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MYPRISM

Override Your Autopilot, Choose Mindful Leadership

Maribel Aleman, Douglas Choo, John Lazar, Beth Masterman, Fernando Morais and Rolf Pfeiffer • Ideas for Leaders Publishing © 2023 • 234 pages

Leadership

Personal Development / Mindfulness

Workplace Skills / Problem-Solving Techniques

Take-Aways

- Generating strategies to address novel problems requires fresh thinking.
- COVID-19 inspired a conceptual approach to problem-solving.
- The MYPRISM method solves a problem the way a prism handles light: by dividing it into its component parts.
- Mindfulness calls for awareness, focus, and attention.
- Change any “why” question to a “what” question.
- Make better decisions by weighing evidence through multiple perspectives.
- To deal with a confusing new reality, know where you stand.
- The best inquiry processes are subconscious.
- Stage your approach to solving problems and put your solutions into operation.
- Figure out a problem, develop a plan, and take action.

Recommendation

The COVID-19 pandemic proved to be a true black swan event. No one saw it coming and initially, no one knew what to do about it. It devastated the globe, shut down economic activity, and caused the deaths of more than seven million people worldwide. *MYPRISM*'s six authors – Maribel Aleman, Douglas Choo, John Lazar, Beth Masterman, Fernando Morais, and Rolf Pfeiffer, all Fellows of the Institute of Coaching (IOC) at McLean, a Harvard Medical School Affiliate – banded together to combat COVID-19. That led them to develop *MYPRISM*, an approach to solving problems. The authors explain how the system works and how you can apply it to attack a problem the way a prism treats light: by breaking it into its component parts and addressing them methodically.

Summary

Generating strategies to address novel problems requires fresh thinking.

In COVID-19's early days, Professor Carol Kauffman, founder of the Institute of Coaching (IOC), a Harvard Medical School affiliate, instituted virtual "huddles" among IOC Fellows across the globe. Kauffman hoped to spur their most imaginative new thinking about the pandemic and, later, about other major emergencies and potential problems.

"The COVID-19 pandemic, with its global, unexpected, disruptive, frightening, and challenging impact, affected us all significantly...no one had a clear idea what it was, let alone what to do."

Co-authors and IOC Fellows Maribel Aleman, Douglas Choo, John Lazar, Beth Masterman, Fernando Morais, and Rolf Pfeiffer volunteered to work with Kauffman to create and sustain an intelligent, decision-making framework to apply to the pandemic and future crises. Together, the authors decided to call themselves "the Kantologos" (the "Song of Logic"). They hoped to move past conventional crisis management and switch off their tendencies toward autopilot thinking, which can beset any decision-maker. They found that "diversity in thought" translated to more enlightened outcomes.

COVID-19 inspired a conceptual approach to problem-solving.

Dealing with COVID-19 was a tall order. At first, it was a baffling medical emergency. Certainty was out of reach and so, most dangerously, was safety. Unfortunately, this is often how events unfold in today's increasingly "volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous" (VUCA) world.

"This current moment of political mayhem, climate disasters, and global pandemic... demonstrates the need for a way of making sense of the world, the need for a new method or tool to see the shapes this age of chaos takes." (Futurist Jamais Cascio's article, "Facing the Age of Chaos")

When COVID-19 began killing millions around the globe, conventional thinking and old practices became of little use, and *MYPRISM* – the IOC Fellows' new problem-solving tool – came into play.

The MYPRISM method solves a problem the way a prism handles light: by dividing it into its component parts.

MYPRISM treats a problem the way a prism treats light. Prisms seem magical. When light enters a prism, it breaks apart, rainbowlike, into separate “constituent colors.” MYPRISM applies this metaphor to break down problems and solve them.

“Since autopilot is learned behavior based on historical experiences, we must have a better understanding of our internal cognitive processes in order to increase our capabilities to self-regulate, intervene, and optimize our actions in ever-changing and challenging times.”

This approach enabled the six IOC Fellows to break distressing realities into their causal components without pointlessly trying to alter reality. The MYPRISM acronym stands for these principles.

- **M: “Mindfulness”** – Be mindful internally and externally. Mindfulness helps transform the “anxious brain” into a “curious brain,” which can make sense of a sudden oppressive, confusing reality.
- **Y: “Why”** – Why do you do what you do? What is your purpose and your objective? The human brain demands to know why it is engaging with a certain problem. Basic human survival instincts call for asking why a problem is happening and how much danger it poses.
- **P: “Perspective”** – This is a call for observation and for broadening your point of view so you can understand your situation with greater clarity.
- **R: “Reality”** – Can you validate your viewpoint? Reality means prioritizing what exists over your possibly biased perceptions. You can’t overcome a problem if you can’t understand its true nature and complexity.
- **I: “Inquiry and Inspiration”** – Turn off your mental autopilot and put forth the energy to seek factual, hard data.
- **S: “Staging”** – Line up your resources in advance so you will be ready to move ahead with a developed action plan. Staging calls for engagement, execution, and a smart exit.
- **M: “Move”** – Implement your plan and put your solution into action. This important transformation requires change, which demands mental courage.

Even when you implement MYPRISM, you may not be able to attack your problem exactly according to your outline. Always begin with mindfulness. Prepare to battle discouragement or confusion if the other steps do not unfold in an orderly sequence, and then proceed thoughtfully as well as you can.

“If you approach MYPRISM as a checklist of things that you have to do...to overcome your autopilot, you are setting yourself up for resistance. Instead, make MYPRISM your habit.”

MYPRISM enables leaders to move away from stale autopilot thinking, avoid conceptual blind spots, and focus on purpose and mission. Deployed correctly, MYPRISM provides a reliable action plan for untangling emergencies and crises. Here’s how to use its components.

Mindfulness calls for awareness, focus, and attention.

Mindfulness emerged from Buddhist and Hindu concepts. The English word is an approximate translation of the Pali language term *sati*, the concept of “attention, awareness, and being.” Enlightenment demands *sati*; leaders who lack enlightenment cannot understand problems or move ahead with planning and executing solutions.

“We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.” (T.S. Eliot)

The logical opposite of mindfulness is “mindlessness,” which Harvard Medical School psychologist Susan David translates as a “state of unawareness and autopilot — you’re not really present.” Mindless leaders can’t solve problems. Embracing the MYPRISM methodology requires developing mindfulness.

Change any “why” question to a “what” question.

Humans instinctively ask “why?”, but the answer can result in either positive inquiry or negative, survival-mode thinking. Mindfulness is positive; it disrupts rote thinking and simpleminded survival-level investigation. Mindfulness frees your inborn inquisitiveness, enabling you to reach more useful, illuminating answers to the question, “why?” Asking a default “why?” question can lead to a negative conclusion because it requires only minimal thinking. It is important to move intellectually beyond this primitive level of cognition.

“Asking yourself [numerous] questions before making important decisions will broaden your horizon and deepen your insight, which, in turn, will allow for richer perspectives and better decisions.”

When you become stuck in survival mode, you may experience difficulty moving beyond an elementary understanding of your situation. This can happen just as you’re trying to determine how to navigate a complicated challenge. Changing your “why” questions to “what” questions short-circuits the anxious, negative, default survival mode. Knowing that everyone must contend with problems eventually, prepare yourself to exercise mindfulness and curiosity when difficulties confront you. Frame each “what?” question slowly. Consciously ask yourself, “What is my intention or objective at this moment?”

Make better decisions by weighing evidence through multiple perspectives.

If you practice the same physical movement often enough, it eventually becomes second nature. You develop muscle memory, a physiological phenomenon known to all athletes. Similarly, you can develop your ability to take on – and benefit from – multiple perspectives before making any decision. This can also become second nature.

“A mindful leader develops the ability to take advantage of the heat of the moment, the emotional power of the discomfort underlying our drive to survive and thrive.”

Weighing the evidence in front of you by employing different points of view and alternate perspectives almost always results in better planning and decision-making, which leads to taking more effective action. When you are mindful about your intentions and goals, you can become what MIT professor Donald Schön calls a “reflective practitioner,” a leader who acts with thoughtful deliberation.

To deal with a confusing new reality, know where you stand.

Giant shopping malls post maps to help you determine where you are. On these maps, “X” marks your location. To avoid confusion, malls often label that big red X, “You are here.” These maps enable you to orient yourself and find the stores you want to visit.

Develop a parallel knowledge of exactly where you stand when it comes to deriving an effective problem-solving strategy and making decisions about difficult issues. Determining precisely where you are may be difficult in shocking or risky situations.

“Do I use my own perspective to understand where we are now? Who else should I tap for their data? People in my organization? Research and professional resources? All of the above? The answer is...‘All of the above.’”

Default, automatic problem-solving strategies are likely to prove useless in such circumstances. At these moments, be bold and try an inventive fresh approach that empowers you to understand your daunting reality more fully and effectively. Using a mindful approach such as MYPRISM provides an empowering reality check.

The best inquiry processes are subconscious.

Handling problem-solving as an on-again, off-again skill results in ineffective thinking, faulty planning, and poor execution during emergencies. Pivotal problem-solving abilities – and crucial leadership skills – are not water taps that you can just turn on and off. You must develop and exercise them so they become immediately available whenever you need them. Leaders must be able to solve problems at any time and on short notice.

“Nothing in life is to be feared. It is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more so that we may fear less.” (Marie Curie)

Effective leadership depends on “mental, emotional, and physical discipline.” Polishing your problem-solving skills requires constant awareness and practice. For example, you can’t expect to ask the right questions if your overall inquiry process is outdated, haphazard, or forced. Inculcate your inquiry process as a subconscious, essential aspect of your nature.

Stage your approach to solving problems and put your solutions into operation.

Proper staging is an essential component of implementing any plan. Make the essential decisions in your situation and stage your plans so they will work out as you expect. Staging, the careful organization and orchestration of your resources as you move ahead to realize your goal, has these three elements.

1. **Engagement** – What will people want and need?
2. **Execution** – What are the best steps to take? What follow-through will they require? What are the most powerful stories you could relate?
3. **Exit** – Have you achieved your goals? Are you holding yourself fully accountable?

When you put your decisions and plans into action, don't rush. Stage your preparations so you are ready to move ahead productively at a reasonable pace. This requires carefully planning and organizing your staging as thoroughly – and as minutely – as a theater director manages a “set, the actors, the lighting,” the costumes, and so on. One false note in any element will ruin the dramatic impact of the overall production. Similarly, one false step in your staging may call your entire plan into question.

Figure out a problem, develop a plan, and take action.

The MYPRISM approach is straightforward and succinct: Plan carefully to move ahead effectively. MYPRISM helps you avoid “analysis paralysis.”

As you solve problems, make plans, and take action, you will find that putting solutions into effect – particularly in a fast-moving environment – often calls for change, which can be unnerving for everyone involved. Few people like change. Those around you may cling to the status quo, figuring they've gotten along so far without radical change, so why should they accept it in the face of this particular dilemma?

“Courage is the ability to act despite fear.”

Many people also succumb to inertia out of the “fear of failure.” Understand that you can't solve thorny problems or take on a leadership role if you are afraid to fail. Working through the mindful steps of the MYPRISM strategy can help you feel confident that you are making the best possible effort to cross the finish line. MYPRISM can serve as a dependable Global Positioning System (GPS) on your leadership journey, supporting you step-by-step as you develop positive solutions to serious problems.

About the Authors

The authors are Fellows of the Institute of Coaching at McLean, a Harvard Medical School affiliate. **Maribel Aleman** is an executive coach at Aleman & Associates. **Douglas Choo** is a managing partner at VIEW Advisors. **John Lazar** is an executive coach at Cassatly Leadership Coaching. **Beth Masterman** is an executive coach at Masterman Executive Coaching. **Fernando Morais** is a Brazilian journalist. **Rolf Pfeiffer** is managing partner at Schwarz & Pfeiffer Executive Advisory Partners.



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