

PART 1: IT'S ON *YOU*

Outside the Box

Quite often, it's on us to fix a problem, and many times, we need more than a little shot of creativity. When the chips are down, we have to think outside the box.

At the first meeting of River Valley Church, thirteen people showed up. Only four of them weren't related to me or weren't promised a job at the church when we could afford them. If those four, two never came back. It wasn't exactly the most auspicious start to a church, but I immediately started looking for a school where we could meet.

I found two schools in Rosemount, Minnesota, that were possibilities. One of them had an open classroom setting: no walls and just some bookcases as dividers between classes of students. As I walked through the building, I strolled past a row of bird cages with cockatoos and parakeets with bird poop spattered on the floor. I tried to envision a nursery of crying babies and toddlers running around without any walls to contain them. I thought of groups of children who didn't exactly need additional distractions to keep them from listening to a Bible story. And then I imagined telling visitors, "We're so glad to have you visit River

Valley! I hope you were able to dodge the bird poop on your way in today.” Option 1 was out.

I walked into Shannon Park Elementary School. It was perfect—a dream come true. It was brand new. I asked if we could use the gym, and the [superintendent, principal, other?] responded, “Yes, you can do that.”

I asked, “How many classrooms can we use?”

“None,” was the instant reply.

“But we have to have classrooms for the nursery and the children’s classes.”

“Sorry, we can’t let you have them. You can use the gym. That’s all.”

I had to think fast. I told him, “What if I use the teachers’ lounge for the babies?” I unashamedly pulled the baby card on him. “You know we can’t have babies in the hallway. That just wouldn’t be right.”

When I saw he was still hesitant, I looked him in the eye and said, “It would be heartless to leave the babies in the hall.”

Finally, he agreed to let us use the teachers’ lounge as our nursery—a victory for River Valley Church and infants everywhere! The gym could be divided into thirds, so we used the dividers to make one section for children’s church. The rest would be where we worshipped. The toddlers, of course, couldn’t be in children’s church, so we put them down a hallway with the portable canisters forming a corral to keep them in.

In a remarkable display of the sinfulness of the human heart, the toddlers gathered in rebellious gangs. Four or five of them somehow decided to form a secret alliance, and with their combined strength, they pushed the heavy canisters enough so they could escape. I wondered why in the world parents of toddlers

would let their kids stay in a makeshift area like this hall, but then I realized parents of toddlers are willing to leave their kids anywhere. They would have been okay with us putting them in the mechanical room and giving them wrenches as toys.

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One Saturday night not long after we started, a tornado blew through the area and knocked out power to the school. New churches are hanging on to their financial lives by a thread, and losing an offering might be too much to bear. We had to have church somewhere! I called the pastor of a church on the other side of town and asked if we could worship with them that Sunday morning. “The only thing I ask,” I explained, “is that you let us take up a separate offering for the people from our church.” He agreed, and we sent out word for everybody to go to the church across town. When we arrived, their bass player hadn’t shown up, so our bass player joined their band for the day.

It gets stranger: That morning, the pastor announced that he was resigning. After he spoke, he told his people, “If you don’t make it as a church after I’m gone, River Valley looks like a really good place for you to go to worship!”

Again and again, I had to find creative solutions to the problems we faced.

TUNNEL VISION

As the old saying goes, “If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.” But not everything is a nail. Problems come in

all shapes and sizes. If we aren't thoughtful and innovative, we'll miss some golden opportunities to grow.

Early in our church's history, I needed to hire some staff members, but we didn't have enough money to pay them. I went to some key donors in the church and made a proposition: If they would pay half a staff member's salary for a year, at the end of that year we'd determine if the staff member's role had created significant growth in the church. If it did, the additional money from new attenders would pay the other half of the salary; if it didn't, we'd thank the person for his or her service and close the book on that role . . . at least at that point. Several of these donors were happy to fund half of the salary of new staff members. It was an awesome solution to our need for more leadership.

Sometimes we have a need for a full-time staff member, but either the church can't afford it or the person we want is only available part-time. Part-time is better than no time. Hire the person you need and trust God to get a lot of work done in half the time.

Pastors often need to think creatively about space in their buildings. They may not want to put toddlers in an area where they can escape and bull rush the congregation, but if they think with an open mind, they may discover ways to add more seats without moving to another building, at least not yet. For instance, I realized that having the platform in the corner enabled us to add about 50 seats. It was an easy way to provide places for more people.

A year and a half after we opened our doors, our band was pretty set and pretty good, but one week, our drummer couldn't make it. We had to have a drummer. I called other churches to see if they would loan us their backup drummer, but nobody had one they were willing to share. I had to find a different solution. By now it was late on Saturday night. I drove to the music store and

walked into the area where drums were displayed. Three employees were standing around. I said, “Hey, I have a proposal for you. Who wants to make \$100 tomorrow morning?”

They looked surprised, but they didn’t blow me off. I continued, “Our church needs a drummer for our band tomorrow. The only requirements are to know how to play the drums and show up sober. If you need a smoke break that’s fine, but being high or drunk isn’t fine. That’s it. Any of you interested?”

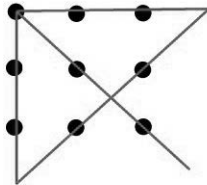
One guy looked at the others to see how they were reacting, and then he looked at me: “\$100 to play at your church in the morning?”

“Yep. That’s it.”

“I’m in.”

I got his name and number. I called our worship leader and told him, “I’ve got a drummer for you. He’s showing up tomorrow morning. Don’t ask too many questions.” The next morning, he came on time. He wasn’t a Christian, but he played the drums and was sober. It worked for everybody.

A few years ago, someone challenged me to connect nine dots with only four straight lines. I looked at it for a long time, and I finally realized could only be done by going outside the boundaries. Here’s what it looks like:



That's our task as leaders: to look for solutions outside the normal boundaries of our jobs. Some of them will work, and some won't, but none of the ones we don't try will work. This diagram instantly showed me that I had lived with self-imposed limitations on the range of possible solutions to wide array of difficulties . . . but no longer. Creative thinking gradually became normal for me.

Some of us are suspicious of creativity because it seems to cause more problems than it solves. In a *Forbes* article called "The Rise of Creativity as a Key Quality in Modern Leadership," David Slocum describes the innate tension between creativity and leadership: "To speak of a creative leader, or manager, is for some a paradox: creativity is chaotic and unrestrained while leadership is orderly and controlling, and setting the two together makes for an uneasy, potentially volatile combination." Slocum traces the history of innovative modern leaders from Henry Ford to Peter Drucker, and he looks to the future:

Returning to the words "creative" and "leadership" themselves, freighted as they are with history, offers some guidance. Together, they suggest bringing novel thinking to leadership challenges and at the same time deploying strategic prioritizing and decision-making to creative opportunities. Rather than antitheses, the words can convey a necessary balance and even symbiosis that support a sustainably successful creative business. No creative leader could ask for more.¹

1 "The Rise of Creativity as a Key Quality in Modern Leadership," David Slocum, *Forbes*, January 27, 2015, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/berlinschoolofcreativeleadership/2015/01/27/the-rise-of-creativity-is-a-key-quality-in-modern-leadership/#2036ef587d1a>

Creativity isn't a distraction or merely an add-on for leaders; it's essential if we're going to take our churches where God wants them to go.

COLLABORATION VS. ISOLATION

It didn't take me very long in leadership to realize that there's a direct correlation between the time I spend with creative people and my level of creativity. I'm sure there are some people who are more creative when they're alone, but I don't know any of them. Even people far over on the scale toward introversion are stimulated and challenged by other artists, thinkers, and leaders.