

THE PROFESSIONAL'S AND THE SLIGHT EDGE THEORY

MINDSET

BY GERRY RISKIN • EDGE INTERNATIONAL



A few years ago Patrick McKenna and I published a work called “Herding Cats” and for the cover we found a photograph of the most ferocious looking lion you have ever seen – maybe you have seen it. Why did we choose that photograph? Because it was a metaphor - it was a symbol for what we believe of professions.

We believe that professionals have the propensity to be the most ferociously independent people who work in a group on the planet. Some people joke that doctors are the worst and maybe they are but they don't work together quite the same way as most other professionals do. Let's face it. Many professionals chose their profession because they wanted to apply a lot of independent thinking; they wanted a lot of control.

They wanted to be able to decide themselves how they would conduct a matter and how they would serve a client.

The second propensity of professionals is to be extremely critical and analytical. Now, those are skills that are absolutely essential for good professional practice. Think about it. When you review a document, let's say an agreement, what are you trying to achieve? You are looking for any amendment that can be made to that document that would make it more effective. In fact, if you're really good at your game, what you're really looking for is omissions - concepts that ought to have been addressed in that document that aren't there. If you're a litigator and you're used to having opposing counsel then you're used to

listening to arguments with a view to destroying them, no matter how good you are. In fact, what you're also thinking about is not only how to destroy them but in what sequence, with what strategic significance, given the nature of the forum you are in. So think about this. As professionals, we tend to be doing a simultaneous translation of everything we see and everything we hear in a highly critical and analytical way. These are essential skills for good professional practice but they do get in the way of some other aspects of our lives. For example, some of us have been told that it impacts our social behaviour. If you have a significant other who is not a professional you may have already had the lecture. If you haven't you can ask for it this evening. It also impacts our ability to be creative and innovative. I'm not suggesting for a moment that good professionals lose the capacity to be critical and analytical for to lose that capacity would be to lose the ability to practise law. However, I think we have to realise that the human brain will not allow us to be critical and analytical and innovative and creative at the same time. They are separate brain functions and what I think all of us need to do when appropriate is learn to suspend that propensity to be critical and analytical.

The third propensity of professionals is to be rather tense. My favourite way of describing this is to ask you to think of a fire station. Think of a fire station for a moment at rest. Dalmatian, shiny trucks, very nice firefighters, perhaps some children touring the fire hall on a safety program. Perhaps one of the

firefighters has just come back from a television studio after doing a program for children about safety. These are nice people. If you walk up to one of them and say "Good morning" you are likely to get a very cordial "Good morning" in return. Now, think of a very different scene. Think of a four-alarm blaze. Think of chemicals stored on an industrial site. Think of the potential for an explosion that could be devastating. Think of a guard that is missing or unaccounted for a life at stake already. Now imagine the same firefighter attacking that fire. Would you walk up to that firefighter and say "Good morning" in that context? I don't think so because you know and I know that the response would be far different. In fact, if you think about your professional practise, which do you think you more closely resemble? The firefighter "at rest" or the firefighter "attacking a four-alarm blaze"? I think most of the good professionals I've served suggest that at the very best it toggles between the two states from time to time. This too comes at a price. Imagine for a moment that as we attack that fire, a junior firefighter comes up to help us by handing us a hose. Our response is supposed to nurture this new firefighter, supposed to develop the firefighter, train the firefighter, make the firefighter more loyal to the firm, enhance the the firefighter's skills. We're supposed to make the firefighter feel good and also "bring them along" at the same time. Isn't that what we're supposed to do. But what do we do? In the heat of the battle we turn to that junior firefighter and say "Not that hose, you idiot, the other one!" ...and then we think maybe later we'll make up

for that by having a little chat – perhaps some tea.

So let's bring these propensities together. We're ferociously independent, we're critical and analytical and we're tense. What that makes for is very low receptivity to some of the information that can help us most. What we need to do, respectfully, is think about that not only for ourselves but for the other professionals with whom we practise. We have to remember that these mindsets result in very specialised behaviours. As you consider this, you will easily think of a significant number of specific examples of how you can employ tactics, inside your firm and outside your firm, in your professional life and indeed in your personal life that will help you overcome these propensities or at least neutralise them. I can assure you that the methodologies contained in this article are practical and capable of being implemented by each and every one of you.

Some years ago I had the privilege of attending a seminar with one of my best clients. This client was extraordinary. He flies his own jet. He's a winner by any definition. He started as a realtor, a simple realtor and then he graduated into more complex development work. He even understood how, during a recession, to become valuable to financial institutions by managing properties that were taken back in foreclosures. He has been enormously successful. He's created software, he's created systems. He's been phenomenal in his area. The seminar he took me to was about a theory called the slight edge theory. And if

you notice a correlation between that theory and the name of our organisation, then you are correct. During the course of that seminar the presenter described the slight edge theory. The slight edge theory has had a tremendous impact on my thinking and of the thinking of those with whom I've worked over the last number of years and I respectfully suggest may have a big impact on your thinking especially in terms of how you could implement and act upon the suggestions contained in this program.

The slight edge theory is quite basic really. It's quite simple. Think of a golf tournament, perhaps involving Tiger Woods, perhaps 72 holes. Imagine for a moment that Tiger Woods wins and his score is 281. What is the second place finisher's score? You're thinking 282, possibly, and you're probably right. In fact Tiger and the other player who came in second may have even had to have a play-off round just to see who won the tournament. Yet look at the first place prize as compared to the second place prize. The first place prize might be millions, the second place prize far, far, far less. What is the percentage difference between the performance of Tiger Woods and the second place finisher? A third of a percent, something along that order? Almost inconsequential. Now think for a moment of a horse race. Imagine for a moment that the first place horse is just slightly ahead of the second place horse at the finish line. What do they do? They take a photograph. It's called a photo-finish. And what do they look for? Which horse's nose is ahead of which other horse's nose. Again,

first prize winner gets a lot of money, second place winner gets a lot less and a few horses after that, as you know, they're out of the money.

What is the percentage of the size of a horse's nose compared to six furlongs. I think you'd agree with me it's infinitesimal. What is the relevance of that golf game or this horse race to the practise of a profession and to this program? Many good professionals think that the extraordinary achievers profession practise, the professionals we all look up to, the exemplary practices, many people think that those people are twice as good or three times as good as the rest will ever be or can ever be. That is wrong. That is nonsense. The very best in the profession are only slightly better than the other good members of the profession. Winners, you will notice, consistently surpass the performance of their peers because they continually improve in small incremental steps. That is the secret to their success.

Well, as you think about your profession practise and as you think about the ideas in this article, remember those who have phenomenal financial success and those who have phenomenal success in attracting the kind of clientele they would like to serve

are not twice as good at these things. In fact they are only slightly better than everybody else. I promise you this – if you work through this analysis - if you accept only those ideas or suggestions which you think will have value to you, if you create only those actions which you think will have a high yield for you – those which will be highly rewarding and if you implement those in small incremental steps, I promise you that in a relatively short period of time, you will be on your way to a much healthier practice, a much more satisfying practice.



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