

# Small Experiments

From birth, we learn through experimentation. This experiential learning contributes to our professional success, as well.

by **Linda Rising** | risingl1@cox.net

I do a lot of traveling across time zones, and, invariably, I make a mistake the first night as I set my travel alarm clock. No matter how careful I am, I miss some button push or setting. In the morning, my mistake is so obvious and I do what I think most of us do—I start saying how stupid I am. In my case, I can also add some pointed comment about my age, suggesting that it might be time to check into a nursing home. I carry this self-berating home with me, and on one occasion, my husband said, “You should take your own advice.”

“What do you mean?” I replied, completely taken aback. He was listening to something I said!

“You always say that you should ask what you are going to do differently. So, instead of beating yourself up, think of something to do differently to solve this problem.”

He was so right. I do say that—all the time! And now, faced with this challenge, what would I do differently? I wasn’t sure why I couldn’t set my current alarm clock correctly. Should I pack my instructions and reread them on the first night? Maybe create a checklist? I know my brain doesn’t work well when jet lagged, but that is hard to avoid when crossing time zones. Should I set the clock before I leave home?

Finally, I bought a second alarm clock. On my next trip, I dutifully set both clocks and, to my very great surprise, the next morning I found that I had set them both correctly. Had I solved the problem? Several other trips confirmed that having two clocks and setting them both somehow resulted in both clocks being set correctly.

I have read that when we have two slightly different settings, doing something in one setting will trigger a reminder about something that has to be done in the other, and going back and forth results in correctly setting both. I must point out, however, that I learned about this after I had bought the second clock. I had no idea whether buying the second clock would really solve the problem. It was a small experiment.

I visit organizations to do retrospectives. You might wonder why a company would bring in an outsider to examine the results of a project. Almost always, it’s due to some kind of failure. The failures present a long list of difficulties. Common items on this list are: missed or misunderstood re-

quirements, poor understanding of business needs, and politics within the development teams. Many of these are big, complicated problems, and, of course, we feel they must have big, complicated solutions!

I used to think that trying to solve a problem with an action plan was the way out. I have wasted more time than I care to think about planning and drawing up steps to a solution for a problem. What I see as the way out these days is a very, very small experiment. I hold that we can’t know how to solve the problem. We never could, despite all the “Five Whys” or “root-cause analysis.” The neuroscientists tell us

that we don’t know why we do what we do and that also applies to organizations, which are just collections of people.

The idea of small experiments is appealing for a number of reasons. It shifts attention from the problem to a hopeful future—we don’t know why the problem exists, but we could try something different in the future that might lead us to a desirable outcome. It’s fun to experiment—we don’t typically like “change,” but we do like to try something new. There is a sense of adventure in it—if it doesn’t work,

we can try something else. There is no failure, only learning. We’re hoping, of course, for some small experiment to make a big difference (a tipping point), but we can’t plan for that.

Folks at any level can tackle even big problems by doing something small at their own level. For example, one form of experiment is to “pretend.” I’m thinking in particular of an issue I often see: lack of effective communication. Usually this means communication with some person outside the team or in some other part of the organization. The experiment for the team would be to pretend that communication is effective. What would that look like? I think it would look like every member on the team doing everything he or she possibly can to effectively communicate. I often suggest some influence techniques to get things started: Try to see things from another’s point of view, go out of your way to be helpful, ask for a favor (I really like that one). It’s really the Just Do It pattern.

Neuroscientists tell us that when we pretend to be happy or sad or effective, we become what we are pretending. We create our own reality. It’s a little New Age-y sounding, but

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those neuroscientists have some convincing experiments of their own.

I was watching an inspiring video of a presentation by Muhammad Yunus, the Nobel Prize winner who instigated the microfinance movement in Bangladesh. He said that at the beginning he found the problems of poverty overwhelming. So, with the attitude of “I can’t do big things, but I can do something small,” Yunus began with a small experiment that involved lending small amounts of money to a small number of people. Today, his financial services are provided by the Grameen Foundation, and experiments are taking place in thirty-six countries, including—and this was a big surprise for me—several locations in the United States. It’s inspirational to see where a series of small experiments can lead.

You can’t realistically plan anything from the beginning; the only way to reach your long-term goals or solve your big problems is to try a small thing and learn from the experience. That’s how we have always learned. Babies do this from the start. It’s the basis for the scientific approach. Experiment and learn. **{end}**



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