

# Mercuri Mail

The India Journal of Mercuri International Oct - Dec 2012

If you ask a manager what he does, he will probably tell you he plans, organizes, coordinates and controls. Then watch what he does. Don't be surprised if you can't relate what you see to these four words

When he is called and told that one of his factories has just burned down, and he advises the caller to see whether temporary arrangements can be made to supply customers through a foreign subsidiary, is he planning, organizing, coordinating or controlling? How about when he is presenting a gold watch to a retiring employee? Or when he is attending a conference to meet people in the trade? Or on returning from the conference, when he tells one of his employees about an interesting product idea he picked up there?

The fact is that these four words which have dominated management vocabulary since the French Industrialist Henry Fayol first introduced them in 1916, tell us little about what managers actually do. At best, they indicate some vague objectives managers have when they work.

Some folklore and facts about Managerial Work:

1. Folklore- The manager is a selective systematic planner. The evidence on this issue is overwhelming, but not a shred of it supports this statement.

Fact- Study after study has shown that managers work at an unrelenting pace, that their activities are characterized by brevity, variety and discontinuity and that they are strongly oriented to action and dislike reflective activities.

No study has found important patterns in the way managers schedule their time. They seem to jump from issue to issue, continually responding to the needs of the moment.

2. Folklore- The effective manager has no regular duties to perform.

Fact- In addition to handling exceptions, managerial work involves performing a number of regular duties, including ritual and ceremony, negotiations and processing of soft information that links the organization with its environment.

A study suggests that Managers believe that in order to keep customers, they need to be seen regularly. Also studies of managers' information flow suggest that the managers play a key role in securing "soft" external information (much of it available only to them because of their status) and in passing it along to their subordinates.

3. Folklore - The senior manager needs aggregated information which a formal management information system best provides.



**Classic Advice on Handling The Manager's Job**

- HBR The Manager's Job-Folklore and Fact-  
Henry Mintzberg

Fact - Managers strongly favor the verbal media- namely telephone calls and meetings. The evidence comes from every single study of managerial work. Consider the following:

\* In two British studies managers spent an average of 66% and 80% of their time in verbal communication. In a study of five American chief executives, the figure was 78%.

\* These five chief executives treated mail processing as a burden to be dispensed with.

\* These five chief executives skimmed most of their periodicals, never looked at standard cost reports.

\* They initiated on their own a grand total of 25 pieces of mail during the 25 days observed by the author.

4. Folklore- Management is or at least becoming a science and a profession. By almost any definitions of science and profession, this statement is false. Brief observation of any manager will quickly lay to rest the notion that managers practice a science.

Fact- The managers' Programmes- to schedule time, process information, make decisions and so on- remain locked deep inside their brains. Thus to describe these programmes, we rely on word like judgment and intuition, seldom stopping to realize that they are merely labels for our ignorance.

We can see that the manager's job is enormously complicated and difficult. The manager is overburdened with obligations, yet he cannot easily delegate his tasks. As a result he is driven to overwork and forced to do many tasks superficially. Brevity, fragmentation and verbal communication characterize his work.



## Our Thoughts

**VINTAGE** explores the facts and folklore relating to the job of a Manager

**FOCUS** describes problem definition for breakthrough solutions

Find out the connection between Heraclitus and problem solving in **Must Read**

Why we resist change - turn to the last page

The pressures of the manager's job is getting worse. Where before he only needed to respond to owners and directors, now he finds subordinates with democratic norms continually reduce his freedom to issue unexplained orders and a growing number of outside influences (consumer groups, government agencies and so on) expect his attention.

The first step is to provide the manager with some help to find out what his job really is?

Here are some self study questions for managers which will help him find it out!

1. Where do I get my information from
2. What information do I disseminate?
3. Do I balance information collecting with action taking?
4. What pace of change am I asking my organization to tolerate?

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5. Am I sufficiently well informed to pass judgment on my subordinates' proposals.
6. What is my vision for my organization?
7. How do my subordinates react to my management style?
8. What kind of external relationship do I maintain and how?
9. Is there a system to my time scheduling?
10. Do I overwork?
11. Am I too superficial in what I do?
12. Do I orient myself too much towards current, tangible activities?
13. Do I use different media appropriately.
14. How do I blend my personal rights and duties.

Roger Von Oech has won a loyal following around the country. This book is a creativity tool based on the ancient wisdom of Heraclitus.

The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus was famous for his brilliant and provocative sayings:

"Dogs bark at what they don't understand."

"You can't step in the same river twice."

"The doctor inflicts pain to cure suffering."

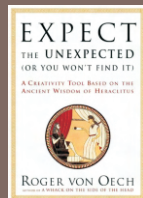
Today, more than 2500 years ago, his ideas about life, nature and the cosmos remain as original as ever. In *Expect the Unexpected*, Roger uses thirty of Heraclitus' epigrams as springboards to dazzling creativity.

Treating each saying as an inexhaustible source of inspiration, he supplies amusing anecdotes, puzzles, mind-bending riddles, hidden jokes and intriguing questions designed to topple old habits of thought and fire the imagination. Drawing on a cornucopia of examples from science, business and the history of invention, as well as from Literature and popular culture, Roger shows how to reverse your expectations, turn change to your advantage, create powerful metaphors and avoid the pitfalls of 'moreness' - that is assuming that more is automatically better - to find novel solutions to even the most intractable problems.

Anyone searching for new approaches for problem solving - from managers to students to artists - will find this book a valuable tool. You can treat this book as a one time read and complete it at one go or use it as a morning meditation or consult the book as a daily oracle.

*Expect the unexpected* offers a good jolt to the imagination.

### Must Read



*Expect the Unexpected (Or you won't find it)*

Roger Von Oech

USD 18.50, Simon & Schuster, 194 pages

Consider this example: Heraclitus says - "It is disease that makes health pleasant, hunger that makes fullness good and weariness that makes rest sweet."

Roger translates this saying into key creative insights:

"Embrace the necessity of opposites."

"Consider the opposite viewpoint."

"Use what's not there."

"Ask a Fool."

Each creative insight is illustrated with many examples that make this book a practical and ready to use toolkit. The entire book displays "business brilliance and gets the mental juices flowing".

*Happy Reading!*

### Ravi's Corner

#### December-Season of Carnatic Music



Classical Notes  
Soul Stirring Lyrics  
Heart Rending Vibrations  
All leading to the Almighty

My spirit is enlightened  
I am soaked in divinity  
Dazzled by the themes  
I seek more of it  
I can't have enough of it!

Who is greater?  
The singer or the composition  
The answer eludes  
Better to sit back and enjoy!  
The sheer power of the music  
envelops the entire being and  
Energy is generated  
All other things just standstill.

# The Power of Defining the Problem

## Focus

Well-defined problems lead to breakthrough solutions. When developing new products, processes, or even businesses, most companies aren't sufficiently rigorous in defining the problems they're attempting to solve and articulating why those issues are important. Without that rigor, organizations miss opportunities, waste resources, and end up pursuing innovation initiatives that aren't aligned with their strategies. How many times have you seen a project go down one path only to realize in hindsight that it should have gone down another? How many times have you seen an innovation program deliver a seemingly breakthrough result only to find that it can't be implemented or it addresses the wrong problem? Many organizations need to become better at asking the right questions so that they tackle the right problems.

Here are three stories of organizations in very different fields that did a spectacular job of defining the problem. This in turn attracted the right kind of innovators and led to breakthrough solutions.

### The Subarctic Oil Problem

More than 20 years after the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill, cleanup teams operating in subarctic waters still struggled because oil became so viscous at low temperatures that it was difficult to pump from barges to onshore collection stations.

**How the Problem Was Defined.** In its search for a solution, the [Oil Spill Recovery Institute](#) framed the problem as one of "materials viscosity" rather than "oil cleanup" and used language that was not specific to the petroleum industry. The goal was to attract novel suggestions from many fields.

**The Breakthrough.** A chemist in the cement industry was awarded \$20,000 for proposing a modification of commercially available construction equipment that would vibrate the frozen oil, keeping it fluid.

### The ALS Research Problem

By the late 2000s, researchers trying to develop a cure or treatment for amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease) had not made much progress. One major obstacle was the inability to detect and track the progression of the disease accurately and quickly. Because researchers could not know precisely what stage ALS sufferers had reached, they greatly increased the pool of participants in clinical trials and lengthened their studies, which drove up costs so much that few treatments were developed and evaluated.

**How the Problem Was Defined.** Instead of framing its initiative as a search for a cure, [Prize4Life](#), a nonprofit organization, focused on making ALS research feasible and effective. The solution it sought was a biomarker that would enable faster and more-accurate detection and measurement of the progression of the disease.

**The Breakthrough.** In 2011, a researcher from Beth Israel Hospital in Boston was paid \$1 million for a noninvasive, painless, and low-cost approach, which detects ALS and assesses its progression by measuring changes in an electrical current traveling through muscle. This biomarker lowers the cost of ALS research by providing accurate and timely data that allow researchers to conduct shorter studies with fewer patients.

### The Solar Flare Problem

In 2009 NASA decided it needed a better way to forecast solar flares in order to protect astronauts and satellites in space and power grids on Earth. The model it had been using for the past 30 years predicted whether radiation from a solar flare would reach Earth with only a four-hour lead time and no more than 50% accuracy.

**How the Problem Was Defined.** NASA did not ask potential solvers simply to find a better way to predict

solar flares; instead, it pitched the problem as a data challenge, calling on experts with analytic backgrounds to use one of the agency's greatest assets — 30 years of space weather data — to develop a forecasting model. This data-driven approach not only invited solvers from various fields but also enabled NASA to provide instant feedback, using its archived data, on the accuracy of proposed models.

**The Breakthrough.** A semiretired radio-frequency engineer living in rural New Hampshire used data analysis and original predictive algorithms to develop a forecasting model that provided an eight-hour lead time and 85% accuracy. He was awarded \$30,000 for this solution.

Critically analyzing and clearly articulating a problem can yield highly innovative solutions. As these stories illustrate, organizations that ask better questions and define their problems with more rigor can create strategic advantage and unlock truly groundbreaking innovation. Asking better questions delivers better results.

- Dwayne Spradlin





## Notes from all over

\* "When all think alike, then no one is thinking."  
- **Walter Lippman**

\* "Capital isn't so important in business. Experience isn't so important. You can get both these things. What is important is ideas. If you have ideas, you have the main asset you need, and there isn't any limit to what you can do with your business and your life."  
- **Harvey Firestone**

\* "Great is the human who has not lost his childlike heart."  
- **Mencius**

\* "It's easy to come up with new ideas; the hard part is letting go of what worked for you two years ago, but will soon be out of date."  
- **Roger von Oech**

\* "The best way to have a good idea is to have a lot of ideas."  
- **Dr. Linus Pauling**

\* "Discovery consists of seeing what everybody has seen and thinking what nobody has thought."  
- **Albert von Szent-Gyorg**

\* "To raise new questions, new possibilities, to regard old problems from a new angle, requires creative imagination and marks real advance in science."  
- **Albert Einstein**

\* "Without the playing with fantasy no creative work has ever yet come to birth. The debt we owe to the play of imagination is incalculable."  
- **Carl Jung**

\* "There's a way to do it better—find it."  
- **Thomas Edison**

\* "The essential part of creativity is not being afraid to fail."  
- **Edwin H. Land**

## Ten Reasons why people resist change - Rosabeth Moss Kanter

- \* Loss of control.
- \* Excess Uncertainty.
- \* Surprise Surprise.
- \* Everything seems different.
- \* Loss of face.

- \* Concerns about competence.
- \* More work.
- \* Ripple effects.
- \* Past resentments.
- \* Sometimes the threat is real.



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Edited by Malathy Sethuram on behalf of Mercuri Goldmann (India) Pvt. Ltd. This publication is meant for private circulation only. Designed & Artwork by Ravi Shankar De.

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