



I AM YOUR NEW NEIGHBOR

BY ROD WILLIAMS

I have moved to everyone's neighborhood. No, I am not talking about my spate of real-estate acquisitions or my newfound mastery of time and space. What I mean is that the reach of my thoughts and actions has never been greater and their capacity to affect the world never more profound. The ways I choose to live and work have an impact on the ways others live and work, not just down the block but across the planet. I toss a stone into the water, and the ripples race away beyond my horizon for parts unknown, carrying unknowable consequences.

Well, I wish that were true, anyway.... Like many others, I can no longer plead ignorance or pretend surprise when the trash I throw over my fence (figuratively, of course) lands in my neighbor's backyard and poisons their dog, or worse. Even my best intentions can have disastrous unintended consequences far removed from where I stand. Am I still responsible, even if I can't immediately see over the horizon?

I think the only honest answer is "yes." It is my responsibility to continually seek to extend my vision, to see further. Doing so requires a sort of personal moral discipline, i.e., an intention to keep awake that sense of responsibility for knowing, as best I can, and caring about the effects of my choices on others. Once I know, then I can act, not hysterically, wildly, or compulsively, but with concern, forethought, and a willingness to make adjustments according to the results I get.

Needless to say, I discover many "horizons" right under my nose; sometimes we're most ignorant about the things that are closest to us. At work, my blind spots often are related to use of resources—cash, people, and ideas—and affect the success of our efforts and

the well-being of the people involved. Some examples include launching into a new project without enough preparation; causing an almost completed one to founder; not coordinating the availability of talent with when that talent will be needed; letting functional silos develop and persist; focusing too much on short-term firefighting and not enough on long-range direction and vision; and working harder and longer, but not smarter. Many such problems arise from not fully recognizing the interdependencies inherent in the system.

On a broader scale, we are letting powerful social forces drag us away from each other, even though we know that this isolation ultimately can't be in anyone's best interests. Being rich is profoundly isolating, as is being poor. Forsaking tolerance and believing you are right about everything is equally alienating. I don't know about you, but I don't want *my* neighbors to starve while I get rich or to live in fear because they hold as sacred something I don't understand. My gut tells me I'd rather see what I can do to help and drop my righteous judgments in favor of plain and simple kindness.

How can we start to "think further" and extend our horizons to include all of our neighbors? Here are a few ideas:

1. Isolation Is a Fiction. Toss out any notion that you are separate from others, both in the workplace and in the larger world. Look for important connections that may not be obvious.

2. Know Your Story. Develop a story-line about what is happening in the systems you are a part of. Get people who represent different parts of the organization together. Capture their mental models of what is happening and come up with a narrative that describes some of the interdependencies.

3. Put on Your Systems Thinking Cap.

Try to diagram the interactions of different elements of the system. If they are complex, use causal loop diagrams or stocks and flows—whatever tools you are comfortable with—to shed light on key interdependencies.

4. Be Open to Emerging Information.

Always look for information from new sources. You'll never be able to see the entire picture, but you will grasp more of it if you keep your antennae up.

5. Remember Your Intention. You are responsible for knowing the results of your actions, so don't grow complacent. Remembering your intention keeps your curiosity alive and gives you focus.

6. Do the Right Thing. Consider the ethical basis of your actions in light of their effects. Don't neglect honest inquiry because you can't face up to the difficult questions.

7. Proclaim Your Vision by Living It. Persuasion has its place, but nothing influences others more than your own example.

Being isolated from each other doesn't make us any less interdependent. When we hold on to this illusory perception of separation, it just means that it's harder to work together to make things better and that our lives will probably get a lot worse before they start to improve. We have two choices. We can recognize now what interdependence means and plan a livable future together. Alternatively, we can start building fortresses and postpone that recognition until another dark age passes. In either case, we will eventually realize that we need to include everyone in order to create a neighborhood where we all can live together well. ■

Rod Williams, Ph.D., is media development director at Pegasus Communications.