility also involves a great deal of courage. When beginning a new job, for example, you sometimes see new ways to make things much more efficient. But if you tell your ideas to your coworkers, you are often met with something like, "Yeah, we tried that before, but it didn't work. In fact, it almost drove us to bankruptcy, so we don't want to go there again!" Their underlying message is, "Don't come here with your fancy new ideas trying to change things. We've tried it all before and know what's best for us. There is absolutely no way you're going to find ways for improvement here."

Companies and organizations should treat their new workers exactly the opposite. They come in with clear eyes and fresh perspectives, so their suggestions might just prove invaluable.

Every organization runs the risk of settling into bureaucratic routines. This makes enterprises stiff and rigid. When this happens, it can seri-

ously reduce a company's competitiveness. It can even lead to the eventual demise of the entire organization. That we are living in an ever-changing world should make it clear that our businesses must also undergo constant change if they want to stay on top. This can be done only in an open environment where the people working for those businesses are welcome to continuously contribute their ideas for improvement and change.

Sometimes change may be so vital that the most important thing is just to keep moving. Direction isn't always of the utmost importance. Sometimes change itself can be the goal. To understand what I mean, think of a goalkeeper, who is always in motion so he can quickly grab the ball when it comes flying toward the goal.

A flexible person has learned how to deal well with both self-criticism and criticism from others. If you do not learn how to do this, you will not be able to assess your behavior accurately and objectively in different situations. Instead, you will become ever more stiff and inflexible.

To handle criticism positively, you have to have a strong sense of self-esteem. If you are not entirely happy with yourself, you may easily jump to the defensive as soon as anyone offers criticism. You will have a hard time admitting when you are wrong.

We have all sometime or other made complete fools of ourselves and wanted to crawl under a rock and disappear. Some people, unfortunately, feel this way after every small failing. Every mistake is blown out of proportion, giving rise to such thoughts as, "I'm such a klutz. There's just no one like me. There's nothing I can do about it. I'm hopeless."

Such thinking only helps to keep self-esteem down. It also prevents us from changing our undesirable habits. We either lose the energy to do anything about them or just don't believe it's possible to do anything about them. We all too often talk ourselves into believing that we cannot change anything, and so we don't. It's all too easy to fall into this circular way of thinking.

*We often discover what will do, by finding out what will not do; and probably he who never made a mistake never made a discovery.*

— Samuel Smiles

I think it would do most of us good to see our failings and shortcomings from perspectives new to us, because nobody's perfect. Understanding this can help us understand that making

a mistake is not the end of the world. This can help us learn to be more flexible.

Assessing why we behave the way we do in different situations does not have to be such a dreadful experience. You can think through behavioral changes or discuss it with others without such unnecessary pressure. It is easier then to reform habits and find new ways of behaving. If you dare to reassess your own behavior in this way, then you will more easily reach greater flexibility.

So flexibility is a matter of daring to make mistakes and of daring to head into the unknown. You have to be prepared that sometimes things are not going to turn out at all as you have planned. But they can turn out well nevertheless. You can find yourself propelled into unexpected adventures. This is something that I had to face one time when, instead of returning home, I had to spend a night sleepless in Seattle.

This took place the first time I took a trip abroad with personal assistants. The trip was all the way to California. It was great to finally be able to take such a trip without my parents. I was almost 30 years old.

But I also made many mistakes. Probably the greatest mistake was that I took too few assistants with me. I had decided to be away six weeks and had divided my time there into two three-week periods of two assistants each. For the first three weeks I had two men who worked alone every other day. When they returned home, they were replaced by two women.

We quickly realized that it was pretty stressful for them to work every other day. I need assistance during my entire waking hours, which is about 12-15 hours a day. The weather at least was great. There came heat wave after heat wave of the sort that we Scandinavians are not used to.

So by the time the guys were leaving for home, we were pretty well tired of each other, and when the girls and I were leaving for home, we were, if possible, even more tired of each other. I believe this is because I had been away for a full six weeks.

Probably all of us have experienced trips of the kind that, when they start nearing the end, all we can think about is getting home. This trip was worse. Our spirits had reached an all-time low and the least difference of opinion caused irritation.

This is how things were as we boarded our return flight. After a stopover in Portland, we were going to head on to Seattle, where we would catch our flight to our beloved Sweden.

But something went wrong when we landed in Portland. The flight was delayed, and then finally we had to leave the plane. Something was wrong with the plane, so we had to take another flight. But would we make it in time for our Seattle connection?

The flight attendants kept checking this information, but couldn't give us a definite answer. The anticipation was killing me because I only wanted to get home. After a long while, we were told that we wouldn't be making our connecting flight. There was a possibility, however, that we would make it in time for another flight. But when we landed in Seattle, we ended up just sitting and waiting. None of the airline personnel seemed to be able to help us, kept sending us instead to the next person. It was chaos.

And we weren't in the least bit in the mood for this kind of chaos. We wanted to go home. We didn't want to continue running around the airport with our luggage in tow talking to one airline worker after another without getting helped. The situation was critical and rising.

At long last, one helpful person from the airline informed us that there were no more flights to Northern Europe that day. We would instead be offered accommodations for the night so that we could take the regular flight the next day.

We were booked into the Sheraton and transported there. We were able to shower, eat an excellent meal and finally get some rest. In the middle of the night, I was woken though by a dripping noise. Since I couldn't fall back asleep, I had to climb into my wheelchair so I could try to find out where the noise was coming from.

In the bathroom, I discovered that the toilet wasn't working right. The water seemed to be running right through it. I tried flushing it a few

times, but this didn't help. I closed the bathroom door, but soon discovered that this didn't prevent me from hearing the drip-drip-dripping.

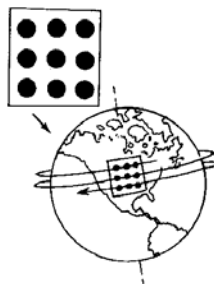
What should I do? It wouldn't be right to call and wake up one of my assistants just for this in the middle of the night. I considered my options and decided that if I was to get any sleep that night, I had to take care of this myself.

The most obvious thing would be to call reception and have them take care of it. But this would not be so easy for me. Since I cannot hold a telephone receiver to my ear, I would somehow have to get the receiver off the phone base, punch in the number with my nose and then position the receiver so that I could talk into the mouthpiece.

I did all this on my bed. I got onto my knees at the edge of the bed and put the phone on the bed so I could punch in the number with my nose. But what was I going to say? And would they understand me?

Most people would probably hesitate calling down to a hotel reception in the middle of the night when in another country just to tell them that the toilet isn't working properly. On top of this, I have a speech impediment that makes it difficult for people who don't know me to understand me over the phone. But I didn't give myself time to think about this. I simply called and said, "My toilet is out of order." As if it were the most natural thing in the world, the receptionist answered, "I'll send someone up."

Fifteen minutes later, a plumber stood at my door, toolbox in hand. He had my toilet repaired within two minutes and was gone before I knew it. The next morning when I woke, I wondered if I had dreamed the whole thing. It was too surrealistic meeting a plumber in the middle of the night at the Sheraton just because I was sleepless in Seattle.



Answer to the question on page 2.