CHAPTER NINE
SHOE SWAPPER

Looking at problems from different perspectives.

INEXPERT WITNESSES

On 20 June 1913 William Marconi, inventor of the radio, sat in court rapt by the testimony of an expert witness in a lawsuit that his Marconi Wireless Telegraph Company of America had brought against the National Electric Signaling Company of Pittsburg. Marconi sat next to his wife and, according to a *New York Times* story that day, 'Both listened attentively to every word spoken by Frank L. Waterman, an experts in patents and regarded as an authority on matters relating to wireless telegraphy.' A lot hung on what Waterman was saying. At issue was whether the Pittsburg dudes had infringed wireless technology patents Marconi had filed in 1896 and were making money from his ideas. Waterman, supporting Marconi's claim that he and he alone should have claim to sole use of the patent rights, said in his testimony that Marconi had not only made wireless practicable but also made it a commercial reality.[1]

Expert witnesses like Frank Waterman are brought in to offer advice in court cases because there is a need for the specialised knowledge they possess. Their knowledge of the subject matter enlightens the judge and jury, enabling them to form a more complete and accurate opinion of a subject that is relevant to the case. We don't know how much Frank was paid for his expertise, but nowadays good experts in the US can make thousands for their time and knowledge. (According to one US study of the matter, the average hourly rate is $300 although, perhaps bizarrely, the less-experienced experts tend to charge more than experienced ones.[2])

[1]Mrs Marconi told reporters, 'I think he will win, and I think he ought to. I believe that a man who obtains a patent on his ideas is the man who deserves all the credit for what those ideas have accomplished rather than a person who improves on the patent.' She was right and Marconi won, proving Mr Waterman's value as an expert witness, but she ended up being wrong in the long term. After years of legal battles, in 1943 the US Supreme Court overturned most of Marconi's patents. It should be noted that at the time the US Government was involved in its own patent dispute with Marconi, leading some observers to suggest the Supreme Court ruling was biased.

[2]From 'SEAK, Inc. National Guide to Expert Witness Fees and Billing Procedures'.

We are all expert witnesses to some extent, in that we have specialised knowledge in some area or another. Expertise that can be very useful in the way it helps us define the creative challenge, filter our ideas and implement the ones that have the greatest chance of success. On the other hand, expertise can also get in the way of idea generation and knowing too much can positively inhibit the creative process. **We know the rules, we know what's been done before, we know what works and what doesn't work and therefore *we think* we know what we shouldn't even bother trying. And often we're wrong.** As co-founder of Intel, Andrew Grove said in a 2005 interview: 'When everybody knows that something is so, it means that nobody knows nothin'.' He believes the best way to tackle a problem is to set aside everything you already know.[3]

A research study[4] looked at how what we think we know colours our perceptions. People were randomly assigned as either *tappers* or *listeners*. The tappers had to tap out well-known songs with their knuckles, such as 'Happy Birthday to You' or the 'Star-Spangled Banner', while the listeners had to try and identify them. Results showed that because the tappers knew what the songs were, they assumed that the listeners would easily get them from the rhythm they were tapping out on the tabletop. They estimated that the listeners would correctly name about half of the songs. In fact, they only got right 2.5 per cent, a twentieth of that number. The *Journal of Political Economy* described as 'the curse of knowledge' the condition of how once you're an expert in a particular field it's difficult to imagine not knowing what you know.

[3]'Innovative Minds Don't Think Alike', Janet Rae-Dupree, *The New York Times*, 30 December 2007.

[4]'Overconfidence in the Communication of Intent: Heard and Unheard Melodies', an unpublished doctoral dissertation by Elizabeth Newton, Stanford University, 1990.

We advocate bringing in *in*expert witnesses to offer a fresh perspective on the creative problems we're trying to solve. Witnesses unencumbered by too much experience or too many rules, who don't know what's been tried and what hasn't. These *inexperts* could be people from within the organisation who work in a different discipline and have little or no familiarity with the area being worked on, or people even further removed from the business – for instance, roofers, writers, musicians, sushi chefs or jockeys – who can help look at the problem through fresh pairs of eyes and reveal a whole new perspective you might not have previously considered.

Of course, the freshest eyes to bring in are those who are removed from business life altogether – children. **A child's perspective is by definition naïve and so hasn't yet been tainted by the rules of business and marketplace.** If you can find a very simple and clear way to explain your challenge it can be very worthwhile asking some kids you know for some ideas, perhaps by asking the help of a teacher and making it into a class project (what, for instance, might a class of five-year-old kids suggest as solutions to a problem such as too much traffic?) and use what they come up with as a method of looking at the problem in a totally fresh way. An added benefit is that most children don't charge such big hourly fees.

I'm a hopeless enthusiast, not just for my own ventures but for everyone else's too! I've been diagnosed as manic-depressive, except without the depressive bit. I can't stop and, who cares, I'm having fun. Sometimes I think some people don't know what they know. In other words, they've put their knowledge into such a small context and imagine that is the only use for it.

For instance, I was once in a black cab in London. I always chat to the cab driver or the petrol pump attendant, or the chap filling the mini bar in the hotel room, or basically anyone who wants to chat during the day. But this time it was the cab driver. He was telling me that things had changed and he didn't like driving the cab any more. I was asking him what the problem was and he said that now there were too many drunks and aggressive people, and the streets were too crowded and all the charm of being a cabbie had gone for him.

Now, these drivers have to go through very complicated and rigorous testing to get 'The Knowledge' as they call it. So I said, 'Hey, why don't you stop and do something else?'. And he said that it was impossible because it was all he knew how to do. He was thinking, 'This is all I know.' I thought for a second and said, 'But you know so much about London, all the streets and the ups and downs of cab driving and judging people's temperament and how to stay safe, etc. etc. Why don't you make it into a board game? How to get from A to B on time in rush hour, and avoiding getting a ticket or picking up a drunk on a Saturday night. Write everything you know and then make a kind of 'Snakes and Ladders' or 'Monopoly'-type game out of it. Give it a name, register it and then meet with a game company.

We had a good old discussion about this and then he dropped me off at my house at Wychcombe Studios in Hampstead, London. About two years later there was knock at the door at my same house, and my wife at the time, Siobhan, answered. She came into the kitchen and said some guy was there, said he was taxi driver and he had something to give me. Yep, it was the game and he had a game company that had produced it for him and he was now a royalty-receiving game inventor! You see, sometimes 'You Don't Know What You Know'.

DO YOU WANNA BE IN MY GANG?

Imagine there's a gang of kids (*Famous Five* or *Swallows and Amazons* type kids, not the mean ones from *Lord of the Flies*) who all hang out together and go on adventures.

The dynamics between the gang members are interesting; they argue about things but always try to find common ground. When there are differences of opinion different members of the gang might form little allegiances. Naoki and Arata might team up to passionately argue their case against Ryota, Bunko and Shiori, or boys might be on one side and girls on another, but regardless they always work together as one to deal with any outside enemy.

So how might Naoki, Ryota, Arata, Shiori and Bunko approach a problem differently? Naoki would be trying to find solutions that take into account the feelings of as many of the gang members and the people they come into contact with as possible. Shiori would be thinking very broadly about the problem and the other areas it might be associated with. Ryota would be focused on finding a solution quickly rather than pondering too much if it's the right one. Bunko would take the opposite approach, wanting to explore every avenue before coming to a conclusion. And Arata would be hell-bent on coming up with a solution that nobody had tried before and be more interested in the unknown nature of it than the results.

All of the gang members have something to offer. Each of their perspectives and ways of doing things has some merit, and imagining how they each might approach a problem can help us switch into different modes of solving it. We can try to imagine what each of them might think and then, when we have some ideas, think about which would agree with each solution, what arguments might ensue and how we might reconcile them. Is there one that is radical enough for Arata, yet doesn't upset Naoki's status quo? Can it fit the facts enough for Bunko and still not lose Shiori's interest by being too rooted in reality? And can it be made to happen without too much dilly-dallying so Arata feels like things are actually getting done? Soon to be a major motion picture …

Naoki, the sensitive one, is very aware of his own and other people's feelings and is always thinking what somebody meant by what they said or did. He's quick to laugh and quick to tears and is always trying to restore balance and harmony in the group.

Shiori, the daydreamer, just goes with the flow and often seems to be in another world. She can often be found wandering around at the edge of the other's activities, not quite a part of them. She will often say something profound and seemingly unconnected to what's going on, and only later will others realise what she meant by it.

Ryota, the leader, is self-assured and bossy. He likes to feel in control and will always make the final decision on what the gang should do. He acts and reacts quickly without thinking things through too much and his decisiveness means they get things done, but can also lead the gang into trouble.

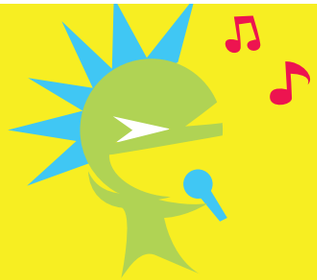
Bunko, the brainy one, is very fact-based and analytical. She loves to think through problems and come up with the most logical solutions based on the facts. She is loud and will challenge Ryota if she thinks he's going about something the wrong way, and she can upset Naoki by her blunt, commonsense opinions.

Arata, the rebellious one, is the one most likely to get the group into scrapes because he's always pushing boundaries, but that means he's also the one most likely to push them into exciting adventures. He hates accepting things because that's the way things are and is apt to go off on his own if he gets too bored with the group.

I was incredibly creative when I was a child, driving my parents nuts. I was full of schemes to make some pocket money, but never went about them in a regular way. I watched boys delivering newspapers and getting paid, but I could see you needed a bicycle or it was lot of work and a very heavy bag to carry. I decided that to sell newspapers was good, but to carry a heavy bag around was bad.

So I asked at the newsagent where the newspapers came from and they told me the address of the local distributor. Then I went down there and somehow negotiated to have a whole heap of Sunday newspapers delivered to me in a bus shelter on Kayll Road. I'd seen that this bus shelter was very busy on Sunday mornings with men coming home from nightshifts and it was on a corner surrounded by four streets of houses.

I had ten times more papers than anyone could carry but it didn't matter because I was just sitting on them! I would sell out in a few hours and go back to the wholesaler and pay him his amount and end up keeping five times more money than if I had had a paper round carrying those heavy papers in a sack every morning – and I only had to do a few hours' work. Then I added another element. I took my guitar and started busking to the bus queue as well, which earned me a few more pounds on top. But the coup de grâce was



when I started hiring my own paper boys to deliver locally and then asked my dad if he could run the business as it was getting too much for me – at 12 years old! This worked out for a couple of Sundays. I had my dad running the stall, paperboys delivering the papers and I was having a lie-in on a Sunday morning. Needless to say, the novelty soon wore off for my dad (who had a full-time job), so I sold the business on.

This wasn't the only business idea I had as a kid. I had endless fun thinking of new ones. One of my favourites was when I bought an old electric-shock machine and I would charge a penny a shock, guaranteeing my classmates it would give them energy and make them more intelligent to help them pass a test.

I always liked the creative shortcut to a problem. So when I realised, at around 14 years old, that I could write a song, I thought, OK, so how do I get people to hear it? So I went to my dad's telephone directory and looked up radio stations. I saw Radio Durham and I knew this was the university town and students might like the songs I was writing. So I called them. 'Hello, Radio Durham,' said a very bright-sounding female.

'Hi,' I said, 'I've written some songs and I want to play and sing them on your radio station.' And before she could answer I said, 'Here, I'll play one now,' and I put down the receiver and started strumming and singing, completely forgetting how long this was taking.

Anyway, after about five minutes I picked up the phone again and said, 'Did you like it?' There was silence for a while and she said, 'Yes, it was very good, but I'm the receptionist.' I said, 'That's OK, just tell the others and call me back,' and gave her my number.

About a week later I was watching the *Beverly Hillbillies* on TV around 5.30p.m. and the phone rang. My dad came in the room looking confused and saying, 'Radio Durham on the phone for you.' I, of course, was completely unfazed. I'd been waiting for them to call back. I'd already visualised me doing four songs in the radio studio and doing an interview and then going on television doing the same in Newcastle.

All of this happened and I got my first cheque for £12 for my radio performance, then another cheque from the TV performance! Now this is a mixture of creative thinking and downright cheek or chutzpah, but it certainly cut out a few years of playing to myself in the bedroom and it was a lot of fun.

I was so into visualisation when I was younger that I would stand outside my house on a summer's day (at the end of a busy shopping street) wearing full skiing gear, goggles, etc., on some homemade wooden skis. It wouldn't bother me that people were staring or kids were calling me names. It made no difference – to me I was already skiing in Austria and with my eyes closed. Six months later I was in Innsbruck in Austria coming second place in the junior slalom.

Now all of this came to an abrupt end when I turned 18 years old. I was now in London, had a record deal and a publishing deal, but I had also discovered drugs. Now, drugs can make you very creative, as is well documented throughout history, but not if you take so many that it takes you all day to make a cup of tea and fry an egg. So I would say for three or four years I didn't really write a song or invent anything much, just ran around trying to get more drugs to help me come down from the other drugs. I know this is meant to be a business book, but I'm now talking about one of the biggest businesses in the world and I was on the receiving end of a well-organised assault on my brain cells. There was disaster after disaster and I went through a bunch of personas … like, turning up to the studio wearing a kilt and sporran, or walking to the local shop and being reminded by the grocer

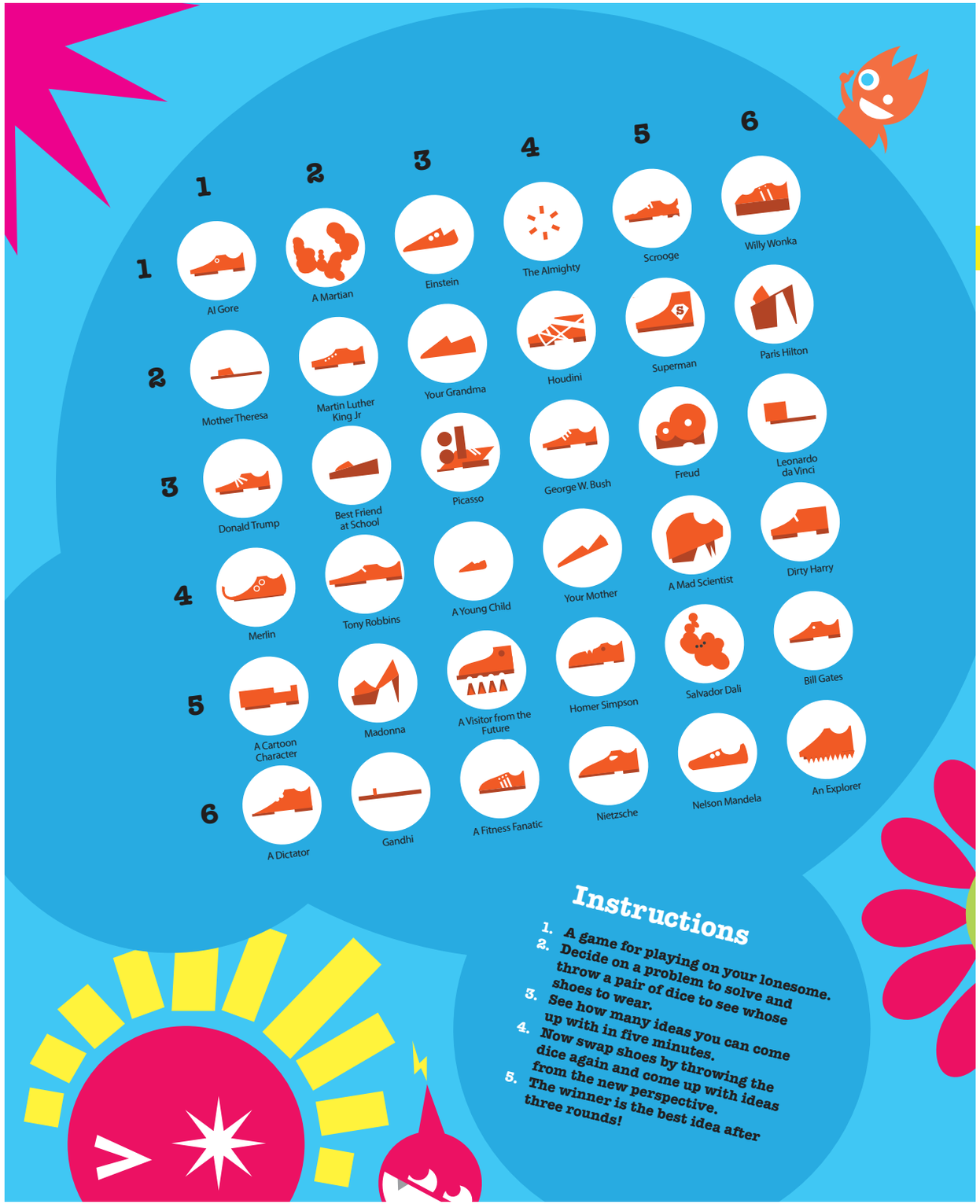
as he escorted me out that I was actually wearing nothing at all.

It all came to a sticky end when I ended up in hospital after being in a car crash and started having recurring lung collapses. Now, you are thinking, 'Where the hell is this going? I paid good money for this book.' Well, remember earlier I said that electric shocks give you energy and make you smarter? I was about to find out the truth of this, big time, because I was about to die and had the biggest electric shock you ever want to have with defibrillators. I came back to life and, guess what, I've never stopped having ideas since.

Literally since leaving that hospital my whole life changed. I was the old me again: no more drugs. I was inventing new ways to record music, reading everything I could on art and filmmaking, even learning to cook and inventing exotic dishes for Annie and my imaginary friends to try. Actually, dying and being brought back to life was like being plugged into an electric socket that pumps creative energy into your veins! It's better than any drug on the planet and it creates infinite possibilities. We advise the electric-shock treatment and Business Playground is developing one now that you soon might be able to buy for the office.

MOVE ONE SPACE FORWARD TO THE NEXT CHAPTER ... OR ROLL THE DICE

Getting too close to a problem can make it difficult to come up with innovative solutions because we tend to be hampered by what we know, or think we know, about what's likely to work. A research study in which people had to get others to recognise familiar tunes by tapping them out with their knuckles showed how what we already know affects our perceptions and skews our judgement. Whereas, if we look at problems through the eyes of someone else, whether a child or a passenger in a cab, the fresh perspectives can lead to ideas that aren't constrained by old rigid thinking. In business we should solicit views from, or try on the shoes of, *inexperts* who can add something new to the problem: people from different departments or from completely unrelated professions. Now, in the next chapter we'll show you how to throw some other unexpected elements into the mix.



BOARD GAME: SHOE SWAPPER

How it works: To get the brain thinking in new directions to solve a creative problem we need go outside what is familiar. We need to experience new things and bring diversity into the mix. In fact, we need to put ourselves into other people's shoes.

How to play: You (yes, you're on your own for this one) try to come up with creative solutions to a chosen problem by taking the perspective of, or putting yourself in the shoes of, different types of people. In each of three rounds you have five minutes to write down ideas from the unique perspectives of the people whose shoes you are wearing.

Example: The problem you're trying to solve might be how to bring more customers into a restaurant. In the first round you throw a 6 and a 2, leading to Paris Hilton's boots. Now you should generate as many ideas as you can from the perspective of Paris Hilton in five minutes. In Paris's shoes you might think that a great way to drive business for the restaurant would be to offer the clientele celebrity gift bags, and this might spark another idea about making customers at the restaurant feel very special, like a celebrity in fact. There could be a gift bag containing unusual toys and a fake paparazzi photographer stationed at the entrance, and framed on the wall of the restaurant could be autographed photos of celebrity customers.

How to win: Play three rounds and the winner is the idea that best solves the problem.