

# Desirable Difficulty

## Why do we need to go out of our comfort zones?

By Ebnun Etheris

We completed a team building program recently for a team of middle managers. The team was very much diverse, easily coming from at least 5 different countries. During a meeting prior to this training session I had a brief from their senior managers and their HR Team. I was duly warned “Ebnun, we have a unique character in this group. Very much brash, quite disruptive and expect to have a hard time during the training session. The person might just derail our effort to cascade the common purpose and values down the operational managers”. I took that sharing with a fair bit of salt and kept an open mind.



Malcom Gladwell in his book, *David and Goliath*, shared his thoughts on desirable difficulty. We go through that, all the time. When it happens, we can make a decision to manage it or walk away from it. Attempting 70.3 ironman races in Putrajaya, after hurting my lower back, 2 week prior was my madness to experience pain for the 113 km distance. It was pretty bad, I was not able to bend down to touch my knees, 2 weeks prior when I increased my training mileage. It was an old injury that crept up again. Lost 2 weeks of training time and I even contemplated giving up and not turn up for the race until Coach Jonathan who convinced me to come and stop if the back hurts again. From 60 km onwards every other kilometer became difficult but I completed the distance of 113 km; relieved to know that I can wear a T-Shirt that said I finished. That’s “desirable difficulty” for me, when we are willing to address difficulties, it makes you stronger both mentally and cognitively, because throwing the

towel is enough to break you down and rebuilding the body and soul there after gets a tad bit harder. Courage is not about being tough, it’s about harnessing “tough” in all aspects of endeavors you embark in. IM 70.3 for me and all the folks who finished, we were just harnessing mentally tough perspectives in our lives to manage, family, work and ourselves (my own short-comings, my faith and my life).

What’s a desirable difficulty? It is the ability of the team leader to manage individuals, who are perceived to be disruptive and hard to get along with. In Malcom’s book, Dr. Jay Freireich, was one such doctor - uncouth, straight forward and plainly a very difficult person to get along with. As managers, it is a team “made in heaven” if you have members who can agree with you, without batting an eyelid and better still echo the very same thoughts you have. With Dr. Jay, if your child had leukemia in the 1950’s and had he been your consulting physician, his straight forward reply to you is that your child will die and it may just happen very soon. He did not get along well with his superiors. Had you been an intern doctor in his watch; any mistake on your part will result in a bellowing voice that will cut across the hallway, asking you why you are trying to kill the patient. He had passion for what he did and he believed in speaking his mind, very much like the “dysfunctional manager” I was warned about. In 1955, National Cancer Institute honored Dr. Jay for his trail blazing work for cancer.

Managers, when you perceive an individual to be difficult, this rebellious uncouth individual who speaks his or her mind, may just be the gem of a team player you need. Getting views and feedback that is watered down to be politically right is easy to come by. Just look around, every Tom, Nick or Harry is just trying to be nice to get by. Managers clamor to be in your good books by agreeing very quickly what needs to be discussed. In the civil service, uniform organizations and family owned businesses, that mantra to tow the line or be marked for life holds true even now. I did have a tough time and it only got better, when the inputs that were shared by this individual helped shift my perspectives on what is needed for the team.

She was honest, and during the team building session, she became an asset to drive what was intended for the learning outcomes. For senior managers, business owners and senior civil servants, individuals who speak their mind are not easily to come by. For a start, if you understand personality types, research have shown that they make up about 19% of the Earth’s population (Percentage of the D profiles computed in DISC). That makes them a rare commodity in the first place, and gem to hold on to, if you are able to manage them. **PE**

### References

- Jason, H. (2013). The Essential DISC Training Workbook, DISC-Org, Reading, California
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**Ebnun Etheris** was part of the pioneering team of executives who saw through the start-up of Singapore’s first Budget Airlines, Valuair. He was responsible for developing the airline’s Crisis planning systems and initiating blended learning in Flight operations. He served as a commissioned officer in the Singapore Police Force and partakes very actively in triathlons and endurance sports.  
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