

INTRODUCTION: SEIZE THE VUJA DÉ



BIG IDEA In A Few Words

Vuja dé is the ability to look at something familiar like you have never seen it before. The lack of vuja dé makes disruptive ideas hard to imagine. It causes us to defend underperforming structures and resist potentially breakthrough ideas. When people believe a conclusion is true they are also very likely to believe arguments that appear to support it, even when those arguments are unsound. We are blind to our own blindness. This is why it is so hard to break out of our entrenched patterns of thought and action and why vuja dé is so important.

Imagine you are part of a meeting to explore the best location for a special banquet to be hosted by your organization. You will have key stakeholders present and you want to make the evening memorable. The ambience and food need to be just right. You want excellence without opulence.

Some people suggest you should give priority to the location even if you have to cater the food. Others prefer the right food even if you have to get creative with the location. Everyone agrees the right combination of both in a single location would be ideal. After a few moments of silence, your colleague says, “How about the local hospital?”



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For most of us this suggestion is more than counterintuitive; it is nonsensical. You know from experience that hospitals don't host banquets and for good reason. They have a unique, unappealing smell and the food is bad enough to make you sick even if you weren't when you arrived. Hosting your special banquet at a hospital is a crazy idea, unless you live near the Henry Ford West Bloomfield hospital in Michigan.

What is different about West Bloomfield? When it comes to hospitals, everything. To start, it was built on a one hundred sixty acre campus to resemble a northern Michigan lodge, complete with woodlands and wetlands. It has a beautiful atrium, large enough to have hosted two concerts by the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. The atrium is decorated with over two thousand live plants and trees that weave around the walkways that make you feel like you are visiting the world's healthiest vacation spot.

The meals were created by a celebrity chef who invested two years developing three thousand recipes. "Indeed, the space is so striking and the food so appealing that the hospital is on track to generate millions of dollars a year hosting and catering functions for companies and community groups."² In July 2010 the hospital hosted the first of what they expect to be many weddings.

How does a hospital morph into a facility that rivals a luxury hotel? Not surprisingly, with a CEO whose previous experience was with the Ritz Carlton. And Gerard van Grinsven brought more than experience; he brought a totally new perspective. Hospital administrators could not see what he saw and would likely have scoffed at the idea of building a facility like West Bloomfield.

How do insiders gain this kind of outsider perspective? It doesn't happen easily and requires *vuja dé*³. You are familiar with *déjà vu*, an unfamiliar place that seems strangely familiar. *Vuja dé* is the ability to look at something familiar like you have never seen it before. Here's how William C. Taylor describes it in his book, *Practically Radical*:

The virtue of vuja dé is that it reframes how organizations make sense of their situations and build for the

*future. But that's different from wholesale disavowal of the past. Sometimes, the very act of rediscovering and reinterpreting the past creates the clarity and confidence necessary to craft a distinctive game plan for the future.*⁴

It is the lack of *vouja dé* that makes disruptive ideas, like a for profit mission organization, as hard to imagine for Great Commission leaders, as a hospital with a multi-million dollar banquet division for health care administrators. The North American mission movement is in need of disruptive innovation and by extension *vouja dé*. We have been concentrating so hard on what we do a gorilla could walk through the room and we might not even notice.

The Invisible Gorilla

In their book *The Invisible Gorilla*, Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons introduce the idea of selective attention through a short film they created with two teams passing basketballs. You may have already seen the YouTube video. One team is wearing white shirts, the other black. Viewers are instructed to count the number of passes made by the team wearing white. To count the passes correctly viewers need to concentrate and focus. At the midpoint of the film, a woman in a gorilla suit walks into view, crosses the court and thumps her chest before moving out of the scene. The woman in the gorilla suit is in plain view for a total of nine seconds.

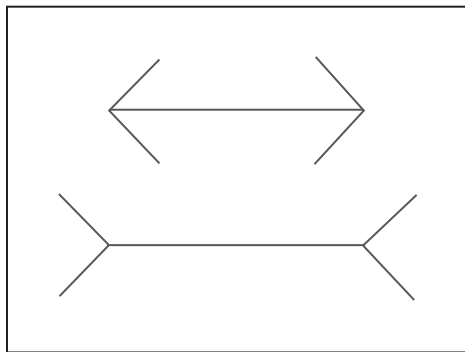
Many thousands of people have watched this film and if they don't know about the gorilla in advance they focus on counting the passes and don't notice anything unusual taking place. Chabris and Simons suggest the most remarkable observation from their experiment is viewers who do not see the gorilla insist with confidence it wasn't there. They find it impossible to believe they could miss something so obvious. Daniel Kahneman, in his book, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, says, "The gorilla study illustrates two important facts about our minds: we can be blind to the obvious, and we are also blind to our blindness."⁵

Too many church and mission leaders are defensive about the need for *vouja dé*. We are blind to our own blindness. This makes innovation and creativity even more difficult. It causes us to defend

underperforming structures and systems and resist potentially breakthrough ideas that appear on the surface as crazy as hosting an important banquet at a local hospital.

Cognitive Illusions

Take a close look at the picture below, and then answer the question, which line is shorter? Obviously,



the top line with the fins angled toward the center is shorter.

That's what we all see when looking at this picture. But if you have seen it before you may recall it is the Müller-Lyer illusion.

Go ahead and measure the two horizontal lines to confirm for yourself they are actually the same length. You can change what you know, but you can't change what you see.

The invisible gorilla and the Müller-Lyer illusion are similar in that they are both visual. But some illusions operate in our mind's eye only. They are referred to as cognitive illusions and what is especially disconcerting is "when people believe a conclusion is true they are also very likely to believe arguments that appear to support it, even when those arguments are unsound."⁶ This is why it is so hard to break out of our entrenched patterns of thought and action and why *vouja dé* is so important.

A physician in the early twentieth century is said to have had intuitions regarding patients who were about to develop typhoid. He developed a methodology to test his hunch that involved the palpation of the patient's tongue. He conducted this simple exam repeatedly without washing his hands in between patients. As you can expect, patient after patient became ill and the doctor came to believe his diagnosis was nearly infallible. Indeed it was, in spite of the fact the positive diagnosis was the result of flawed methodology that reinforced a cognitive illusion.

Psychologist Daniel Kahneman refers to this as WYSIATI: What You See Is All There Is. Our focus and familiarity with how we do what we do, even when it comes to Great Commission initiatives, can work against us. It produces blind spots that keep us from seeing gorillas and produces cognitive illusions.

One dangerous expression of WYSIATI can be described as theory-induced blindness. Here is how Daniel Kahneman explains it:

“Once you have accepted a theory and used it as a tool in your thinking, it is extraordinarily difficult to notice its flaws. If you come upon an observation that does not seem to fit the model, you assume that there must be a perfectly good explanation that you are somehow missing. You give the theory the benefit of the doubt, trusting the community of experts who have accepted it.”

This kind of professional group think is common for a mature field of study populated by very smart people who have spent years highly invested in honing their craft. The best way to expose cognitive illusions and the WYSIATI syndrome is by introducing cognitive diversity that brings a fresh, outsider perspective to the group.

Thankfully as Christ-followers we have the benefit of engaging with people from outside the mission enterprise who share our passion for Jesus and commitment to bless the nations but can look at our systems, structures and methods with fresh eyes. They can help us cultivate a Holy Spirit energized vuja dé.

NOTES

¹ We have been engaged in some vuja dé of our own this past year, which resulted in the merger of CrossGlobal Link and The Mission Exchange, and the birth of Missio Nexus. Vlogs recorded prior to February 2012, reflect one of our parent body brands, The Mission Exchange.

² William C. Taylor, *Practically Radical* (HarperCollins e-books, 2011), Kindle location 1538, Chapter 2

³ This term has been traced to Tom Kelley, general manager of IDEO, who credits Bob Sutton at Stanford University, who heard it from Jeff Miller, an accomplished sailor with a PhD in biochemistry. It may have actually originated with comedian George Carlin, from his book, *Napalm and Silly Putty*.

⁴ William C. Taylor, *Practically Radical* (HarperCollins e-books, 2011) Kindle location 457, Chapter 1

⁵ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux) page 24

⁶ Ibid, pg 45

⁷ Ibid, pg 276

Sieze the Vuja de is a compilation of transcripts from Learning @ the Speed of Life, the video blog of Missio Nexus, by Steve Moore. Missio Nexus was formed out of the merger of CrossGlobal Link and The Mission Exchange and is the largest network of Great Commission oriented evangelicals in North America. For more information visit www.MissioNexus.org.

Other books by Steve Moore

