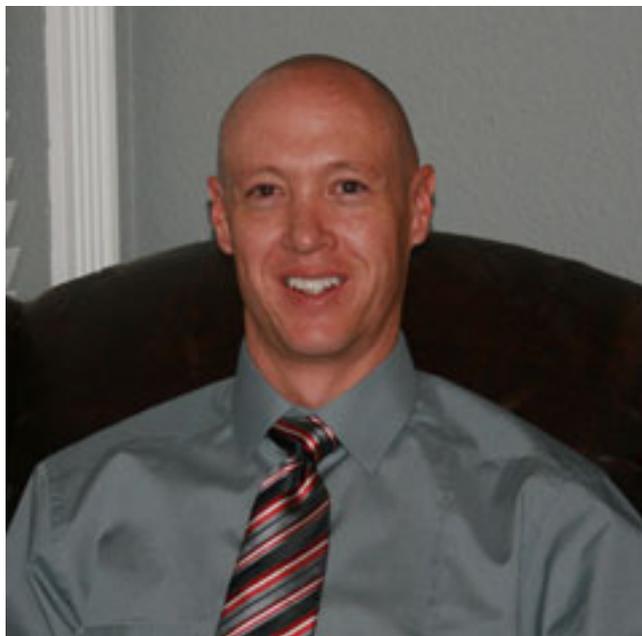


Bust through Confusion by Changing Contexts



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In advanced engineering, statistical, or physics mathematics, when there are too few equations for all of the unknowns, we have a trick called a transform to help us solve the problem. We transform the equation to a “space” where one of the unknowns is either assumed or fixed, solve the problem, and then transform back to solve for the remaining unknown.

Guess what; the same trick works for leading teams and setting a vision. Try this trick the next time you are having trouble getting everyone to see a path forward.

A few years ago I took over the leadership of a team of representatives from all over the corporation in which I worked. The team’s task was to develop a deployment strategy to unleash Design for Six Sigma (DFSS) upon the entire global corporation. No small task.

I was a member of the team already, but by the time I was given the lead we were already behind schedule and still struggling to get everyone on the same page about the mission. The team was made up of cross-functional representatives from every sector. Everyone knew their sector and their functions, but only three or four of the dozen or more members had any real understanding of DFSS.

Desperate for a way to get everyone focused on the mission instead of the confusion, I decided to try the transform trick. At our next face-to-face meeting I broke out an exercise that I had planned.

First, I needed to find a common ground we all shared. I started looking for games

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that everyone played. I thought for sure that golf would hit the mark, but no. Quickly, we identified chess as a common ground.

With chess identified, I changed the topic of the discussion. Instead of worrying about DFSS, I challenged the group to outline a plan for teaching a group of high school or college students how to play chess competitively. I indicated that the goal was to take the students from zero experience with chess to competitive expertise in about one year.

Immediately we began to brainstorm about how to accomplish such a mission. We needed to educate the students on how the pieces moved and the rules of the game. We also needed to teach some basic strategy.

Obviously, we needed some coaches who were chess experts, and we needed a way to keep parents involved and helping to drive rehearsal or practice, but not trying to coach. We laid out a plan recognizing that instruction isn't enough, but practice and rehearsal were much more important.

I could go on, but in short, within about one and a half hours we had outlined a solid strategy for how we would turn inexperienced students into competitive chess players by a certain deadline. It was really pretty easy.

Everyone in the room understood the fundamentals of teaching and coaching; they were all leaders inside the business after all. Also everyone understood enough about the game of chess that each was comfortable contributing to, and troubleshooting, the strategy.

The rest of the afternoon was spent transforming the chess strategy back to a DFSS deployment strategy. Plans concerning the chess pieces were translated into plans for the DFSS tool set. Elements concerning engaging and involving parents turned into plans for the management, and plans for teaching and mentoring during practice became the incredibly valuable strategy for ensuring that recipients of the DFSS education also received follow through mentoring and practice opportunity.

In a single day we went from confused and uncertain, to having the greater part of our deployment strategy outlined, and we didn't have to spend weeks educating all of the team members and leaders how to use the DFSS methodology. It worked very well, and I have used the same transform trick many times since then.

I'd love to take credit for the idea and call it the "Nicol Transform," but really the method is as old as the invention of the metaphor, which is certainly as old as language itself. The great part is that the trick is as simple as coming up with a metaphor for your real challenge and talking about it instead.

The next time you are struggling to get everyone in your meeting or on your team to see how to proceed, change the focus from the subject of confusion to a subject everyone already understands. Make your plan based on that, and then change the plan from the metaphor back to the real idea.

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It's fairly simple and it saves a great deal of time and stress. Try it for yourself and see.

Stay wise, friends.

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