

CHAPTER EIGHT

FAR OUT

**Think BIG and don't let the truth
get in the way of a good story.**



Canadian Kyle MacDonald had a pretty unusual idea for how to use a paperclip. He set himself the challenge of seeing what he could get for it by trading-up and, after 14 trades, exactly one year later he ended up with a house in Kipling, Saskatchewan (and that was *before* the housing market crashed in 2007). Kyle told us how he came up with the idea: 'I was bored and I remembered a game called Bigger or Better. **You start with a small object and trade it for a bigger or better object. Repeat. Usually a kids' game. More knocking on doors, less Internet. The red paperclip was the first thing I saw when I thought of the idea.'**

He started on 12 July 2005, by advertising the red paperclip on Craigslist.org, saying he wanted something bigger and better for it (we like his honest approach) and was offered a fish-shaped pen (this is Canada, after all). He exchanged the pen for a ceramic knob, and in turn: a camping stove, a generator, a beer keg and Budweiser sign, a snowmobile, a trip to the Canadian Rockies, a supply truck and a recording contract. Next, in April 2006, he got a year's rent in a flat in Phoenix.

Then it gets really weird. He got a lot of publicity, ended up as a bit of celebrity and was contacted by a Hollywood actor, Corbin Bernsen (from TV series *LA Law*). Kyle told us he thinks Corbin might have been bored too and the idea just appealed to him. He then traded his Phoenix flat for an afternoon with Alice Cooper. Eh? According to Kyle's blog, 'Alice Cooper is a gold mine of awesomeness and fun.' And he traded that afternoon of fun for a snow globe of the band KISS. Now, it seems actor Bernsen was a collector of snow globes, so wily Kyle used the KISS orb as bait and asked readers of his blog to send more globes to Bernsen in exchange for signed photographs of him, Bernsen and the KISS globe. Kyle ended up getting a movie role from Bernsen to barter. Publicity-hungry Kipling (a town with a population of 1,140, thought to be named after Rudyard) decided that it could benefit from Kyle's quest, so it bought an unoccupied house (worth about \$45,000 at the time) and

offered it to him in exchange for the movie part. They planned to hold a contest to audition for the role. According to Kyle's blog, the town's revised offer to him went something like this:

'Kyle, the Town of Kipling, Saskatchewan, wants you to complete your quest for a house. The Mayor and Town Council, with the support of the employees and residents of the Town of Kipling, have a revised offer for you. We know you will say Yes!



- 1 As a new resident to our community you will receive a Community Welcome Package containing local information and promotions from local businesses.
- 2 The Kipling Chamber of Commerce will give you \$200 in Kipling Cash. This Cash can be spent at any local Chamber of Commerce business.
- 3 You will be given a Key to the Town of Kipling.
- 4 You will become Honorary Mayor of Kipling for One Day.
- 5 You will be named an Honorary Lifelong Citizen of the Town of Kipling.
- 6 The day we make the trade will be decreed One Red Paperclip Day by our Town Council and everyone will be encouraged to wear a red paperclip in honor of your achievements.
- 7 We will build the world's largest red paperclip in dedication to you and your 'one red paperclip project'.
- 8 Most importantly, to allow you to complete your quest ... We will trade to you a house. The house was built in the 1920s and has been recently renovated. It is located at 503 Main Street Kipling, SK, Canada. It is approximately 1,100 square feet on two floors. There are three bedrooms, one and a half bathrooms, kitchen, living room and dining room. It has white vinyl siding, a new roof and eaves troughs that have been put on in the last few years. We will be sending you pictures of the house as soon as we have had time to touch up the paint.

Kyle MacDonald, do you accept our offer of one house in Kipling for one role in Corbin Bernsen's movie *Donna on Demand*?'

Kyle accepted and the deal was done on 12 July 2006. The movie *Donna in Demand* was released in 2008, featuring Kipling resident Nolan Hubbard who had won the audition for the part.

For a while you could go to Kyle's website¹ and make an offer for the house, and more than one person offered a red paperclip for it, but he eventually donated the house back to the town of Kipling. And what has the whole experience taught Kyle? He told Business Playground: 'If you don't take the first step, you'll never go anywhere.'

IT WAS HOW BIG?!

Dramatisation when used as a tool to solve problems creatively can force us to think a little bigger. The thing is, **we tend to have mindsets that are in proportion to the size of the problem: if it seems smallish, we'll think small, if it looks BIG, we'll think a little bigger, and if a challenge has crisis proportions we'll apply all our creative energies to getting it solved.**

Think of how the language around climate change shifted over time from the cutesy and benign 'global warming' to the much more dramatic, and accurate, 'climate crisis'. Al Gore started using the words 'climate crisis' because he'd been told by his advisors that the problem wouldn't be seen as particularly harmful or urgent otherwise (other polls indicated that 'crisis' was too dramatic, and that 'climate change' might strike the right balance and shake people out of their complacency). In the introduction to his 2006 book *An Inconvenient Truth*² he states, 'The climate crisis is, indeed, extremely dangerous. In fact it is a true planetary emergency.'

¹www.oneredpaperclip.com

²*An Inconvenient Truth: The Planetary Emergency of Global Warming and What We Can Do About It*, Al Gore, Rodale Books, 2006.

Al Gore understood that until he could get people to see the scale of the problem they would be unwilling to take it seriously enough to change their behaviour.

Other experts have used the term 'global heating' to communicate the idea that it's about getting hot, not just warm. Dr Lovelock, environmental expert and author of the brilliant 2006 book *Revenge of Gaia: Earth's Climate Crisis and the Fate of Humanity*, has said,³ 'Warming is something that's kind of cozy and comfortable. You think of a nice duvet on a cold winter's day. Heating is something you want to get away from.' Meanwhile, opponents to the idea that mankind is having an adverse effect on the planet's climate have tried to give the problem much milder labels. Language expert and Republican Party consultant Frank Luntz wrote a memo in 2002 that advised the party to use the term 'climate change', rather than 'global warming'. In the memo he wrote: "Climate change" is less frightening than "global warming".⁴ As one focus group participant noted, climate change "Sounds like you're going from Pittsburgh to Fort Lauderdale." While global warming has catastrophic connotations attached to it, climate change suggests a more controllable and less emotional challenge.' Before the memo, Bush used the term 'global warming' frequently in public speeches, but subsequently hardly at all.⁵ Luntz wrote in his memo, 'A compelling story, even if factually inaccurate, can be more emotionally compelling than a dry recitation of the truth.'

³It's ironic that on one side of the debate, 'global warming' was seen to be too mild a term and 'climate change' the more urgent and therefore better term, and on the other the opposite was true. So 'climate change' ended up being recommended by some advisors on both sides, but for exact opposite reasons.

⁴'Global Heating, Atmosphere Cancer, Pollution Death. What's in a Name?', Andrew C. Revkin, www.nytimes.com

⁵'Memo Exposes Bush's New Green Strategy', Oliver Burkeman, *The Guardian*, 4 March 2003.





Similarly, John F. Kennedy knew what he was doing in May 1961 when he created a crisis for America by announcing to the nation they must win the space race against the Soviets or lose their place as the world's dominant nation. And, lo just over eight years later, on 20 July 1969, the United States of America became the first nation to put men on the moon. Kennedy had said in a speech to a joint session of Congress: 'Recognising the head start obtained by the Soviets with their large rocket engines, which gives them many months of lead time, and recognising the likelihood that they will exploit this lead for some time to come in still more impressive successes, we nevertheless are required to make new efforts. For while we cannot guarantee that one day we shall be first, we can guarantee that any failure to make this effort will find us last.'

People tend to think of more innovative solutions when given a bigger problem to solve.

It stops your thinking being in small increments and allows you to dream up big ideas that are very different in nature and scale. How can you dramatise your own business challenge so you focus creative energy in the right direction? How could you bring it to life to inspire yourself and other stakeholders to crack it?

How about a bit of exaggeration to make the point? This is without doubt the best business book ever written; it'll change your life and solve the world's problems too. Oh, and it's completely edible and nutritious and makes for a very tasty meal. Exaggeration is a wonderful thing. No, actually, it's the best thing ever, ever, EVER. Remember our ball-gazing technique of Chapter 3, and how thinking up what might seem like crazy future scenarios can free us from our mental shackles? No? Well, anyway, our point is that exaggerating a scenario to extreme proportions is also a great way to get the creative juices flowing. With our *too much traffic congestion in LA* example, an exaggeration of the situation (though not too much of one) would be that cars are absolutely stationary in LA. There is absolute gridlock. People can't get to work. They can't make their

ways home. Pregnant women can't reach hospitals. Michael Douglas leaves his car in the middle of the jammed street. (Oh, sorry that's a movie,⁶ but it's also scarily real, and you get the idea. Nothing is moving.) A solution to this exaggerated scenario might be to quit using cars altogether. It might be impractical, but the notion might free up some ideas for ways to dramatically reduce the number of cars on the roads that otherwise we might not have considered.⁷

MAD WORLD

While in business the temptation is to try to maintain control as much as possible, it is often a liberating and fruitful experience to think of the most outlandish ideas you can and then work on ways to make them practical.

When trying to come up with creative solutions we need to ignore the most obvious ones, or at least put them to one side with a reassuring 'there, there, just wait quietly here' pat on the head.

Obvious solutions are likely too similar to what the situation is already like now and won't take you anywhere meaningful and new (see the *Chaos Theory* section in Chapter 10).

You can make it into a game. Gather together a small group of people and sell them numbered cards for a pound each. Write up the problem on a board or piece of paper and give them ten minutes to write down on their cards the most unlikely solution they can think of for the problem, one idea per card. Players then look at one

⁶*Falling Down* (1993).

⁷Or at the other extreme, minimise the problem so actually it doesn't seem like much of one at all. Make it very, very tiny. Then the solutions would take more of a positive spin and be about ways to make the most of the situation, not try to radically alter it. Find you're spending a little tiny bit longer in the car than you'd want to? No problem, have some fun while you're there. There could be a radio station dedicated to people stuck in LA traffic with local news and gossip, or a series of self-improvement CDs or podcasts in bite-sized pieces that turn the delay into a useful experience. Rather than try to radically alter the situation, we have now accepted it and made the best of it.

June 2009

Dave,

I have asked my father if he could forward you a mail after seeing your amazing performance at the conference. I found it extremely funny, informative and way ahead of its time. The lesbian grandma chocolate advert made me cry I laughed so much.

I have a café-bar in Leeds called The Roast Café. We are situated on the river, have a good terraced area and relaxed friendly decor (Paul Smith-type stripes on doors, herbs in the windows, goldfish, different types of seat covers, burgundy Chesterfields and the staff wear Fred Perrys). We are open for breakfast (15 per cent of the business), lunch (45 per cent of the business) and dinner serving British-style food (10 per cent of the business); from great bacon butties and chicken Caesar salads to John Dory with samphire⁸ and sundried tomatoes. I have attached our evening menu for you to have a look at. The evening side of the business could deliver us so much more profit if marketed with a difference. We also do outside catering to offices for meetings (30 per cent of the business) and host events at the venue. Breakfast and lunch are very



successful, the evenings have proved to be more difficult despite mentions in *Vogue* and other good write-ups. The evening food is as good as the best restaurants in Leeds.

My question is do you have any ideas how to drive our event business, targeting individuals, companies (despite all their budgets being slashed) and party organisers within the Leeds area? If that requires marketing the whole venue in a different way, so that we become better known, then I will give it a go. We have very limited budgets, but would give anything a go. I am well into purple cows and any other things you could come up with. If you could help I would really appreciate it.

Cheers,
Matthew Firth
Roast Café

⁸A type of edible plant.

Dear Matthew,

Did you ever hear of 'The House of Blues' in the USA? They created something called the Gospel Brunch that was totally unique and a massive success with Sunday lunchtime queues around the block.

www.houseofblues.com/venues/clubvenues/gospelbrunch.php

I think if you create a unique event that involves eating and an uplifting thing it will work. Also in USA they have a thing called 'a roast' where people get together and honour one person, but they 'roast' him or her, all tell stories and send him or her up. Do they do that in the UK? That could be a perfect fit!

Dave

another's cards and add notes to the crazy ideas for ways to make them more practical. A crazy solution for reducing traffic congestion might be to get everyone to fly instead. Another player might add to this idea, as a way to make the original implausible idea plausible, that there could be short shuttle flights between different local LA airports (e.g. LAX, Burbank, Santa Monica and Long Beach).

Once everyone has had a chance to add their suggestions to the ideas, they each have two votes to give to the two ideas they consider now to be the most implausible. These are the ones for which the additions didn't help bring them back to earth much. The idea with the most votes for being the most implausible wins all the money! In other words, the craziest idea is rewarded rather than the most practical one, so forcing people to think outlandishly. But along the way the ideas that didn't win might have some real potential as practical solutions to the problem. Sneaky, huh? **Now get those obvious ideas out of the corner and send them home.**

A variation on this is to split the group into two teams. Each team comes up with an unlikely solution to the problem and the other has to add some suggestions to it to make it more realistic. If a team makes the opposing team's idea more feasible then they get a point (or a doughnut, or whatever) and if not, the doughnut goes to the other greedy sods.

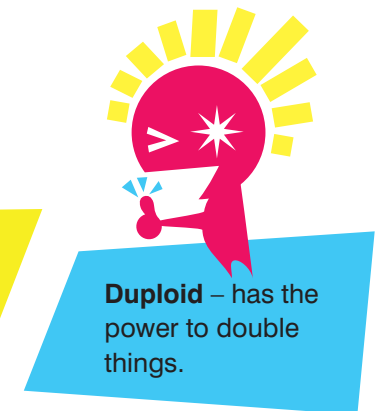
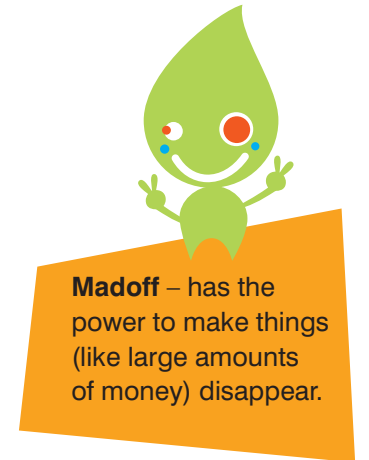
O SUPERMAN⁹

In the 1978 film, *Superman*, baddie Lex Luther gives Superman two big problems to solve, knowing full well Superman only has time to do one. The first is a nuclear missile heading full tilt to the San Andreas Fault that will cause an earthquake in California, the other a missile aimed at Hackensack, New Jersey. Superman opts to save New Jersey, and in the aftershock of the earthquake caused by the Californian missile Lois Lane's car falls into a crevice, earth falls on top of her and she dies. Not a good Hollywood ending. So Superman will have to bring Lois back to life. What does he do? What any one of us would do if we were a superhero, he alters the course of history by spinning the Earth in the opposite direction from its normal course, so reversing the time to before when she died, allowing him to save her.

Superheroes, as we all know, have super powers – hence their name. So, what if we could apply those powers to the problem we're trying to solve? Let's get together a group of ordinary mortals and make them into superheroes. They can either pick who they want to be or can be randomly assigned their new roles. Here's our set of superheroes, but you can make up your own.

People can even be given props to help them to get into character. Now they can apply their superpowers to the problem.

⁹'O Superman (for Massenet)' is an experimental song written by Laurie Anderson in 1981 and is part of the much larger work, *United States*. Anderson married long-time companion Lou Reed in 1981.



For traffic congestion in LA *The Telekinesist* might use his powers of transportation to instantly take all the cars out of the city. **How might we do a similar thing in real life, without resorting to superpowers?** Maybe not all the cars, but at least some of them. Should we, for instance, only allow certain types of cars on the roads, such as ones with high fuel efficiency?

Duploid might double the number of cars on the road to make the traffic situation in the city so intolerable that it forces commuters to leave their cars at home and think of alternatives. In real life we could find other ways, penalties for instance, to encourage people to rely less on their cars. Or if *Duploid* were feeling more benign he might double the number of buses, so making it easier for people to use public transport, and so we might then start thinking of ideas to increase the number of buses in the city.

And, of course, the powerful *Viagratro* could use his powers of levitation to raise cars off the ground, leaving those left on roads to travel around more freely. And this idea might get us thinking about how overhead rail systems do a similar thing, like literally raising people off the ground in cars (although those ones stay up for more than a couple of hours).



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

This chapter has been about how thinking BIG can help trigger interesting ideas. Kyle MacDonald wanted to see how far he could go by starting with a single red paperclip, and after a series of barter trades he ended up with a three-bedroom house in Saskatchewan, Canada. Evocative language can help us think big by dramatising a problem and bringing it to life (and, on the other hand, language can also be used to make it not seem like much of a problem at all).

When trying to come up with creative solutions we need to use whatever tricks we can to fire up the imagination, like exaggeration for instance. Exaggeration can lead to thinking that takes us away

from the more obvious solutions and allows our imagination to run a little wild. Now in the next chapter let's investigate what looking at things from people's different perspectives, or trying on their shoes, can do.



BOARD GAME: FAR OUT

How it works: Kyle MacDonald thought of a quite amazing use for a paperclip – trade it for a house. It was a pretty far out idea and not something you’d normally come up with as a use for a paperclip. This game is about thinking up other interesting ideas for how to use a paperclip.

How to play: Players create the longest chain of paperclips that they can by coming up with ideas for things to do with a paperclip. Find a paperclip to use as a

counter and see how many spaces you can move along the board. On page 235 there is a list of ideas that people given the task will typically come up. Move one space along the board for every idea already on the list, but two whole paperclips for every idea not included on the list.

How to win: You’re playing against yourself so everyone’s a winner. Just see how far you can get around the board.

