

# Mentoring for Change

executive mentoring and coaching, leadership, storytelling

Welcome to the Mentoring for Change newsletter. In this issue:

- The Paradox of Choice
- Classic Models – The Creative Process

With best wishes

*Heike the Mentor*



## The Paradox of Choice

I'm a long-term Apple computer user. When I came to buy my latest laptop, I had a choice from 6 models (the entire Apple laptop range) and was able to easily and quickly choose the model that best matched my needs. If I had been a Windows user, it would have been very different. I would have had a choice of thousands of different laptops from hundreds of manufacturers. To make the best choice then would have been almost impossible – I'd have had to spend ages comparing and contrasting before making a decision – but that, as I've discovered from Barry Schwartz's book *The Paradox of Choice* (HarperCollins 2004) is because, at least when buying technology, I'm a maximiser.

Maximisers want to know that they've made the best choice that could be made. The only way to do this is to check out all the alternatives. As a decision-making strategy, maximising works fine when you only have a few options but quickly becomes impractical as the number of options increases.

The alternative is to be a satisficer. To satisfice is to settle for something that is good enough and not to worry about the possibility that there might be something better. So a satisficer decides on her criteria and standards, searches until she finds an item that meets those standards, and at that point she stops.

Being a maximiser has several drawbacks. After they have made a selection, maximisers are nagged by the options they haven't had time to investigate. Not only are maximisers likely to say "If only I had gone to one more shop / listened to Mike's advice /.." they are also likely to experience regret in anticipation of making a decision,

imagining how they will feel if they discover that there was a better option available! Also the more options they look at, the easier it is to imagine alternatives that don't exist but which combine all the best features of each option. In the end maximisers are likely to get less satisfaction out of their choices, even though in objective terms they may have made a better choice. Indeed, maximisers experience less satisfaction with life, are less happy, are less optimistic, and are more depressed than satisficers.

But whilst maximisers in particular suffer more from a surfeit of choice, too much choice is a problem for us all.

As Schwartz points out, when we have no choice, life is unbearable. As choice increases, as it has in our consumer culture, the autonomy, control and liberation this variety brings are powerful and positive. But as the number of choices continues to increase, negative aspects of choice appear and, as the number of choices increases further, we no longer are empowered by choice but tyrannised! Just because *some* choice is good, it doesn't mean that *more* choice is better.

The paradox is that, whilst with limitless choice we produce better results with our decisions than we would in a more limited world, we feel worse about them!

So, what we can do to be more satisfied with our choices and help our coachees to be more satisfied with theirs?

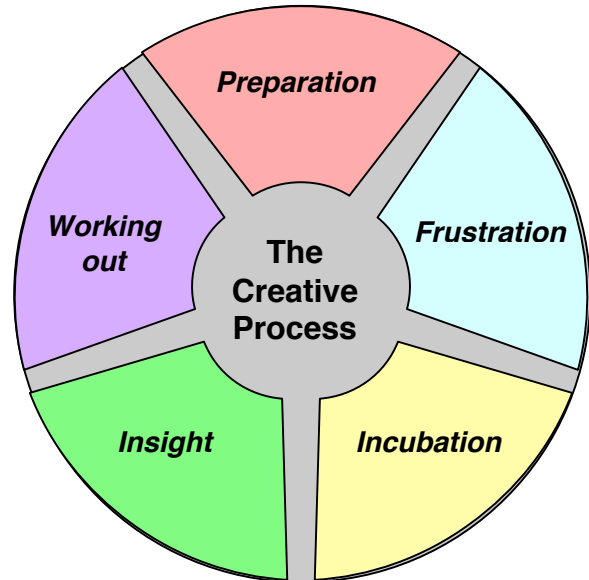
- Recognise that what is most important to us most of the time is not the objective results of decisions, but the subjective results. Since an overabundance of options is likely to lead to worse subjective results we must pass up opportunities to choose and restrict the options we consider.

## Classic Models – The Creative Process

I first came across this model fifteen years ago, and have regularly used it since to facilitate my own creative process and that of my clients.

Creativity is often seen as being only about the moment of insight – the moment of inspiration when the answer comes to us. What this model recognises is that creativity is a process in which insight is but one of the stages. There are five main stages:

1. **Preparation** is concerned with analysing the task, gathering data, looking for patterns, trying out ideas, and questioning assumptions. It's where we bring to light everything we already know about the situation and gather all the resources we can. Sometimes this will be enough to solve the problem – but often it won't be and then we will start to feel increasingly frustrated.
2. It is easy to experience this **Frustration** as a sign of failure and lack of ability. But in fact it indicates precisely the opposite. It is a signal that our habitual ways of thinking about the problem are breaking down and that creativity is becoming possible.  
  
To be creative, by definition we need to get beyond our current beliefs and mindsets, to explore new territories, and to bring what is outside of our consciousness into our awareness. But our rational mind wants to stay with what it knows and tries to hold us back from moving into the unknown, the only place we can be creative! This feeling of frustration is actually the feeling of our conscious mind recognising that it doesn't know the answer and beginning to let go control to our unconscious mind.
3. **Incubation** is the time when we give up trying, put our conscious problem solving on hold, and hand over to the unconscious mind. We do this by 'sleeping on the problem', by doing the washing



up, by staring out of the train window, by having a bath or just by getting on with something else that needs to be done – what I usually do is spend a couple of hours walking along the Malvern Hills.

4. Having done all the groundwork, we then wait for the moment of **Insight** – the 'aHa' moment when we give birth to a new idea, see things in a new way, or create new possibilities. Whilst the insight often appears to have come from nowhere, the creative person knows that it actually occurs as a result of everything that has happened before.
5. To have an insight is one thing; to turn it into form is quite another. The final stage, **Working Out**, involves testing the insights and turning them into something in the world.

For more on this model and creativity in general read *The Creative Manager* by Roger Evans and Peter Russell, Unwin Hyman, 1989.

- Shorten or eliminate deliberations about decisions that are unimportant to you
- Learn to accept "good enough" (be a satisficer, not a maximiser)
- Limit how much we think about the attractive features of options we reject
- Unless we're truly dissatisfied, stick with what we always buy
- Practice an "attitude of gratitude" - consciously strive to be grateful for what is good about a choice or experience, and to be disappointed less by what is bad about it.

I heard the radical architect Christopher Alexander speak. His criterion for choosing one piece of architecture over another? He asks himself "In the presence of which do I feel more whole?" or "Which is more like a picture of my soul?" Now that's a way to make great choices!

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At the Schumacher Lectures in Bristol a few weeks ago

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