

How to Break Through Your Limits and Achieve Greatness

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In his installation pieces, artist Michael Murphy translates renderings of flat, 2D images into three-dimensional spaces. The viewer who sees the image of an eye, for example, would totally disagree with the person viewing the same piece of art from any other perspective. In fact, leave the single spot where Murphy's eye is visible, and the image suddenly explodes into a galaxy of floating wooden balls. Depending on which perspective you see it from or which position in the room you're standing in, you could have an infinite number of ways to describe what one viewer so clearly saw as an eye.

This is what we do every day with the world around us. Think of how many descriptions we use to try and define people – height, weight, hair color, DNA coding – but we could never possibly identify every single dimension of their being. There could always be another way to describe them. The closest we could ever come would always be at least one dimension less. This demonstrates the limit of our perspectives but also offers unlimited possibilities for us to continue our exploration and imagination. In the same way, we could never imagine every possible approach to problem-solving, goal-setting and our own self-betterment. Everything in life is limitless – perspectives, solutions and room for improvement – but we define the quality of our lives by how much we push those limits.

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There are no limits

When I attempt to solve a problem, I approach it with three principles in mind. The first is an understanding of the incompleteness of all perspectives. If viewers of Murphy's eye were to reconstruct what they saw depending on where they stood, and we were to combine those limited perspectives into one, even if that limit included everyone on this planet, we would still be able to find another perspective and a different view. This is related to the diverging nature of brainstorming.

The second principle allows each perspective to have any opportunity to be heard and reviewed. Each perspective is equally valid depending on the situation in which it was generated, meaning we can respect all opinions without bias. That is, however, until we confront a problem that needs to be solved, which presents the third principle – a break in that symmetry of perspectives. This is related to the converging nature of problem-solving. When facing the problem of naming his work, for example, Murphy could have brainstormed limitless solutions, but his goal was to narrow the viewer's focus onto the same concern as his: government tracking and its watchful reach into people's personal lives. Naming his work "Perceptual Shift" brings them closer to seeing his perspective – that many may not see the watchful eye unless they shift their perspective.

Just like the infinite number of perspectives to view his art, there were an infinite number of solutions he could have devised to name his art. But he had to narrow down his own divergent perspectives to the best possible one at that time. Even still, there could be a better name to serve his purpose more effectively if he examined the problem from one more dimension; yet another limitless pool of opportunity.

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Pushing our limits to reach new heights

In the same way that solutions to problems are limitless, there is a limitless amount of data available to help us improve. It would be impossible to brainstorm an exhaustive list of all the room for improvement because there can always be one more idea. The two-dimensional ways we can approach our three-dimensional world are endless to the Nth degree: There is always an N+1 to be found.

Of course, we all know there are physical limits to what the human body can do. Those who break those physical limits set world records until someone else comes along to push them even further. This is what separates elite athletes from average sports players – they push their limits to be the best in the world at what they do by practicing their skills every day.

I try to encourage my son to take this same perspective as a hockey goalie every time he lets in a goal. I tell him to reflect on each one – the angle, direction, speed and player's movements. Even though he could never possibly come up with an exhaustive list of all dimensions for improvement, by brainstorming as many as he can conceive, he can identify infinitely more ways to protect the goal better. With hindsight, we can always learn from our mistakes and identify what works and what doesn't to find a better solution. Leaders can apply this to their own problem-solving and encourage the same mindset in the members of their team.

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It's all part of the game

Of course, I also remind my son not to dwell on those goals he lets in. It's a natural part of the game. Sometimes, letting in goals could be a simple matter of bad luck, just as allowing no goals involves a certain amount of positive luck. Tapping into our limitless room for improvement is our small effort to control how we reduce that unlucky probability. The best goalies become the best and let in fewer goals because they use every allowed goal as a learning opportunity to prevent the next one.

In the same way, failure is a vital part of achieving success when we use those experiences to better ourselves and fine-tune our skills. The best way of doing something today might not be the best way of doing it tomorrow. Stay open to the limitlessness of improvement. Let nothing be "too outrageous" or determine "it won't work" before allowing it to exist as an option. Brainstorm as many ideas as possible and narrow them down to the best solution, knowing there could always be a better way and always aiming to find it.

Each time we go back to square one and brainstorm another list of solutions to find this extra dimension, we come up with answers we haven't tried before to accomplish our goals better. Understanding the limitlessness of problem-solving as an opportunity for improvement is how we grow. The framework of these principles is universal and applicable to any scenario, from becoming a better hockey player to leading a business for better performance and everything else in between.

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