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# The Constraints That Move Us Forward: How Covid-19 Has Sparked Creative Solutions



**Michael C. Wenderoth** Contributor

Leadership Strategy

*I write on leadership, power and politics, and China.*



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The comedian Jon Stewart was asked what drove the creativity of his late-night talk show, *The Daily Show*, and his response surprised a lot of people:

“I’m a real believer that creativity comes from *limits*, not freedom,” he **said** (emphasis mine).

Shelter-in-place has injected dramatic limits into our lives, from work to school to carrying out routine daily tasks, and millions of people have had to rapidly adapt and find new ways to get things done. The questions

regarding how to *do* things are endless. How do we work when we can't step out of the home, let alone travel, or while attending to kids and other family members in the house? How will children learn without their accustomed daily routine? And what about the people who aren't online – how do we serve them?

Some of the new solutions may in fact be *better* than how we did things before. This should make us question how we've always done things, and to continue to question them once things return to “normal.”

That is exciting – but it shouldn't surprise us.

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Constraints are, counterintuitively, critical for creativity, which is why they are an integral part of how the most innovative people and organizations operate. We are so accustomed to seeing or solving a problem in a certain way, that we benefit from a constraint that forces us “outside the box” – and this different viewpoint is essential because it opens us up to reframe the original problem and see new options.

Numerous studies show how we're victims to well-known cognitive biases, for example the [Einstellung effect](#) (familiarity leads us to jump to an answer, discarding alternatives) and [confirmation bias](#) (we pay most attention to information that reinforces our beliefs). In organizations, more than half the decisions fail, which has been [traced](#) to a failure to see alternatives. Even master chess players [overlook](#) better move sequences when the pieces are laid out in familiar ways.

Tough obstacles can prompt people to [open their minds](#). That's why the oldest and most validated [creative problem solving processes](#), and top innovation consultancies, like [IDEO](#), employ [exercises](#) that introduce

constraints – they help us not just with generating new ideas, but with the more difficult task of escaping old ones.

Indeed, more often than not, it's knowledge, not ignorance, that holds us back.

- Time constraints force us to focus on the priority at hand, and produce something workable. “Good enough” can do more good than something that never sees the light of day. (Think: Nothing like a deadline!).
- Resource constraints force us to seek different approaches. (Think, like MacGyver: If I don't have the right device, how can we get the same **job done** with materials on hand, or in different way?).
- And point-of-view constraints on our thinking force us to see from a **fresh perspective** (Think **different**, like Apple: How would my child or someone in another industry approach this problem?)

Since the initial shock of the pandemic, I've seen creativity unleashed at an unprecedented pace, and in unsuspecting places. These observations started small, with a tiny plastic bag at the grocery store in Spain, then continued a week later when a pastor reimaged his sermon in California.

Here are those stories and a few more – all generated by the introduction of constraints. They have the potential to positively transform our work and life:

## Work

One of my executive clients is required by his company to be based in their U.S. office with his team, even though his wife and children live in Asia. Travel and separation from his family has taken a toll on his well-being, and this in turn has affected his productivity and company loyalty.

For the past two months, as a result of the coronavirus, my client has been successfully managing his team remotely – from his rented apartment in

the U.S. It took a state-wide lockdown to try out teleworking and remote management, and to see that, yes, it is possible and can be done well.

There's mounting **evidence** that the productivity benefits of remote working outweigh the costs, yet many companies still adhere to traditional policies on work location, hours, flex-time – simply because that's how things “were always done.”

## School

While the internet and videoconferencing have helped us at work, it has also enabled our kids to attend school remotely – which introduces the questions of how they learn best.

As a professor, I have seen students who struggled to participate in class begin to thrive online. I've also personally embraced new techniques, like live polling, to foster engagement. As one colleague told me, “Starting to teach online years ago improved my in-person courses.” Millions of teachers, and students, have been forced to sink or swim without a physical classroom.

Other improvements have nothing to do with technology. Our school, for example, allows families to manage their own daily schedule. My daughter needs her sleep and is now flourishing with an at-home start time of 10:30, which allows my wife and I to use productive morning hours for other work. Research shows that kids do **better** starting the day later and as many parents can attest, shaking your teenager out of bed early is a sure fire way to put everyone in a bad mood to start the day.

In Amsterdam, the Netherlands, where my nephews live, schools are **reopening** but maintaining the constraint of social distancing. One novel solution: Classes will be split into two groups and students will attend school on alternate days, or at different time slots during the same day. This enables teachers to provide more attention in class, reduces the boredom of shelter-in-place, allows students to continue with some self-study, while alleviating some of the burden on parents who are working from home.

**Policy makers** will have the **complex task** of assessing what leads to better educational outcomes. But there are certainly millions of intriguing experiments in progress that can be analyzed if we can locate the right data.

## **Business**

Years ago, during an innovation workshop, my executive students examined how physical stores could better serve the elderly. Almost everyone wanted to create an app and delivery service, so I introduced the constraint that solutions could not involve technology.

They complained. But when they looked more deeply, they realized they were addressing the wrong problem. The senior citizens they interviewed and observed shopping didn't want a better-faster-cheaper way to get their goods. What they wanted was more social contact.

Make no mistake: Online delivery has allowed millions to get what they need without going out – and this is a boon to elderly shoppers. But can we serve seniors safely, without isolating them?

Due to Covid-19, many grocery stores now have early morning hours exclusively for older shoppers. This has made seniors happy, allows for more dedicated service, minimizes cross-infection – and probably reduces anxiety for all impatient shoppers at the checkout line.

Communities and grocery stores may have tapped into powerful ways to foster community ties, satisfy customers, and even boost store performance. Will they choose to keep these hours once “normalcy” returns? I certainly hope so.

## **Life: Church, Healthcare, and Daily Tasks**

A pastor of a **small church** in California moved online. This enabled more people to attend and also appealed to the teenagers and children, who could interact through the chat function. One of his first sermons, interestingly, cited John, chapter 1, verse 5, “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.” He asked how each

person was “surprised by joy” – not despair – that was brought by the constraints of the pandemic.

In Spain, healthcare workers had to **create protective equipment**, and innovators **created alternatives**, when facemasks were in short supply. In China, a color-coded **QR healthcare system** uses big data, mobile phones and temperature checks to track and permit safer movement. Worldwide, telemedicine and phone consults have taken off. Even **vaccine discovery** might happen faster, as studies in journals have been made available months ahead of time, and **sharing** among researchers has increased.

Creativity can even spring from the most mundane daily tasks, like the plastic bag that first got me noticing human ingenuity during the crisis. With disinfectant out of stock, my local grocery store clerk swapped new sandwich baggies onto the payment terminal, so customers didn’t pass on germs. Necessity is **indeed** the mother of invention.

No doubt, we have plenty of things to complain about (reduced bandwidth on your Netflix stream or a two-day Amazon shipment delay, should not be among them). But, it also seems to me that the new constraints have not squashed the human spirit, nor our collective creativity. In fact, in many cases, it is quite the reverse.

And that’s what moves us forward.

When the quarantine is lifted, there will be comfort in returning to the way things were. But remember that many of our old ways at work, school, government didn’t always work so well. Some downright failed us. Not everyone will be excited to be back to 9-5 in the office, the hour commute, getting kids up too early for school, or having the family complain about going to church on Sunday.

There’s the story, of unknown origin, of the man who saw an elephant tied in place by a tiny rope attached to its leg. The elephant had been so conditioned to its situation of being tied up, that even with that tiny rope, the elephant stayed in place. Because of the constraints we are

experiencing at present, we are beginning to uncover new solutions that can untie us. The trick is taking advantage and not remaining in place like that elephant.

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**Michael C. Wenderoth**

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