

## Seven Principles for Possibility Thinking

Many of us who revel in the *World of Possibilities* are often considered unrealistic and far too high on the risk-taking scale. But as my friend Randy Gage wrote in *Risky is the New Safe*, the most dangerous thing leaders can do is maintain the status quo.

But to help those hesitant to venture far beyond their comfort zone here are seven principles about how possibilities work.

- 1) **Everything that will ever be possible is already possible.** This simply means that whatever *possibility* you want to make into a new *reality* has already been started. Don't let this freak you out...but the *energy* behind that possibility already exists. We manifest that energy by opening the windows and doors of our minds. It really starts with what *belief* you hold about a possibility. "Belief" means "confidence reposed in a person or thing." At one point the word was also associated with "to care, desire, love." I have to ask it: *Exactly how much do you want that possibility to be a reality?*
- 2) **Just because it's possible doesn't mean we should do it.** All kinds of hurtful, illegal and destructive things are "possible" and goodness knows we have enough sad examples of that in the world today. We're not talking here about an evil category of possibilities.

We *are* talking about choosing between possibilities that have different benefits. Your company makes a widget. You could make it so it lasts forever and costs more or you can make it so its cheap and lasts one day past its warranty. One possibility is to significantly increase profits by tripling the cost of a drug knowing people will pay pretty well anything for a cure. Or you can add hundreds of capabilities to IoT devices that 99.8% of purchasers will never use or even know they're there. Which possibility do you choose?

Obviously there are pros and cons to every possibility. So, in truth, it gets down to one's value system and what we believe is right and good...and would make our kids proud of us.

- 3) **Like most everything else, possibilities need cost/benefit analysis.** While it's true we need to be clear about our corporate values, the brutal truth is that the *benefit* of each possibility has to be weighed against the *cost* of implementing that possibility. Being crystal clear about what your *brand*

stands for is key to working this out. Quality? Economy? Innovation? Customization? Chose the possibilities that strengthen the brand.

I have a terrific sporty car that has everything you could ever imagine... *except* blind spot indicators. Why was that possibility ignored? I'd have gladly paid five times whatever it would have cost the manufacturer to install them.

- 4) **Even a slight iteration expands a possibility by an order of magnitude.** The example I often use to illustrate this point is a dinner party. You and your spouse invite two other couples over for dinner. Six people intending to sit around a table have 720 possibilities for where to sit. If one of those couples happens to bring along just one other person, seven people have 5,040 possibilities for where to sit.

Even one small additional idea that at first seems inconsequential can make all the difference in the world.

- 5) **ALL possibilities are interdependent and must be evaluated as a whole, not as an independent factor.** Adding a possibility to an existing system changes everything. If I could get anyone to understand the centrality of this principle it would be politicians! They tend to look at every issue like it was a stand-alone problem. But before casting the first stone, let's admit we are not exempt from this mistake either.

This is not to discourage possibility thinking, it's to better our thinking. At the time of this writing the government is thinking of the possibility of applying a tariff to imported steel. They want to protect home-grown steel. Yet, any of us could easily sit down and make a list of the reverberations of that possibility on the construction industry and the customers it serves. The point is we need to think things through not just think we're solving a specific problem. The term "unintended consequences" comes into play when we neglect to think in terms of whole systems.

- 6) **See your *highest* possibilities and then lower sights if you have to.** Much of the time we simply can't have what we really want to happen. It's more complicated than we can handle or afford. But even considering the ultimate possibility is energizing. It's *possible* for me to fly to an overseas gig in First Class on Emirates Airlines where my seat would be bigger than my first house. Unfortunately my client won't entertain that possibility. So I lower my sights to Economy which is still pretty amazing!

Don't cut off an idea just because you immediately think it's not going to work. What if it could? What would it take? What would make the ideal possible? Don't lower your sights until you absolutely have to.

- 7) **Yesterday's success is the greatest threat to tomorrow's possibilities.** We used to say "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." Then some consultants got us to say "If it ain't broke, break it" which, if you think about it, is blatantly self-serving. My approach is *not* to foolishly break it. Instead add possibilities to it. An advancement. A new application. Few things are more profitable than finding a totally new customer category or application for a legacy product.

Look, if you're having the best year ever, it is highly unlikely that anyone will encourage "out of the box" thinking. We only do that if we're struggling. Nothing could be more shortsighted. While we're sitting there enjoying our success, a competitor is coming up with a new possibility. Especially in the best of times, insist on everyone constantly asking one question: *What else is possible?*