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WHAT'S THE OPPOSITE?

Of all the things that thwarted early Arctic exploration, the onset of a polar winter remained the most ineluctable... And the most deadly! So concluded radical Norwegian explorer Fridjof Nansen... Knowing his attempt to reach the North Pole would fail if his ship became packed in and crushed by winter ice, his solution was both elegant and brilliant. So what did he do?

The answer is an excellent example of 'Opposite Thinking'. This is at once both an entirely obvious and quite subtle approach! At its simplest, you consider an idea that you have, and ask: "What's the exact opposite of this?" Doing so not only allows you to double your idea pool, but also gives you an indication of the range of thinking that lies between the two ideas. In other words, it suggests a spectrum of thinking between the black and white…

For example, take the situation of wanting to make an ideas meeting different. Typically, a 'brainstorm' is held in small groups, at the office, during the afternoon. Asking "What's the opposite?" instantly – and almost without thought – gives distinct alternatives: larger groups or individuals, out of the office, not in the afternoon!

So if you want to change your approach, you might immediately think to try asking individuals to each generate 10 ideas, over breakfast, in the coffee shop, or wonder: where, outside the office, might be more conducive to ideation? As you begin toying around with each element, you'll quickly see how this simple question *instantly* shifts your perspective.

An interesting example of this opposite thinking can be seen in the extraordinary creativity of engineers planning to relocate Egypt's Kalabsha Temple in 1970. The tides of the Nile left the 2,000 year old site underwater for nine months of the year – nowhere near long enough to move in the necessary equipment and manpower, cut the archeological treasure into 1,600 blocks, label them and move everything out again!

So the German engineering team chose to do the exact opposite: they let the river rise to its highest point and only then began dismantling the temple – using cranes on barges! As the waters dropped, so too dropped the barges with the cranes, allowing workers to remove the many layers of stone from the top down... When they reached the lowest levels, they had plenty of time to take out the foundations and equipment because it was the dry season!

In much the same way, Arctic explorer Fridjof Nansen realised that his predecessors' biggest mistake was trying to race to the Poles ahead of winter. Other ships – fast and light in weight – had already tried this and repeatedly failed: they were crushed by the relentless advance of the freezing ice fields around them!

So Nansen did the opposite: he built a slow-moving, heavy vessel, 'The Fram', with a uniquely strong, smooth, round bottom. Consequently, as the jaws of the advancing pack ice formed, they had nothing upon which to take hold: The Fram, large, sturdy & stubby, and carrying enough provisions to allow the crew to survive until the ice thawed – simply rose up and onto the ice shelf... There, she lolled gently onto one side and came to rest as the crew began the next stage of their journey!*

Our own 'Rube Goldberg Machine' video from Christmas 2013 also illustrates how opposite thinking works... When the idea first came up, this was going to be a very large and elaborate prop; the video would show media equipment toppling over in an enormous domino effect, all round the office. The piece would necessarily cut to show action in various different rooms... However, in an attempt to increase our options, the question was posed: what is the opposite of this approach?

In this case, identifying the opposites is very simple. They would be: *don't use* media equipment, reduce the scale of the objects, restrict the action to a much smaller area – and film it in one take! Now when you watch the piece, you can easily see that this is the direction in which we went. The machine uses music and a selection of retro toys to give another layer: the emotional resonance that the original idea lacked. See the video here – remember it's the *opposite* of what we first came up with: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5NSf1f07Lj8

Another notable use for this technique involves making a note of everything that you – or your client – dislike about an existing piece. Alternatively, you can start by asking: "If I were trying to make a piece the *same way* as most people make a piece like this, what would I need to do?" Either way, you end up with a list of things upon which you'll want to improve.

As an example, we'll use another DMI Christmas video – this one from 2014. Regardless of the other criteria it needed to meet, our feeling was that it should be a LEGO video. In researching what's been done before, it seemed to us that many of the LEGO videos one sees are predicated only on one idea – and that one idea is often executed rather sloppily. So if we set out to make a video that looked like most of those, or made notes on things we wanted to avoid, what might be on that list? Well, the column on the left is what we find many videos do; the column on the right is its natural and obvious opposite.

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Most LEGO videos:	The 'Opposite' suggests we…
Flicker on account of fluorescent lighting	Use decent lighting
Have irregular shadows from daylight	Use decent lighting – it's imperative!
Show ugly, depleting piles of Lego	Show no 'ugly' LEGO piles
Are filmed on tatty or bland surfaces	Create at least one appropriate 'set'
Show every brick being added	Show 'building' only if it's interesting
Have no music, or don't *use* the music	Make music an integral part of the video
Feature only stop-motion OR time-lapse	Use techniques that serve the 'story'
Are just 'set builds', parodies or sketches	Avoid 'set builds', parodies & sketches!
Use no video, puppetry or in-camera effects	Vary the content to propel the action
Reveal arms, hands or fingers in shots	Scrutinise every image before moving on
Feature just one LEGO set being built	Use whatever LEGO is necessary
Feel overly long	Keep pace through camerawork, music, plot
Keep the camera in one place	Cut – and move the camera *a lot*
Maintain a dull mid-frame throughout	Vary the frame – and get in *close*
Lack interesting camerawork	Use jump cuts, focus pulls, etc.
Let the camera move as taking photos	Remote trigger the camera
Are flat: there's often only one idea!	Layer the production, as with any piece

You can see that the opposite states of many of the situations that we dislike are self-explanatory. The degree to which these 'opposites' shape the feel of the piece may not, however, be apparent! In truth, it's astonishing how much direction the list gives. Add in the facts that it had to be a Christmas piece, and the music track was blatantly lyrical, and you might appreciate how the video very nearly wrote itself after this! Take a look at the 2014 Christmas piece here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3T4s26z7fo

* When we say "lolled" we mean, of course, to drop or droop. We're not saying the ship sent Lots of Love or Laughed Out Loud. For more information on the Opposites Technique, email deej@dmiproductions.co.uk

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