DON’T GIVE A DAM

Do you repeatedly encounter people who make you angry, or irritate you simply because they feel like it? There’s good reason to believe that you’ve got a problem, and it’s mostly with yourselves. Creativity researcher Dr Eyal Doron explains why it’s not worth playing by the rules

Dr Eyal Doron

There is a certain arrangement that we all live by, and it’s linked to a clear division between two types of people: The 5% who create, dream and do; and the remaining 95% who work for them. It's astonishing how the 95% to work, put their heads down, refuse to dare too much, not to dream too big, and accept getting by with less. So how do we create a reality in which people find gratification in checking boxes, carrying out menial tasks, and fulfilling the dreams of the other 5%? And how do the few never cease to imagine and frolic in reality with all the gay abandon of a kid in a playground? What enables this bizarre arrangement to exist?

A week ago, I received the answer when I came to collect my 8 year-old daughter Alona from school. “How was it?” I asked her as usual, and she told me that it was great — they watched an entire movie for two hours. “Why?” I asked. “Because we were good children so we received a prize”. This struck me, and suddenly I understood how a whole system emerges from the pathetic idea to reward children with a film that takes up half their school day. The puzzle pieces came together and I felt as if “The Matrix” had been revealed before my eyes. It’s simple to explain, but chilling. And everything begins right there—in school. But we need to go back for a moment to understand the full extent of the matter.

WHY IT’S BAD TO BE A GOOD KID

We learned three basic principles in school and these three rules are still taught today: To respond to external motivations, to be a “good kid”, and to fear failure. Three things which prevent children from shooting for the stars, which ensure that they will always remain accountable to the world, condemning them to work in a dream factory for the 5% who think differently.

The first part is obvious: Any given day in school is a flood of prizes, warnings and deals. Nothing is ever done for the sake of the thing itself. Children receive merit points on a board, win stars and get stickers because they were quiet; eventually they stop expressing any real interest in anything.

All the researchers and studies will explain to you that internal motivation is the main engine for success, happiness, satisfaction, vitality and health. Schools teach the exact opposite. Like the dogs in Pavlov's experiment, the buzzer for the break makes them feel hungry, and the merit point on the board causes satisfaction to course throughout the body.

The second principle is to be a “good boy”. If it wasn’t already obvious enough, then a fascinating study from 2015 demonstrated that disobedient children became higher earners decades later. So who really benefits from being good kids? Others, mostly. The idea of ​​being a “good boy” corresponds to the education of the last century, of what Seth Godin calls “the old American dream”. That's how we were educated, and that was what we were expected to do at work: toe the line, follow the rules, obey, be disciplined, get there on time, shut up and work hard, because in the end we’ll be rewarded. If we grind our teeth for years and years and devote ourselves to work, in the end we’ll receive comfortable pensions. All week we work for the weekend, and all our lives for our pensions.

That was the arrangement and that's how things worked, but this arrangement has changed completely, writes Godin. The new market punishes everyone who is just “okay” (a lot of shady work, very little pay), and the “new American dream” looks and sounds quite different: be extraordinary, make sure you stand out from others, know how to connect between people and ideas, come up with creative and even crazy new ideas. The system will reward you ten times more today if you show creativity, innovation and daring than if you are obedient and follow the instructions. The third principle is the fear of failure. A series of tests and grades could have built confidence here, unfortunately the reality is different.

RIHANNA NEEDS TO COME LATE

One of Sigmund Freud's short and profound articles centres on daydreaming. A boy, writes Freud, runs around a living room and daydreams aloud. Think of your child imagining himself as a superhero, making pretend battle charges and hollering to himself. At some point in our childhoods we feel a sense of shame or embarrassment to continue this habit, and stop acting out our fantasies. This is the moment when we begin daydreaming.

The loss of childhood is associated with the moment when we feel ashamed. The irresponsible, naive and shameless child becomes a responsible and embarrassed adult; one who refuses to allow himself to be foolish in front of others.

But some of us never stopped running about in the living room. Some of us make the whole world their playground. When pop singer Rihanna visited Israel last year, a crowd of tens of thousands waited for her for hours until she turned up on stage irresponsibly late. A short while earlier, it was reported on the news that she’d been spotted floating in the Dead Sea earlier that day. The article, which the singer’s production team allowed to be broadcast for some reason, made it abundantly clear that there was no good reason for her tardiness. Then I realized: This is simply her arrangement with the audience. She lives the way she wants, and a lot of people pay a ticket exactly because of that. In her case it could be said that she *had* to come late.

The idea of ​​a mature and responsible adult, a rigid, square person influenced by the environment, has been the subject of an unprecedented attack in modern management books. It is clear to everyone that this is a recipe for an employee or manager lacking creativity and imagination. Movies also try to influence our opinion in this regard.

Who are our heroes? Those who do not heed warnings, those who do not pay attention to recommendations. Their main weapon is the ability to think independently of what at that moment is perceived as correct, polite, acceptable or appropriate to do. But we are unable to do that. We were raised with the need to receive a good word and an immediate compliment, as much as possible. To get a pat on the back, and without delay. We yearn for the instant gratification of a merit point on the chalkboard, as back in school. To live life to its fullest, in vivid colours, we need something else.

FLEXIBILITY OF THOUGHT

An act of independent thought, one that does not take into consideration what is acceptable and expected of you, is not necessarily associated with a perception that slights others or takes a dim view of morality. Neither is it a show of power. The real power is to act out of a deep belief in something, even when everyone around does not like the idea. The spectrum of social responses can be varied: sometimes it will cost you a raised eyebrow, sometimes it can even lead to social exclusion.

In his fascinating book, Siebert describes what enables captives to survive where others have failed. One of the survivors summed up their experience in a sentence that characterises the entire group: “I had to act against the education I received as a child so that I could survive.” This is a moving and thought-provoking message. It is deeper than can be summed up here, and is related specifically to the ability to read the situation in a flexible manner, (not to regard the captors as a generic set of “baddies”, for example).

What is important for our purposes is that the survivors were required to act out of a deep inner intuition, and break away from the way their fellow prisoners thought. Only then could they discover forces they had not known themselves before. This is not a cliché, in their case it saved them.

The test is simple: do you repeatedly encounter people who make you angry or irritate simply because they feel like it? It's a good sign that you're in trouble, and mostly with yourself.

Sometimes I suggest to people who have a hard time starting to do it (as in, stop giving a damn about what the whole world thinks) for others – to do everything possible for a sick parent, or for their child at school. It is easier and connects us to another kind of action and power — with our backs to the wall, or when something gives us a sense of injustice.

Remember the satisfaction you feel after a struggle against “the system” in the name of justice? You can feel this on a daily basis, and without emergencies. A pleasant sense of liberation and freedom that you’re simply doing something and concentrating on it without thinking for a moment what the consequences will be. That’s how the 5% live each day. Don’t you want to join them?

A METHOD TO THE MADNESS

When business examples are needed for rule-breakers who pay no attention to warnings, usually we encounter a familiar line of heroes who are repeatedly quoted and held up on a pedestal. I have a special fondness for the examples of “ordinary people” who simply decided to do what they thought was logical then, and what all the others around them thought of as an irresponsible and crazy step.

Victoria Knight-McDowell, a California-based second-grade literature teacher, all-too frequently caught colds from her students, until she decided she'd just had enough. She began to study Chinese and holistic medicines to strengthen her immune system. She had no background in the subject, but her natural curiosity led her to experiment at home. She began to create herbal mixtures and vitamins for her family and friends, consulting herbalists and nutritionists. “It went so far that we said, 'Let's put it on the market and see what happens.'”

According to Knight-McDowell, the most important thing she and her husband did was conduct research so that the pills would dissolve in less than two minutes - "because Americans like things to happen quickly." Seeing that these concoctions help, they decided to break their pension funds and invest all their savings, $300,000) to set up a business. In the first stage, 12,000 jars were made, the labels were pasted manually, and at the end of her day at school Victoria would call local pharmacies herself. When she started out she would have to ask the bank clerk the most basic questions. “I didn’t know the difference between loss/profit reporting and financial status”, she recounts. The environment did not support them, and the family thought that they should invest more in the house than in their product, called Airborne. “People told me, 'It's a crazy idea!' Or they said: 'You can’t do it.' But you have to learn to simply ignore them.” By 2001, Airborne recorded sales of more than 3.2 billion dollars.

The environment was off-putting, but Knight-McDowell listened to her gut feeling (she had no basic knowledge of chemistry, pharmacy, or economics). On the packaging it even says, “created by a teacher”. It would have been more appropriate to write, “created by a teacher who believed and didn’t give a damn”.

IT’S CONTAGIOUS

Sometimes trauma, of all things, can motivate us to not care what others think. The idea is not to wait for it. It’s ok to look for shortcuts. The obvious tips are, of course: to start out small (once in a while to do something daring), to make decisions in a completely different way than we’re used to, or to stick to people who are naturally very independent and free. It's contagious.

The truth is that this is a process that requires changing our basic perceptions and necessitates starting to act out of gut feelings much more. Without analysing things from every angle, without endless consultation, without all the doubting and traumas of the past. To press the buzzer and only then to guess the answer. To concentrate on the thing itself alone, without thinking about the outcome. Less intellect, more intuition.

So what's new? Among other things, that the cards in the 21st century have been well and truly shuffled, and that you have a good chance of joining the dreamers. You do not have to work in someone else’s dream factory, even if you weren’t born to royalty. But like the great survivors and the little heroes, you will sometimes have to go against (almost) everything you've learned to this day.

Main image text: The system will reward you more today if you show originality, braveness and creativity, than if you remain obedient and carry out instructions