

The Art of Possibility: Transforming Professional and Personal Life

by Rosamund Stone Zander & Benjamin Zander
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Reviewed by:

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The Art of Possibility is a light-hearted, inspiring book appropriate for common reading programs, class discussion, and first-year student writing at both two-year and four-year institutions. The book entices readers to move beyond their comfort zones and into the realm of possibility by utilizing twelve well-outlined practices. In fact, the authors are so committed to indoctrinating their readers into belief in the benefits of possibility that the first page of the text is devoted to Emily Dickinson's celebrated poem, "I Dwell in Possibility." Certainly, the respective experience of each author on an individual level would lend credibility to the book's content, but, when combined, Zander and Zander's suggested techniques for increased openness cannot be ignored.

Rosamund Stone Zander is an executive coach, family systems therapist, and gifted artist with a master's degree from Boston University's School of Social Work. Benjamin Zander has more than 30 years of experience as a conductor of the Boston Philharmonic. He is a sought-after speaker for his presentations on leadership and creativity. The authors' unique perspectives provide a healthy balance between creativity and practicality, between music and social work, and between current reality and future possibility.

Overview

The following is an outline and brief description of each of the twelve practices.

First Practice: It's All Invented

The first practice focuses on realizing that the barriers in our lives are built primarily upon assumptions that do not exist in reality. Using a humorous story involving Pablo Picasso as an example, the authors posit that our minds construct our reality, and therefore, reality is subjective. Thus, in order to step outside our self-imposed boundaries, we must teach ourselves to re-construct the "real world."

Second Practice: Stepping into a Universe of Possibility

The second practice discusses how human beings operate under the assumption that the purpose of life is to survive to live another day. As the result of an instinctually driven mentality to prolong life, we expend ourselves seeking out purportedly "scarce" resources such as money, power, and safety. Instead, the authors encourage their readers to assume that growth and change are always possible in the universe, and thereby open the doors to possibility.

Third Practice: Giving an A

The third practice involves giving others the benefit of the doubt. By purposely working to see the best in others, we end up seeing the best in ourselves. Rather than reacting to mistakes with disdain, why not be curious and appreciative for a unique and unplanned moment? Another benefit of “Giving an A” to others, is that it opens up the probability for partnership, teamwork, and relationship building.

Fourth Practice: Being a Contribution

The fourth practice offers the fresh idea that it can be healthy to replace the drive for success and fear of failure with a plan to be a contribution to our environment. As a pebble in a pond generates consequences far beyond its immediate surroundings, our small acts of kindness can generate a long-lasting positive impact. By trying to contribute, we are gently pulled into a present-centered mind, rather than a past or future-centered mind.

Fifth Practice: Leading from Any Chair

The fifth practice centers on the belief that we can lead influentially through our actions, even if we are not in a traditional position of power. To illustrate the point, the authors share a story about how the best orchestra conductors are those who freely give their power to others, which creates a trickle-down effect to the degree that every single orchestra member feels valued and respected. In other words, the chapter talks about synergistic servant leadership and the benefits of being open to feedback from all angles.

Sixth Practice: Rule Number 6

The sixth practice is simple: Lighten up! The authors encourage their readers to let their “central self” shine through by opening up to the flow of new experience. In order to determine who or what our central self is, we must answer the question, “What would have to change for me to be completely fulfilled?”

Seventh Practice: The Way Things Are

The seventh practice is all about being present to reality without resistance. In order to do so, the authors state that we must learn to distinguish between assumptions, feeling, and fact. We must release “shoulds” from our vocabulary, clear ourselves of judgments, and invite mistakes into our performance. By wholly accepting all facets of reality, we can learn from each experience to develop ourselves.

Eighth Practice: Giving Way to Passion

The eighth practice involves letting ourselves participate fully in our life experience. In order to completely activate our energy, we must focus on the larger puzzle and pattern of which we are a part. An entertaining concept called “Beyond the F*%@ It” serves to bring the principle to life.

Ninth Practice: Lighting a Spark

The ninth practice focuses on “enrollment,” the art and practice of generating the spark of possibility for others to share. The authors use the term “enrollment” in order to convey the intentionality required when choosing to engage in the practice. As the authors note, one can

easily light a fire if the spark is always carried. To help their readers move through the process of enrollment, four steps are offered:

1. Imagine that people are an invitation for enrollment.
2. Stand ready to participate, willing to be moved and inspired.
3. Offer that which lights you up.
4. Have no doubt that others are eager to catch the spark.

Tenth Practice: Being the Board

The tenth practice suggests that we take responsibility for the role we play in what happens in our lives. By owning the risks we take and decisions we make, we maintain control of our lives. By the same token, we can empower ourselves to remove stumbling blocks in the way of our goals and generate successes as well.

Eleventh Practice: Creating Frameworks for Possibility

The eleventh practice builds upon the tenth by taking the practice of “Being the Board” one step further. Once we have taken responsibility for the life framework we create, we have the freedom to create vision, establish environments that breed possibility, and restructure meanings. The authors make an important distinction between mission and vision, and deliver a somewhat vague three-step process for framing possibility. The process involves creating a purposeful new framework in the realm of possibility, living out the new framework, and monitoring oneself to ensure adherence.

Twelfth Practice: Telling the WE Story

The twelfth, final, practice is one that joyfully advocates for a framework of *WE*, rather than *I*, *you*, or *they*. In addition to being a clear advertisement for world peace, which is well exemplified by a story regarding the Truth and Reconciliation Committee in South Africa, this section shares how dissolving borders is also helpful on a personal level. Lastly, the authors provide a final stepwise process, this time for attaining *WE* practices.

Program Relevance

The Art of Possibility provides some food for thought to which students would likely respond. The book is included on Penguin Group USA's list of books for 2010 orientation programming, and multiple institutions have incorporated the text into learning communities, required reading lists, leadership retreats, and orientation programming. However, the work may not appeal to professionals for use during an orientation or a first-year experience seminar as a whole. Although the practices included in the book are intriguing and relevant for our time, they hardly seem unique. Even within the book itself, it is safe to say that the twelve practices could be boiled down to half that number given the significant amount of overlap present. Fortunately, the book has flexibility as its core strength.

Because the book is neatly organized into easily absorbable sections, professionals can incorporate choice practices into student programming. For example, the practice of “Stepping into a Universe of Possibility” would be a great avenue for encouraging first-year college students and transfer students to step out of their comfort zones and into their new academic and social environments. The practice of “Giving an A” could serve as a lesson on how to be

tolerant of others during residence life programming or diversity training. The practice of “Leading from Any Chair” is a natural fit for servant leadership programming. Professionals will undoubtedly find that further benefits of the book can be extracted by pairing select practices with germane programming.

Perhaps the only area of concern professionals should consider when reviewing the book is the imbalanced use of gender pronouns. Although feminine references are not absent in the stories and examples, the pronoun “he” seems to be the rule rather than the exception.