

As Luck Will Have It



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Dan Ariely's book, *Irrationally Yours*, is a collection of his "Ask Ariely" columns featured in *The Wall Street Journal*. I purchased this book at an airport bookstore after learning that a short flight delay was going to stretch into several hours. As luck would have it, this particular book made me think and laugh, and the four-hour flight delay flew by.

One of my favorite chapters is titled "On Luck as a Multiple-Stage Number Game." In this chapter Dan replies to the following question from a reader: "Are there people who are just lucky? I think so. Only I'm not one of them."

Ariely's answer about whether people are lucky is valuable advice for nonprofit leaders. He explains that "Luckier people tend to try different things more frequently, and by trying more often they also succeed more." He reminds his reader that it's important to recognize that decisions are often made in stages, not all at once. He observes that "...luckier people don't just try more things to start with; they are also quicker at cutting off the paths that don't seem to work out and focus on the more promising avenues."

A few simple lessons for nonprofit leaders include:

- **Try things more frequently** — As Ariely explains, "...life, to some degree, is a numbers game..." By trying something frequently (and in a different way), you have a better chance that a few of those many attempts will be successful. Nonprofit leaders must be willing to experiment. Recognize that your odds aren't very good if you choose to pursue a single, simple solution to a complex problem. Be willing to try very different approaches to managing the most complex challenges facing your nonprofit. To get started trying things frequently and in different ways, invite diverse team members to share their ideas and to shake their fear of failure. If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.
- **Just say no** — While it's important to try frequently and to consider a range of options, it's just as important to identify and say "no" to the options that are less promising. Pursuing a dozen strategies simultaneously reduces the odds that one or two will be implemented thoroughly. Set less favorable routes aside to focus on a handful of approaches that you can realistically pursue, and that promise a high return. If you're not skilled at cutting out failing projects or identifying opportunities with low potential, then ask a couple of your team members to help you play devil's advocate and take a critical look at your projects and programs.
- **Practice flexible, continual decision-making** — An employee once told me that my leadership style

was frustrating because I changed my mind too often. While I agree with her observation, the truth is that many projects require interim steps and decisions. Information gleaned in one stage of a project often necessitates redrawing the trajectory. Follow-on decisions that first seem to conflict with an earlier position may actually ensure success or prevent the waste of precious resources. Instead of mechanically staying the course on a planned-out project, train your nonprofit team to assess each project phase in real time-so you can make better decisions by reacting to events before or as they unfold. Today's buzzwords like 'resilient' and 'nimble' describe nonprofits that are comfortable with flexible, tenacious decision-making, and that know when to shift gears to keep their missions moving forward.

- **Welcome serendipity** — We are all offered opportunities in life, but lucky people actually take those opportunities. In 2012, researchers at University College London began [studying the phenomenon of serendipity](#)-a 'happy accident' or lucky surprise. By studying many personal accounts of serendipity, the researchers found that it typically encompassed an insightful 'aha moment' that leads to a valuable but unanticipated outcome. UCL researcher Dr. Stephann Makri added that people who experienced serendipity were propelled 'forwards at a faster pace than they would have traveled otherwise.' Dr. Makri believed that anyone could benefit from serendipity if 'they remain receptive to it and ready to act on it when it happens.' So if you want to get lucky, take opportunities when they appear in your life.

I've yet to meet any nonprofit sector leaders who wouldn't relish a bit of luck. Yet luck isn't as elusive as it may seem. Increase your leadership luck by being willing to experiment. Model courageous leadership by reversing course on strategies that are less promising. Recognize that all worthwhile endeavors require adaptable, continual decision-making. And resist the urge to economize by making pre-mature decisions. Above all, be open to taking opportunities when they magically present themselves.

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