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ARE YOU OPEN TO NEW IDEAS?

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Are you open to new ideas? What if it comes from an alternative source or even from someone lacking accreditation? Perhaps an unconventional solution is presented by someone from outside the industry – would you take it under serious consideration?

Previously I wrote an article, "Sales Moneyball" based on a baseball recruiting concept that when presented to the conservative folks at the Oakland A's, was thought to be a ridiculous idea, especially since it came from an outsider. In their opinion, it was a math solution, not a baseball solution. However, the statistical analysis that was the basis of the Moneyball concept was a game changer (no pun intended).

Similarly, the following story is just as compelling, and it includes some great lessons for business owners and managers. It is the account of the Oxford English Dictionary, James Murray and Dr. William Chester Minor. On the surface, this may seem like an odd example for a modern business application, but after considering it in a bit more detail, I am sure you will appreciate its significance. As you review this incredible story, consider what these men accomplished even though both individuals could have been rejected outright as contributors to such an important project, and how unlikely it was that someone would consider their ideas to solve the problems necessary to accomplish such a monumental task.
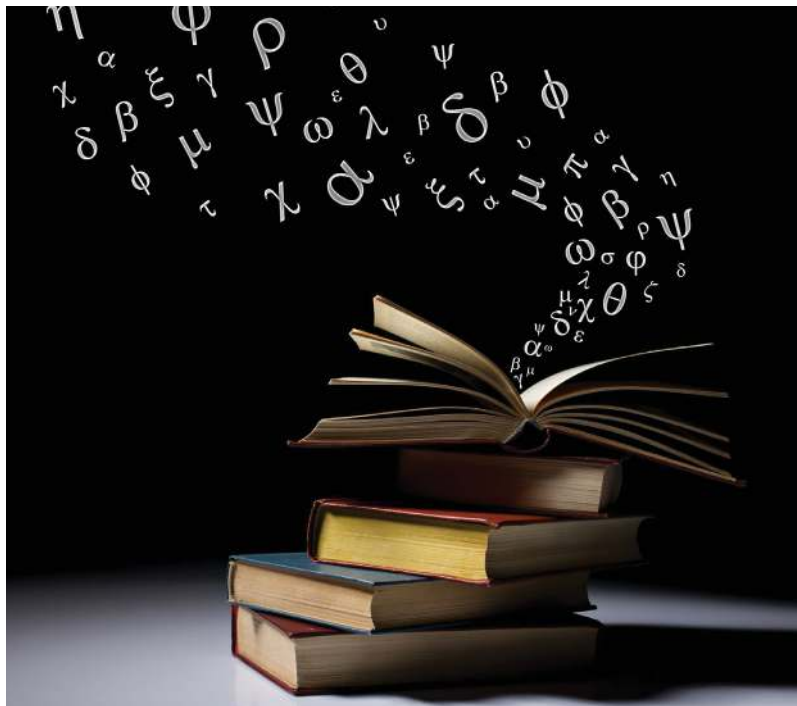
The story begins in 1878, when James Murray was invited to meet the Delegates of the Oxford University Press, to interview for the job of editor of a new dictionary of the English language. As the editor, he was to capture all the words present in the English-speaking world and their various meanings - a massive project. In 1879, an agreement was entered between the parties, and Murray began to undertake the project to edit the new dictionary. To put the enormity of this project into perspective, writing the dictionary was to take ten years to complete and would be approximately 7,000 pages, consisting of four volumes. When the dictionary was published in 1928, it was twelve volumes - 414,825 words defined with over 1.8 million citations illustrating their meanings.

As you consider Murray's résumé, ask yourself, "Would I hire Murray for this project?" If you were a manager at the Oxford University Press, would you have been open to Murray's ideas? An honest answer is that he was not the ideal candidate that a well-educated group from Oxford would have chosen. Here is why. James Murray was born in Denholm, Scotland, and he left school at age fourteen because his parents could not afford to pay the fees to continue his education. He did not have a college degree, or even what one might consider a high school diploma. However, he did not let that hinder him, and at the age of seventeen he became a teacher at the Hawick Grammar School, and three years later he was the headmaster of the Subscription Academy in Hawick.

Eventually, Murray's primary interest was languages and the origin of words. Although self-taught, he was reasonably fluent in Italian, French, Catalan, Spanish, and Latin, and somewhat fluent in several other languages including Portuguese and various French dialects. He was also familiar with Dutch, German and Danish. Several other languages included in his studies were Anglo-Saxon, Mœso-Gothic, Celtic, Slavonic, and Russian. He also read at sight the Old Testament (Hebrew and Syriac), and to a lesser degree, he knew Aramaic, Arabic, Coptic, and

Phoenician. It is quite an understatement to say that his knowledge of languages was outstanding for an individual with no formal schooling past the age of fourteen.

If you think this is an exciting story, buckle up because it's about to get even more remarkable. As Murray's inaugural team attempted to review every word in the English language, along with the origin of each, he soon realized that his small group would never be able to accomplish this undertaking - not even in ten years. So, thinking "outside of the box," he came up with the following idea. He sent out a request to the general public for help, so individuals that were avid readers could review and map certain words. Through a mail-in response program, participants could send their research to be cross-checked by his team.

One respondent was an individual named Dr. William Chester Minor. Once again, consider how open-minded you would be to accepting help for your project when you learn a bit more about Minor. Here is his story. Dr. William Chester Minor was born on the island now known as Sri Lanka, and at age 14 he was sent to America where he eventually attended Yale Medical School, graduating with a degree and a specialization in comparative anatomy in 1863.

Minor became a Union Army surgeon, no doubt witnessing terrible war casualties. After the end of the U.S. Civil War, Minor saw duty in New York City. However, by 1867, his erratic behavior came to the attention of the Army, and he was transferred to a remote post in the Florida Panhandle. By 1868, his condition had progressed to the point that he was admitted to a lunatic asylum in Washington, DC. However, after eighteen months he showed no improvement, and in 1871 he went to London to seek treatment for his mental condition. He lived a debauched life and haunted by paranoia in 1872 he fatally shot a man whom he believed had broken into his room. Eventually, Minor was found not guilty by reason of insanity, and he was incarcerated in the asylum at Broadmoor in the village of Crowthorne, Berkshire, England. Since he received a US army pension and was not judged dangerous, he was given rather comfortable quarters and was able to buy and read books. Interestingly, he was also regularly visited by the widow of the man he had killed (which is another fascinating story), and she provided him with further books.

Most likely, his contact with various London booksellers is where he learned of the need for volunteers for the Oxford Dictionary project. Minor became one of the project's most effective volunteers, reading through his extensive personal library of rare books and documenting quotations that explained the way particular words were used. The team working on the dictionary at the Oxford University Press published lists of words for which they wanted examples of usage. Minor provided many of these examples with increasing ease as the lists grew.

It wasn't until quite sometime later that James Murray learned of Minor's background, eventually visiting him at the asylum in 1891. Several years later, Murray gave recognition to Minor's enormous contributions to the dictionary, stating, "we could easily illustrate the last four centuries from his quotations alone."

Without these two unlikely men, the outstanding achievement of compiling the Oxford English Dictionary would most likely have taken many more years. Their work has benefited generations of readers not to mention the educational system in the entire English-speaking world. So how did this happen? The leaders of the Oxford University Press were willing to think outside of the box and were open-minded to someone else's ideas - even when the "someone else" did not fit the mold of what traditionally would be considered a reliable source. Additionally, James Murray implemented an unconventional idea and was willing to accept help from those that could provide it, including someone as improbable as Dr. William Chester Minor.

The story of James Murray and Dr. William Chester Minor is one that I will never forget. The business lessons contained within illustrate that great ideas and scholars can come from the most unlikely places. Think about it. Where do you source new ideas? When you hire someone to do a job, how focused are you on the customary credentials? Are you willing to accept involvement from individuals that support your mission and are eager to help you achieve your goals even if they are from an unlikely source? After reviewing this account, I am sure you would agree that these are important questions that deserve consideration.

Oxford English Dictionary | The definitive record of the English language

open-minded, *adj.*

Origin: Formed within English, by compounding. **Etymons:** OPEN *adj.*, MINDED *adj.*

Etymology: < OPEN *adj.* + MINDED *adj.* Compare slightly earlier OPEN MIND *n.*

Having an open mind; receptive to new ideas; unprejudiced.

1748   S. RICHARDSON *Clarissa* VII. xcvi. 358   Such persons generally find it to their purpose, that all the world should be open-minded but themselves.

1828   *Foreign Rev.* **2** 115   Open-minded, truth-seeking men.

1861   T. HUGHES *Tom Brown at Oxf.* III. xii. 223   In fact, he is a wonderfully open-minded man for his age, if you only put things to him the right way.

1903   G. B. SHAW *Let.* 6 Mar. (1972) II. 316   You can't feel at home with anything that is strange, no matter how open-minded you may be.

2001   *Financial Times* 5/3 (advt.) We're open-minded about credit history and flexible about forms of ID.

This entry has been updated (OED Third Edition, June 2004).

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