

Turning Constraints into Benefits *Learning from the Tao*

Constraints are all around us. In the eLearning world, constraints are often propagated by technical glitches and system scheduled maintenance. Sometimes they are proliferated by a course's popularity or shaped by a know-it-all expert—or student. Often they are handed to us in the form of a project with limited time and budget. Constraints restrict our freedom to act, and, too often, they threaten our ability to just get the job done.

But what if we could take each constraint and turn it into a positive benefit? It is possible; it just requires a bit of foresight, knowledge, and practice. The way I have learned to turn constraints into benefits is to follow Tai Chi movements.

Tai Chi is an ancient Chinese exercise that dates back to the 5th century. It consists of a philosophy that is built on Taoism which essentially urges followers not to resist the natural ebb and flow of life. After all, nature will always win, so why waste energy. Thus, instead of resisting, the Tai Chi practitioner takes time to breathe, to be present in the moment, to sense his environment and become more aware of what is happening around him. In this reflective stance, the practitioner then begins to feel for weak spots or openings in order to redirect his energy towards them.

You too can use this Tai Chi philosophy to eliminate the frustrations associated with constraints and to begin to reap benefits. Just follow these simple steps.

1. Breathe

First, you must have a clear mind. To reach that state, consider the Taoist saying: *If you're not quite sure what to do, don't do anything yet. More will be revealed.* When faced with the unexpected, our first reaction is too often an overreaction—an angry shout, a slamming of the fist or placing the blame. A better reaction is no immediate outward action. Don't do anything yet. Instead, just breathe. Why is this the better response? Because breathing—taking long deep, even breaths in and out—calms the heart, lets the blood flow and clears the mind. It also gives you a moment or two to really take stock of what is happening. And it gives time to those behind the scenes to be thinking and working to fix things—uninterrupted by unwanted or unproductive outbursts

2. Be present

Now focus your whole mind, and being, on the present. Concentrate on what is happening right now, in this moment. If you are working at a distance, focus also on what might be happening at your distant sites. The key is to open your mind, as well as eyes, to see your surroundings clearly.



3. Sense

Gather in information. Listen carefully to what those around you are telling you. Calmly ask questions and look directly at those who you are relying upon for information. Listen to them carefully. Making them aware that you are fully present and that their input is honestly being taken in and considered. Use as many of your senses as possible. Be aware of body language as well as tone of voice.

4. Yield and overcome

Let go of your own expectations. Feel for the weaknesses and openings—the other ways of moving, of doing things. The magic is that while you are yielding to your environment, more and more ideas will begin to flow, both from within yourself and from those around you.

5. Redirect

Now prioritize the constraint, as well as the constraints within the constraint. Place each in its proper slot and determine the tasks that must be accomplished to fix the problem, minimize its effect and benefit from it. Take advantage of other aspects of the environment that are already there, and take advantage of colleagues who can assist you. Put on your creative cap. Begin to take action.

Summary

Don't look at constraints as restrictions. Instead look at them as opportunities to follow a different track, try a new theory, create or form new partnerships, or discover new media or methods. By addressing constraints with a calm mind, focusing on the present, sensing who and what is being affected, listening to those who can help you and finding creative solutions, you will earn a reputation as a problem solver. Also you will begin to gain peace of mind, better health and better balance in dealing with the numerous constraints life will continually throw your way.

