

ABCs OF MSD: X IS FOR X FACTOR

ROB HITCHINS

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

*Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,*

*And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

-- Robert Frost

The Road Not Taken (1915)

“I took the road less traveled by... And that has made all the difference.” The meaning of Frost’s poem – a favourite of mine – has been much debated. Is it about daring to take a path that others have feared to tread? That was certainly what first drew me to the poem. Others argue that it’s about making choices and being comfortable with where they take you. As I’ve got older, I have shifted from being inspired by the former to embracing the latter. Both have merit in the work we do. I’ve been doing this for a long time now and increasingly I have come to recognise that there are no perfect answers, but that well-timed ‘good enough’ actions can make all the difference.

A systemic approach is based on analysis. To keep asking ‘why?’ Why are things the way they are? Why do people act the way they do? Why hasn’t something better happened already? This analytical mindset forces us to focus on feasibility (could) and helps us avoid normative judgements (should) or pushing pre-conceived ideas (solutions in search of problems). We triangulate and measure to keep ourselves honest and reduce optimism bias. These are all positive attributes that I have come to value highly. But. But... what about the X-factor? That intangible ‘something’ that often drives success?

William Easterly distinguishes ‘searchers’ from ‘planners’. MSD programmes try to be searchers in a context of bureaucracy, full of the planners Easterly criticised. A context where funding and implementing organisations are governed by processes and procedures for accountability. Where a CV’s worth is determined by its length. Where ‘human resources’ are managed rather than ‘talent’. Where an idea requires several peer-reviewed academic papers and a brace of randomised control trials to be valid. Where learning is reduced to paint-by-numbers toolboxes that seek to turn what we do into a science. Where even impact investors want guaranteed returns. In a context dominated by the quest for the ‘right’ answer, the silver-bullet solution, the risk-free option, an analysis-based approach can become a reason for not acting, to keep looking at two divergent roads and not move down either one. So, where does the X-factor fit in?

At the outset of my professional career, in another century, I took part in several analytical processes that aim to ‘really understand’ the complex systems in which we planned to intervene. We did desk-based research, field work, surveys, focus group discussions, interviews. Lots of them. And at the end of many months, we were left scratching our heads: what do we do? Naturally, we did more research! Yet, at around the same time, some of the most successful interventions I saw had their roots in chance encounters at check-in queues or sports clubs. Is that the X-factor, being in the right place at the same time?

Later, I helped design new initiatives, and advised several programmes that were transitioning between a successful first phase into a second phase. These were all carefully planned, competently managed and well resourced, but often stumbled. Conversely, I have been involved in programmes with woeful designs and hopeless implementers where an inspirational team leader, a well-connected team member or an influential partner turned base metal into gold. Are people the X-factor?

In the programme I currently advise, COVID-19 and African Swine Fever could have derailed all or large parts of what we were doing. But these unpredictable shocks opened opportunities for us that we could not have envisaged and allowed us to make progress with a variety of stakeholders where we previously we had been struggling for traction. Is being alert and responsive the X-factor?

So, what is the X-factor? Is it just luck, a coincidence of events and timing? Is it having the right people? Is it about being alert, responsive and prepared to take action, sometimes when you’re not entirely clear where it will take you?

I reckon all programmes need some luck and they can’t function effectively without the right people. But it seems to me that the X-factor is about being prepared to act, to take some risks – albeit educated ones – with the people you have, in response to what’s around you.

How can we maximise the X-factor? [Spoiler alert: there’s no tool that can do this part for you.]

Risk is the name of our game, so don’t try to research it down to zero: Pareto had it right, we must work on the 80-20 principle. Much of what we do won’t go as intended, but some things will exceed expectations. The trouble is, you don’t find that out until you try. We need to have a higher tolerance for risk. If international development assistance isn’t about risk, then why are we all here? A well-timed but imperfect action is preferable to paralysis by analysis, because at least you are getting some real-world feedback.

The sibling of risk is failure, so don’t treat it like an unwanted child: Taking risks means that some things will fail. Shit will happen. Expect it, deal with it, learn from it and build from it. Don’t try to disguise failure with slick comms or by blaming it on unforeseen exogenous factors (or other people). Some of the most successful programmes I know had a train-wreck intervention in their early years, but nobody was fired. Senior management owned it, made sure the team learned why it went wrong, and adjusted accordingly.

Get uncomfortable: Sticking to the status quo gets us nowhere. We need a mix of planners and searchers. Bring in people, try activities and build relationships that are outside your ‘box’. Do stuff that makes you feel uncomfortable and might even freak out your boss or funder (without getting arrested).

Keep yourself honest: However, working with the X-factor is not a free-for-all. Some guardrails are needed. The examples above all involved serendipity. But that good fortune was only exploited by having the right people, looking in the right places, asking the right questions, and with the ability to respond agilely. Those elements don’t just happen by chance. The frameworks of MSD help us to search for and guide how we might best respond to opportunities.

As Thomas Jefferson said, “I am a great believer in luck, and I find the harder I work, the more I have of it.”