

Where Does the Magic Come From?

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Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.

- Clarke's Third Law

In my career, I have at times run a successful project, built a high-performing team, or conducted a stunning class. Each time, though, I knew that my technology seemed like magic even to me, because I didn't really know how I did it. I do like to succeed, so perhaps I should be content with success alone. But I always worry:

"If it's indistinguishable from magic, how do I know it won't go away next time?"

When I worry, I'm reluctant to change anything, no matter how small, for fear that the magic will flee. I feel trapped between the fear of losing the magic by change and the fear of losing the magic by failing to change - a classic example of the trap known as a "double bind" (damned if you do, damned if you don't).

Double binds often result in paralysis or ritualized behavior. For example, I'm often called upon to improve meetings, but then find it difficult to persuade my clients to change anything about the meeting. "If we move to another room, it might not be as good as this one." "If we don't invite Jack to the next meeting, we might need something he knows." "If we change the order of the agenda, we might not get through on time." "If we vote in a different way, we might make a poor decision." "We must order our donuts from Sally's Bakery or we won't have a successful meeting."

Breaking the Bind

I'd find this behavior even more frustrating if I hadn't experienced the same double bind myself - for example, when faculty considers some potential improvements to our Problem Solving Leadership workshop (PSL). Over the years, lots of people have experienced what they call "the magic of PSL," and we're proud of that. But each time we consider a change, someone raises the fear that the change might make the magic disappear. Fortunately, each time we do this, someone is able to prove that the magic is not tied to the factor under consideration.

For instance, we've worried about changing the hotel or city where PSL is held. We do attempt to find magical sites, but then we remember that many PSLs have transformed mundane hotels in mundane cities into magical sites. This proves to us that the magic can't be in the site, and frees us from that double bind.

Or, we've worried about changing the faculty who teach PSL. We certainly don't choose faculty members at random, but every faculty member has led many, many magical PSLs. So the magic can't be in any particular faculty members.

Or, we've worried about the combination of faculty members. We don't choose our co-training pairs at random, either, but all combinations experience magic. So the magic can't be in the faculty combination.

Again, we've worried about the materials we use. We certainly don't choose materials at random, but we do change materials from class to class, and each class deviates from the "standard" materials in a variety of ways. Indeed, there is no single item of material that's in common between the very first PSL (back in 1974) and the most recent one. So the magic can't be in particular materials, either.

The same approach can be used to break other double binds - by finding a counter example to match each objection:

- "If we move to another room, it might not be as good as this one." "Ah, but remember when they were painting this room and we we met downstairs? We had a good meeting then."

- "If we don't use Microsoft Project, this project might fail." "Could be, but we did project X with other tracking software, and we did a fine job."

- "If we change to a new version of the operating system, we might have crashes." "True. But we had a few crashes the last time we upgraded, and though it was some trouble, we dealt with them."

- "If I clean up that code, the system might fail." "That could happen, but the previous three times we cleaned up some code, we caught all the failures in our regression testing. So let's do it, but let's be careful."

The Effective Use of Failure

What can you do if you don't have a counter-example and can't create one in a safe way? In that case, it helps if you can demystify the magic and understand its underlying structure. To do this, you need examples where the magic didn't happen. In social engineering, as in all engineering, failures teach you more than successes. For instance, the PSL faculty became more aware of the source of PSL magic by observing a few times that the magic didn't "work." Usually, people come to PSL voluntarily, but not always. Once in a while, someone is forced to come to PSL to be "fixed," but people who have been labeled as "broken" may resent the whole experience, and may not feel much PSL magic at all.

From these rare failures of PSL magic, we have identified one key component of the magic of PSL:

People are there because they have chosen to be there.

Curiously, the same component works in creating magical meetings, magical projects, and magical teams. When people are given a choice, they are the magic. Or, more precisely, they create the magic.

When people choose to attend a workshop, to participate in a project, or to join a team, they plunge themselves fully into the experience, rather than simply going through the motions. Consultants can thus have a "magic" advantage over employees: They always know that they've chosen this assignment, so they can always throw themselves into it without reservation. Employees can have this choice, too, but they often forget - just as some consultants forget when they feel forced to take an assignment out of economic necessity.

Keep this in mind the next time you choose an assignment. If you feel forced, you won't do your magical best. You won't have access to the magic that lives inside of yourself.

About the PSL Insider

The PSL Insider is published by Weinberg and Weinberg to share insights and to encourage attending our Problem Solving Leadership (PSL) workshop. For information about the workshop content, schedule, cost, and location(s), see our website:

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Choosing PSL

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I've been asking and I have not found anyone who feels that they have a really good description of PSL. If we can't describe PSL, how can anyone help others knowledgeably choose to attend?

We each routinely face "forced choices" in our lives, where the unknowability of the outcomes leaves us either stunned or frantically pursuing information that doesn't exist. In these situations, choosing itself becomes a double bind. But referring and being referred doesn't need to so entangle the parties.

Choosing well means selecting the right choices. Timing, choosing between now and later, is an example of a false choice. No one can adequately prepare to experience what many attendees say "changed my life." How could they? Now or later are weak alternatives when considering PSL.

Obligation versus interest guarantees a tangle. Feeling obligated doesn't necessarily mean that one shouldn't attend. The

imprisoning double-bind here is believing that you must attend for "their" reasons. Anyone can escape this bind by simply deciding to attend to pursue their own interests. No one except you really has to know that you've transformed your assignment into a gift for yourself.

No one can be fully informed before deciding which future to choose. The desire to be fully informed is itself faulty. Real choices are best informed by being clear about what YOU want out of an experience rather than by trying to understand what it is likely to give you. Why? Knowing what you want is already yours, knowing what you'll get isn't yet, and getting it depends upon what you are pursuing. What you'll get out of PSL (and life) depends most upon what you want out of it. If the choice hinges upon knowing how it will turn out, you might as well just wait it out. Choosing not to choose is often the most pernicious choice.

I tell people that choosing PSL is choosing to get better at using your self as a medium to get what you want. This is real magic informed by real choice. PSL is not an end but rather a wonderful medium for choosing, pursuing, and for finding what you want in this world. What part of choosing what you want makes this choice so difficult?