THE FLEXTRAVERT ADVANTAGE

Professor Karen Pine
“I wish I’d handled that differently”

Has that thought ever crossed your mind, particularly after something has gone badly?
Have you found yourself wondering, “Why did I do that?”. Often the reason is because we didn’t stop and think.

I was in a situation recently where, fortunately, someone else intervened before I could act in a way I might regret. This is what happened.

I was faced with a complaining neighbour at a party and, without thinking, I jumped into defensive mode. I’m ashamed to say I was ready to argue, to stand my ground. Fortunately, Ray, my co-founder at Do Something Different, stepped in and kindly invited the neighbour to join the party. The neighbour was a very elderly gentleman. He may just have been curious or lonely. He was thrilled to be asked to join in. Soon he was enjoying the music along with us, smiling broadly, and it all ended happily.

But it could have all gone wrong. My knee-jerk reaction to the situation was to defend my position, to meet confrontation with confrontation, instead of considering all possible options. Thank goodness Ray had acted according to the first characteristic of a flextravert.
The first characteristic of a Flextravert: Flextraverts act in a way that’s best for each situation. Not according to their default strategy.

Most of the time our reactions are habitual. We all have default strategies that we fall back on time and time again. Strategies that are born out of habit, experience, personality or just plain laziness.

Yet the demands of life are not fixed. They are dynamic and fluctuating. And every situation has multiple dimensions. That means there are multiple ways of responding to it. Flextraverts can recognize all the dimensions. They know they have choices. They don’t simply react mindlessly or out of habit. Flextraverts choose the best response for any given situation. No wonder they usually bring about the most positive outcome, are liked by everyone and seem to sail through life with greater satisfaction, meaning and resourcefulness.

**TIP:** When faced with a challenging situation STOP - don’t react. Consider doing the opposite of what you’d normally do.
Conformity is rewarded by society

We live in a society that rewards conformity. When you go with the flow and do what everyone else does, no-one questions you. Fitting in never caused any ripples or rocked the boat. But to experience more delight, more creativity or something EXTRAordinary from life, there are times when we must go against the flow of the norm. And that means flipping the script.

It’s said that British people spend six months of their life standing in queues. Queuing is one of many social norms that is firmly fixed in our culture. What else can we do? Look at this picture of how people in Thailand queue.

When we accept a social norm and think there is no other way, there may be a way of doing it differently.
Hannah is a Mum of two young boisterous children. She spent a lot of time trying to manage her children by shouting at them. They spent most of their time ignoring her. Hannah was exhausted and at her wits’ end. She decided to do something different. Instead of shouting, she got down to the children’s level and spoke in whispers. They were so surprised by her change in behaviour they responded differently too. They came closer to listen to what she had to say. Hannah found it calmed everyone down and life began to get a lot easier.

**TIP:**
When you want other people to change and your usual approach isn’t working, change your strategy for something completely different.

**Bad news or good news? You choose**

We exist in a media world that sees only one dimension, and it’s a pretty negative one. Consequently we get fed a daily diet of bad news – disaster, tragedy and human failing. But there is so much more to the world than negativity. Human experience is multi-dimensional. There is bad stuff, yes, but there’s also lots of good. This year I decided to tune
TIP:
Instead of mindlessly absorbing the news you are fed, change to a different news channel or newspaper and get a new perspective on the world.

Flipping the script

Christina, from the US, was at a dinner party with friends. As they were tucking into the delicious food and good wines an armed intruder burst through the door. He pointed a gun at the guests and demanded they hand over all their cash. Everyone was terrified, then they realized they had no cash on them. They tried to reason with the intruder, but it didn’t work and he just got angrier. Christina then decide to offer the intruder a glass of wine. He was surprised but he accepted, drank the wine and even ate some cheese. Then he tucked his gun under his arm and left. Christina had flipped the script and, fortunately, all ended well. People who really get into Do Something Different tell us they regularly flip the script on everyday life in all kinds of ways. They swap places at
the dining table. Stand up during meetings. Have a barbeque in winter. Switch roles at work. Choose random music or reading. Swap sides of the bed with their partner. Or sleep at the opposite end. And they experiment with doing the opposite, and going against the flow of the norm.

The second characteristic of a Flextravert: Flextraverts can flip the script to get the best possible outcome.

Scripts are the brain’s way of organizing sequences of events into a predictable pattern. Imagine going to a restaurant. Your brain already has a restaurant script:

• arrive at restaurant
• get a table
• order a drink
• look at the menu
• order food
• eat food
• pay
• leave

Having this script encoded in your brain means that whenever you go to a new and unfamiliar restaurant, you know the drill. You simply follow the script and don’t even have to think about it. This makes the new situation easy, predictable and less stressful.
Flipping the script on a date

When I first went for a meal with my husband he flipped the script on me. As we looked at the menu he came up with the idea that he would choose my meal and I should choose his. I have to admit this unnerved me at first. Back then I was a fussy eater. I’d already settled on my safe choice, the fishcakes. After the flip, he got the fishcakes and I ate, for the first time ever, some very succulent pork belly. It was delicious and set me on a course of being more adventurous with food, and with life, thereafter. We created to do something different shortly afterwards.

Ordinary or extraordinary lives?

In the film Dead Poet’s Society, the inspirational poetry teacher John Keating (played by the lovely late Robin Williams) urges his boys to live extraordinary lives. He dreads the prospect of them mindlessly following the script of their predecessors and fathers before them, instead of treading their own, unique path. Mr. Keating insists the boys rip out the introductory pages in their poetry books, so as not the be influenced by others’ ideas. He tells them to walk differently in the quad, and not to fall into step with others. He even jumps up on the desk in class and declares, “I stand upon my desk to remind myself that we must constantly look at things in a different way”.

The unorthodox option

As a teacher John Keating took an unorthodox approach, which meant he risked his job. But he made a huge and potentially life-changing impact on the boys he taught. My husband took a risk when he flipped the restaurant script, I could have been a vegetarian or hated the choice. But flextraverts know that, in the end, it can be worth taking a risk to bring about an extraordinary outcome.

The third characteristic of a Flextravert:
Fleextraverts are willing to take risks to make meaningful connections with others.

TIP:
To deepen connections, we have to take all sorts of risks. This might mean:

• Being the first to say sorry
• Or the first to say I love you
• Asking a difficult question
• Disclosing something very personal
• Being vulnerable
• Knowing when not to react
• Respecting a different viewpoint
• Letting go of a grudge
It isn’t always easy

Meaningful connections take conscious effort. And, as we noticed earlier, many of us behave without conscious thought most of the time. It’s when we take small risks with others, and don’t behave habitually, that we start creating deeper, more meaningful relationships.

So we have seen that Flextraverts have these three key characteristics:

1. **Flextraverts act in a way that’s best for each situation. Not according to their default strategy**
2. **Flextraverts can flip the script to get the best possible outcome**
3. **Flextraverts are willing to take risks to make meaningful connections with others.**

Therefore, it is hardly surprising that Flextraverts lead happier, healthier lives.

The *Flextravert Advantage*

There is lot of research testifying to the flextravert advantage in all walks of life. And as we’ve been delivering Do Something Different programmes to people all over the globe we’ve been able to collect heaps of data on the benefits of being flextraverted. For example:
**Fleextraverts are slimmer**¹. The more flexible a person is, the lower their BMI, our data show. Poor eating behaviour is maintained by fixed habits and inflexibility. Fleextraverts aren’t driven by their habits and are less likely to eat mindlessly. We have conducted trials that involved helping people to become more fleextraverted (by doing something different). The more flexible they became, the more weight they lost and the more likely they were to keep the weight off.

**Fleextraverts are less stressed**². Our data on 1800 people who had been on a Do Something Different programme showed unequivocally that greater flexibility was linked to lower stress. The work of Todd Kashdan³ from George Mason University also shows that many mental health conditions are characterised by a lack of flexibility. People with anxiety and depression typically have undifferentiated responses that are invariable and stereotyped. Anxious people tend to worry or ruminate reflexively, not selectively. A depressed person responds to all situations – good or bad - in the same way, unlike a fleextravert. The research shows time and time again that psychological flexibility is related to greater resilience and better mental and physical health.

**Fleextraverts bounce back**⁴. Resilience is critical for a flourishing personal, social and professional life. After the terrible events of 9/11 in the US, many people understandably felt sad, angry or fearful. Yet one year on some people were coping significantly better than others. Researchers from Columbia University looked at the differences between people who coped well and those who still felt distress a year later. They found a difference in people’s ability to flexibly enhance or suppress emotional expression in accord with situational demands. In other words,
flextraverts have greater resilience and are better able to quickly recover from stressful events.

**Flextraverts are effective**. Since they’re resilient, healthier and less stressed you won’t be surprised to learn that flextraverts are more effective at work too. Adam Grant from the University of Pennsylvania studied what type of people make the best sales people. It wasn’t the extraverts who performed best, as many might expect. Extraverts’ sales results were poorer than flextraverts. Because flextraverts didn’t just talk. They were great at listening too. And they knew when it was appropriate to either talk or listen.

**Flextraverts show up**. When you consider that the flexextraverted employee is physically and mentally healthy, is resilient and good at their job, it is unsurprising perhaps that they are less likely to be absent from work. This was confirmed by a study into psychological flexibility by Frank Bond from City University that found fewer flextraverts in the absenteeism figures.

**Flextraverts are more tolerant of difference**. Because flextraverts are able to discern the multiple dimensions of events and of other people, they are more tolerant of difference. In other words, they are less biased, less prejudiced.
This finding comes from Do Something Different data collected in a large corporate organisation. The green bars show how inclusive people are in their interactions with others; their ability to include and accept all types of people, regardless of difference. The green bars go from low fleextraversion on the left to high fleextraversion on the right. The more fleextraverted a person is, the more inclusive of others they are.
In times when humans across the globe seem to exhibit more hatred towards each other and less tolerance, it is flextraversion – the ability to see multiple dimensions in events and in other people - that is the tool we all need if we are to successfully navigate the challenges of an uncertain future.

“.. by being flexible and living in service of our deepest values instead of being narrowly focused on achieving happiness, we end up experiencing more frequent joy and meaning in life and less distress; we end up with greater vitality and degrees of freedom for how to live each moment.”
(Kashdan, 2010).

**And the good news is.... we can all be flextraverts**

Our Do Something Different methodology is proven to bring out the flextravert in all kinds of people. Although the science behind Do Something Different is complex and robust, digital technology now allows us to create effective individualised interventions.
To try out the flextravert approach, remember to make Do Something Different your mantra and follow these 3 simple steps:

- **STOP**
  yourself resorting to your default strategy

- **FLIP**
  it on its head

- **USE**
  the best strategy

**The flextravert advantage** can extend to you, to your work, to those around you and can be a force for good in making the world a better place for us all to live in.

This eBook is based on a talk first given by Professor Karen J Pine at TedX Brighton ([www.tedxbrighton.com](http://www.tedxbrighton.com)) on 28th October 2016.
References


Further Reading

Flex by Professor Ben (C) Fletcher and Professor Karen Pine is published by UH Press (2012) and available from:
Amazon.co.uk


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www.dsd.me
At Do Something Different we believe in bringing glorious positive change into people’s lives. At work. At home. Everywhere.

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