

Bob Gunn, Editor

# Dropping Eggs

BY ROBERT W. GUNN & BETSY RASKIN GULLICKSON

How do you drop an egg from the roof without breaking it? Each spring, that question is posed to the first graders of the San Anselmo, Calif., public school. This year, one of the students grappling with that assignment was Jinsung. His mother, Kukhwa, helped Jinsung with his homework.

“Jinsung made a plan to protect the egg with a pillow,” Kukhwa said, “but I suggested an airbag instead. I thought that would be much safer than a pillow, and he agreed. So we made an air bag, which Jinsung named ‘an air pillow.’”

The big day arrived, and Kukhwa accompanied Jinsung to school, bringing along her younger son, three-year-old Jinsoo. The event began. One by one, a teacher dropped each egg from the roof. “The children had come up with so many ideas to protect the egg: a parachute, a ball, and so on,” said Kukhwa. “But no one else had an ‘air pillow’ like the one that we had prepared. Jinsung and I were full of confidence that our idea would succeed



where others failed.”

At last, the teacher came to Jinsung’s air pillow.

“As soon as I saw it, I sensed our plan would fail,” Kukhwa said.

“The egg was supposed to be in the center of the bag, but the bag was so full of air that the egg had been pushed into a corner. When it was dropped, it made a sound I’ll never forget. Nor will I forget the look of disappointment on Jinsung’s face.”

Afterward, Kukhwa asked Jinsung what he thought about their failed attempt. “Nothing,” he mumbled.

“Failure is a stepping stone to success,” Kukhwa told him.

“What do you mean?” Jinsung asked.

“We can learn what went wrong and what we need to fix next time,” his mother replied.

“But it’s over! We won’t have the project next year,” he wailed. Jinsung was full of frustration; Kukhwa was remorseful. But one member of the family was happy. Three-year-old Jinsoo kept talking excitedly about seeing so many eggs dropping from the sky.

These three people attended the same event, but each had an entirely different experience. And it wasn’t because of what they saw, but because of what they *thought* about what they saw.

What we find particularly intriguing is the difference in perspective of six-year-old Jinsung and his three-year-old brother. We surmise that difference has to do with a rite of passage in the life of every child: learning wrong from right. At three, Jinsoo’s world is full of things that turn out differently—eggs that stay whole, eggs that crack, and eggs that shatter into yellow blobs; each one is interesting. By six, Jinsung has learned that a whole egg is better than a smashed one; he’s focused on finding the “right” way to do things. He got a result he didn’t want, and

his attachment to a particular outcome triggered negative emotions. While his younger brother remained open to the thrills of creativity, Jinsung's natural curiosity was being shuttered by expectations.

When we reinvent knowledge through trial and error, we may find entirely novel, creative solutions that enliven our effort and bring unanticipated benefits. The process of invention and discovery—the joy of learning—is the point; outcomes are just mile markers along the path.

Our entire academic experience, however, reinforces the “right/wrong” perspective—rewarding us for knowing “right” answers instead of asking us to do our best and to explore continuously. Carried into business, the tendency to codify right answers inexorably creates bureaucracy. A procedure created in a moment of need, perfectly attuned to a particular set of facts, no longer fits changed circumstances. Yet policies require work to be done the tried and true way—the right way. When systems become rigidly “right or wrong,” institutional performance is impeded, and people leave their brains at the door. For example, we see this in organizations when:

- Performance reviews merely list the ways in which the person's accomplishments fall short of job standards;
- Meeting agendas serve to tell, or sell, the boss's “right” answers;
- Decisions are taken in the context of detailed analyses and PowerPoint presentations that delineate everything that could go wrong rather than asking, “What if it goes right?”
- Brainstorming sessions rush to solutions, shortening the time spent in the discomfort of uncertainty and provoking a rubber

band effect: People stretch for a moment and then fall back on answers close to the familiar instead of taking a chance on something entirely new.

Life, by its nature, is uncertain.

Each instant is distinct from what we encountered the moment before. We seek certainty, but we live in mystery. Why not acknowledge the power of working in the unknown? As author/teacher Cheri Huber has written: “Living your life in fear that you're going to do it wrong is like an explorer who is afraid of getting lost.” When leaders act from a stance of “I don't know,” they open up possibilities for staff to discover ever greater solutions and to continually strengthen their internal resources.

To open your organization to greater possibility, reintroduce a sense of curiosity and wonder into the business conversation. Transform performance reviews into exploration of the differences in perspective and in how we show up. Make meetings a forum for real dialogue that harnesses collective wisdom to tackle challenges too big for anyone to do alone. Loosen up brainstorm sessions to allow the mental space and time for the kind of reflection that brings real insights. Commit to decisions by using your heart and your gut instincts, taking action even when you can't rationally prove that events will work out. Act boldly with the faith that, whatever the outcome, you and your team will find ways to make it right in the end.

You don't have to launch a “skunk works.” To change your organization, start with small steps, such as:

- When reviewing research, instead of asking, “Do you agree or disagree?” ask, “What's surprising?”
- Go to lunch with someone you know well, and ask questions, lis-

tening for something that you don't already know about them.

- Become comfortable with silence and the space between words.
- Take a walk with a child in order to see, through a child's eyes, the wonder along the way.

At the crux of efforts like these is putting aside the momentum of our own thinking and our blinding attachment to what we know to be right or wrong. Instead, we stay open to inner resources that arise in the space between our thoughts—where common sense, wisdom, and inspiration reside—so that we discover richness in whatever shows up.

The penultimate role model for profiting from open-minded curiosity is Thomas Edison. As a boy, he annoyed his teacher to distraction by persistently asking, “Why?” As a young man, he refused to accept expert opinions, relying instead on experimentation. As a legendary builder of profitable businesses capitalizing on inventions, he left a battery of quotations that point to the power of suspending certainty about what's “right.” Two stand out to us:

“Just because something doesn't do what you planned it to do doesn't mean it's useless,” and, “Results! Man, I have gotten a lot of results. I know 10,000 things that won't work.”

That's the lesson Kukhwa hopes that her son learns from the day of dropping eggs. ■

*Bob Gunn is the cofounder of Accompli, an advisory/coaching/training firm focused on organizational change and executive leadership development. You can e-mail Bob at [rgunn@AccompliGroup.com](mailto:rgunn@AccompliGroup.com).*

*Betsy Raskin Gullickson was an EVP for Ketchum Communications and is now a leadership coach and author.*