Better decision making through informed changes to an outdated worldview

In this dizzying digital age we receive more news than ever before. Populism, climate change, conflicts, crime, societal changes and social relations, increasing competition, technological developments, having to achieve more with less..... it often feels as if the world is changing much more rapidly than we are equipped to deal with. Can this end well? When contemplating such important topics, it doesn't help that practically everyone has a distorted and outdated worldview.

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Photography: Speakers Academy® | Walter Kallenbach

It turns out that in many subject matters our view of the world, shaped by our background, education and the news sources we absorb, is incorrect. One of the most striking examples I use in my lectures that shows just how deep-rooted our distorted worldview can be is my niece Hannah. When she was 11, I asked her, "What's the first thing that comes into your head when you think of Africa?" Her spontaneous answer was, "The Red Cross and Marco Borsato (a famous Dutch singer and War Child ambassador). So young, but already with such a decided perception of Africa … the Red Cross and War Child and as a child she had very little exposure to daily news items. Of course, every country has its share of misery and many things still go horribly wrong, but there is also significant and positive progress. This progress is much less talked about.

PROGRESS

For example, the research agency Motivaction carried out a poll in 26 countries asking, "In the last 20 years, has the proportion of people living in extreme poverty increased, remained the same, or decreased?" A shocking 84% of respondents thought that poverty levels had remained the same or even increased. The correct answer, however, is that extreme poverty has actually halved in the last 20 years - a spectacular improvement. Only 16% of the respondents are aware that poverty has decreased (a similar The World's Best News survey in The Netherlands showed that a slightly higher 19% of respondents were aware of this).

The global percentage of 1-year-old children vaccinated against at least one disease has dramatically increased from 22% in 1980 to 88% today. A fantastic achievement, but again the vast majority of people do not have a clear picture of such long-term progress and tend to answer this question based on the state of the world in 1980. This means that on the one hand we have an outdated view of reality, and on the other we are unable to recognise the opportunities this progress has to offer. The distribution of vaccines requires a so-called

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cold-chain; during transportation these vaccines must remain refrigerated from laboratory, on or along sea or road, to storage facilities at local hospitals. This requires a consistent electricity supply and other variables such as the adequate training of nursing staff for the correct administering of these vaccines. This infrastructure exists and manages to reach the vast majority of children all across the globe. The opportunities to further expand on and invest in this infrastructure are huge, however they are overlooked simply because we do not know that this infrastructure is so widely available.

OVERLY DRAMATIC WORLDVIEW

The fact that we just don’t see these improvements does not positively contribute to the dramatic worldview many people instinctively possess. Our brains tend to pay the most attention to negative events that play to our natural fears. It is therefore not surprising that the media tends to cover disasters, conflicts, scandals and all other types of minor and major suffering. Good news simply doesn’t sell as well. Yes, dramatic events do happen. The trouble is we rarely or consciously realise that these are the exceptions (how many planes didn’t crash today?). Furthermore, we lose sight of long-term trends as a result of this focus on daily events.

This is why an overly dramatic worldview fails to contribute to constructive discussion and limits our ability to diligently deal with future challenges and opportunities. Is the glass half empty or half full? Returning to the example of the trends concerning extreme poverty, Motivaction also asked, “Do you think the living conditions of the poorest people will improve within the next 15 years?” Out of the 16% that were aware of the decrease in poverty levels, 68% answered positively and said conditions will improve. Out of the 84% that were unsure or thought that poverty has increased, only 18% believed that conditions will improve in the future. While this is no proof of causality, it does indicate a strong correlation between being well informed and a having a positive attitude. Which would you prefer? Would you rather work together with optimists, or with pessimists?

People sometimes say to me, “Peter, are you one of those positive-thinking types who see everything through rose-coloured spectacles?” My answer? No, I’m not. I’m neither an optimist nor a pessimist. I’m a possibilist; I am aware of what’s going right, but I’m also very much aware of the issues we need to discuss. As for those rose-coloured specs, although not necessarily rose-tinted, we all wear a pair of coloured lenses that shape and filter how we view the world - otherwise known as our personal bias.

PERCEPTION VS REALITY

Hannah also helped me realise how firmly ingrained our personal bias is and how it dictates what we consider to be normal and abnormal. Hannah and her family had lived in Malaysia for near on two years and they travelled back and forth between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore on a regular basis. Hannah applied her own logic to my question about where she thinks people live the longest; “Malaysia is dirty, Singapore is clean, so you live longest in Singapore because the hygiene is better there.” My point with this example is that one’s personal bias, the specific colour of your glasses, is determined by where you grow up. If Hannah had not lived in Kuala Lumpur for those two years, she would not have given that answer. Of course, the world is too large and complex to be able to know and comprehend everything, and it is exactly for this reason that we must be both curious and humble, remaining open to other ideas, insights, customs and cultures.

Numbers are vital when painting a clearer picture, because it turns out we’re not very good at intuitive estimation. Ipsos MORI research shows that most people think that The Netherlands spends 19% of its gross domestic product on healthcare. In reality this figure is 11%. Roughly speaking, that’s a difference of about 50 billion euros. Most people also think that 26% of the Dutch population aged between 20 and 79 have one of the various types of diabetes; the correct figure is 6%, a significant difference. Using such ‘guesstimates’ it’s easy to think, “Wow, a quarter of the population has diabetes, that’s serious, something must be done. Why doesn’t the healthcare system get more funding? Yes, healthcare must have access to more funding!” Of course, there may be other very good arguments why the healthcare system should get more funding, but in guesstimates like these our opinion is based upon a skewed perception and not a realistic one. Not good, as far as I’m concerned.

LEARN TO LOOK AT THINGS DIFFERENTLY

We need to learn to look at things from another perspective. There are 10 principles we can use to look at our environment in a more nuanced way which subsequently allows us to make better decisions. One of these principles is to reset the ‘gap instinct’. We have an almost incontrollable tendency to divide everything into two groups in order to focus on their differences: rich-poor, high-low, left-right etcetera. However, we must also realise that the majority is usually somewhere in the middle. Basing a complete worldview solely on exceptions is unwise. I often ask profit and non-profit business groups, “Is your organisation set up to help the majority of your customers as fast and professionally as possible, or are its rules and procedures primarily aimed at the exceptions? If the latter, are these perhaps unnecessarily hindering your honest customers?

There’s also the ‘negativity instinct’. We recently saw how bad news is more likely to be spread by the media and that trends should be viewed based upon a broader timescale, as while an individual event may seem extremely negative, the long-term trend in which it plays a part may be significantly improving. Resetting the ‘fear instinct’ is another principle, where it is important that we experience fear in its correct proportion and assess risks in order to form a realistic view of opportunities and threats. Or we can reset the ‘blame instinct’ and resist the temptation to immediately assign blame when something goes wrong, instead consciously choosing to first investigate the cause(s). These principles of thinking are together known as Factfulness.

'FACTFULNESS'

Factfulness is a term coined by Ola Rosling of the Swedish Gapminder Foundation

which describes “the stress-reducing habit of only carrying opinions for which you have strong supporting facts”. Ola is the son of Hans Rosling, professor of international health and master-statistician-story-teller who sadly passed away in February 2017. In the final year of his life Hans worked on his book Factfulness together with Ola and his wife Anna Rosling Rönnlund. The book was published in April 2018 and was very well received, recommended by both ex-president Obama and Bill Gates, the latter’s reaction printed on the book’s cover: “One of the most important books I’ve ever read – an indispensable guide to thinking clearly about the world.”

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SOURCES:
www.glocalities.com/mandela | www.worldsbestnews.nl/motivaction/ (Dutch)
www.ipsos.com/en/perceptions-are-not-reality-things-are-not-bad-they-seem | www.gapminder.org