Problems, Obvious Solutions, and Alternatives When You Get Stuck
Have you ever stopped to think about how people in general go about solving problems? In most cases, we naturally go about solving problems by starting with the obvious solution. If this fails to work, more often than not, we assume the solution was incorrectly applied (after all, the solution was obvious and should have worked). This thinking entraps people by closing their minds to focus on only one solution (i.e., the obvious solution). So, any success in reapplying the obvious solution is achieved via the constant application of pressure. In the end, the results are inconsistent, frustrating, and exhausting.

Let’s illustrate how this might work using organizational skills (my personal favorite when it comes to examples). Think of the people you know who are chronically late and frequently miss appointments. How should they resolve this problem? Isn’t it obvious? They should plan their day, get a day timer, set alarms to remind them of meetings, take care not to over commit/schedule, to name a few obvious solutions.

If the obvious solutions work, great! But what if they don’t? More often than not, people assume the obvious solution didn’t work because it was incorrectly applied. As a result, the obvious Plan B solution becomes, “Just try harder,” or they find others to “help them” or “fix them,” so they can get the obvious solution to work. Occasionally, Plan B works and the matter is resolved. Frequently, however, it does not work and people get stuck.

As a coach, I believe that the reason the obvious solution doesn’t always work and people get stuck is simple. People are different. So, what is obvious and works for some does not always work for everyone. I say when the obvious solution doesn’t work, look for solutions that are not so obvious to others.

To illustrate, I will share an example from my life about how I had to develop a solution that was not so obvious. I have dyslexia (among other things that make me different and unique). Reading for me is time consuming and hard.

Yet, in college, I did well in sociology, political science, and public affairs, all of which required a lot of reading. The way I survived was to read the first line of each paragraph; this became obvious to me when I had to figure out a way to keep up. I can assure you, my solution was not so obvious to those without dyslexia. Some are quick to label my dyslexia solution as “out-of-the-box” and foreign to them. From my perspective, the solution was constructed based on what makes me different (i.e., how I work). What is out-of-the-box to them is “in-the-box” to me.

Allow me to put things into context. Let’s assume there is a large box that is big enough to walk into. This box represents where one finds obvious solutions (i.e., in-the-box thinking). When problems arise, we naturally unlock the box and venture in. At times, a workable solution is found. At other times, a workable solution is not found and the box becomes a jail, entrapping the person in the box. As others come and go from within the box, the “trapped” person presumes that each person who exits has a solution in hand. Desperately, the trapped person keeps trying to reapply the obvious solution and gets nowhere; this process can spiral out of control and result in despair.

What is unfortunate is this: If trapped persons would only PAUSE for a moment, they would notice that they are not trapped. The same key that unlocked the door to get them into the box will unlock it to let them out. What’s more, they are not the only ones who did not find a solution in the box. Others before them also left the box without a solution, choosing instead to focus on looking for a solution outside of the box. These are people just like you and me.

In summation, what I find individually and as a coach is that it is natural to try to find obvious solutions to your problems. However, when these solutions don’t work, you have a choice: You can choose to believe that everyone is the same and focus on reapplying the same solution, trying to make it work. Or you can find the out-of-the-box solution that works for you based on how you are unique from everyone else (e.g., dyslexic), not how you are the same.