



Don't Do as I Say - Do What Thou Wilt or Won't or Whatever

Environment

Tony Broadbent Sat, 27 Jul 2019 18:26 GMT



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Blimey. All I said in my June 21 Opinion piece ('Don't Just Sit There Chewing Over Your Beliefs and Biases...Do Something!') was that we should "do something" instead of "doing nothing" in the face of the overwhelming issues that now confront us all. Such as the ever-rising tide of plastic garbage clogging up the world's oceans and, of course, the ever-present spectre of climate change. And within days I received emails telling me I'd got it all wrong, that I'd got everything backwards.

But such is life: Have an opinion. Wait long enough. And just like when you're waiting for a bus; three of them will come along, all at once, and all of them going in the opposite direction.

Yet that's our social media driven World Wide Web of a world for you. Everyone's opinions are immediately as valid as everyone else's. Even, though, as experience eventually teaches you: Results may vary.

Good thing I'm familiar with Newton's Third Law: "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." Plus, I like to think of myself as being as open minded as the next man. So it was only proper I show due and proper respect and consideration to any and all of my critics. God bless 'em.

And, anyway, I've always been open to adopting new mental models or willing to give an existing mind-set a good wash and brush up when given reason to do so. Readily consigning to the recycling bin any ideas or concepts found to be no longer fit for purpose.

Helpful Criticism One: That I'd made the all too common mistake of confusing the difference between simple motion and purposeful action.

Motion is useful, it's true, but it won't ever produce an outcome in and all by itself. The thing being that all motion really does, is allow one to feel like one's making progress without ever having to run the risk of failure.

Okay, then, I said to myself: If mere "Action this day" will no longer cut it, what about "Purposeful action this day." Not as pithy, perhaps, but entirely workable until all of my now properly purposed actions have become duly instilled as habits.

And, that, I thought, was that. Me, suitably chastised; chastened, even; and on with the show.

But, oh, dearie me, no.

Within days I received my Second Helpful Criticism pointing out how wrong I'd been in suggesting we all "do our bit." Only this time the 'nudge' towards a better mode of thinking wasn't some brand new Millennial mental model, it was a throwback to ancient times.

Now, I'm always open to a bit of Marcus Aurelius. I mean, who hasn't spent time with his truly inspiring 'Meditations' and not come away suitably moved and improved. But the thoughts of Roman satirist Petronius Arbiter (27 AD - 66 AD) on "the illusion of progress" were entirely new to me. Or if I'd ever come across them, before, I'd quite forgotten them. His thoughts on the matter uncannily the same: That simply doing something, rather than nothing, isn't the same as getting results.

To wit: "We trained hard, but it seemed that every time we were beginning to form into teams, we would be reorganised. I was to learn later in life that we tend to meet any new situation by reorganising, and what a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency, and demoralisation."

Again, all to do with something called the "Do Something Syndrome," when we all too readily convince ourselves that motion is better than inaction. And so seductive can be the need for a sense of movement it can even obscure the need for results. All too easily give the feeling that as long as we're in motion, we can't ever fail. And perhaps, even more tellingly, that as long as we're doing something, anything, failure can't ever find us.

The definite 'Whack!' to the side of my head from all that: Motion is easy. Results are hard. And that it's much easier to tell yourself you're doing something, rather than just sitting there, chewing over your beliefs and biases and doing nothing at all.

All of which rendered me guilty as charged. And me, now, doubly chastised and chastened.

Did I mention that buses come in threes? Because, not long after all that, this dropped into my in-box with a pronounced thud: "Upset about the plastic crisis? Stop trying so hard."

A marvellous, as it turned out, not to be missed piece by Roland Geyer in 'The Guardian's on-going crusade against unconstrained worldwide plastic pollution. And if not quite in total disagreement with my earlier call to action, then certainly a call for people to do more—or as Greyer so compellingly argues, even less—to help ensure the future of this entirely magical, breathtakingly lovely, utterly irreplaceable, little old blue planet of ours:

"We make good-faith efforts to help the planet by recycling, but what we really need to do is even simpler."

The aforementioned "Do Something Syndrome" now called: "Action Bias."

Mr Geyer fair knocked my mental model for six when he proposed that: "Action Bias" is the very thing that gets in the way of solving environmental disasters such as the swirling mass of discarded plastic in the oceans. That "the cheapest and most effective solution to ocean plastic is strangely also the one that is least talked about. It is this: making and using less plastic."

He then took the bloody bails off the stumps; and stumped me into the bargain; when he next took on the whole subject of Climate Change:

"Climate change is another example where 'Action Bias' comes into play. Despite increasingly urgent calls by scientists, we seem unable to reduce our carbon emissions. Could this be because it is essentially a call to non-action? The simplest and, as some would argue, only realistic path to cutting carbon is to not burn those fossil fuels in the first place and simply to leave them in the ground."

Even so, given the scale of the climate crisis, Geyer suggests that we all still desperately need to become far more energy-efficient.

"A massive deployment of low-carbon technologies, like wind and solar power, would be a terrific start. Every forsworn carbon-intensive activity would be a step towards stabilising our climate. But, 'No', there are more calls for action, instead. 'Let's do something!' people cry. But while people put enormous hope into recycling, they don't

give 'Source Reduction' much thought at all, whereas, some serious attempts at 'non-action' by all of us, would go a long way."

Blimey. Roland Geyer (pronounced Gaia?) isn't at all wrong is he? And there was me brought up to think: 'Don't put off until tomorrow what you can do today.' Shows you how daft I can be, sometimes. So from now on the cry is: "Do what thou wilt or won't or whatever, just as long as it helps increase 'Source Reduction'!"

I'm not just making sure to clean out my yoghurt pots, I'm eating a lot less yogurt. I'm eschewing unnecessary food packaging whenever and wherever possible. And my shopping bags proudly attest: 'I Used To Be A Plastic Bottle'.

As if that wasn't enough, an author friend of mine immediately seized the day when we happened to be chatting over a cup of coffee the other morning; no milk and no sugar, of course; by reframing the very idea of "ideas coming in threes" not as some weird case of synchronicity, but as "False Frequency Syndrome."

All of which is to say I'm now busy sorting through all the many other 'mental models' that currently exist in the file drawers somewhere in the back of my mind.

And, as with any proper editing process, there will be blood on the carpet.

But then to quote the much missed Christopher Hitchens: "The essence of the independent mind lies not in what it thinks, but in how it thinks."

How true.

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