



Five Tips to Break Through Your Filter(s)

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by John Hagel III and John Seely Brown | **Comments (8)**

It is no surprise that we instinctively seek out those who share our interests. This is especially true in times of increasing pressure and uncertainty. We have an understandable tendency in such times to seek out the familiar and comfortable as a buffer against the unforeseen changes around us. In so doing we can inadvertently put ourselves in a cage of similarity that narrows our peripheral vision of the world and our options. The result? We may be even more vulnerable to being blindsided by events and trends coming at us from new and unusual directions.

The Internet compounds this narrowing by invisibly removing subjects and people from our online searches and even our casual exploration of websites, explains Eli Pariser (http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2011/05/seven_things_human_editors_do.html) in his new book, *The Filter Bubble* (<http://www.amazon.com/Filter-Bubble-What-Internet-Hiding/dp/1594203008>). Worse yet, we tend to become more extreme and entrenched (<http://www.amazon.com/Going-Extremes-Minds-Unite-Divide/dp/0195378016>) in our beliefs when we become involved in a tight-knit group that shares them.

The bottom line: the choices we make and the technology we use can progressively narrow the range of experiences we have. To counteract the potential stultifying effects of the filter bubble we will have to overcome our natural instinct to seek out the comfort of those who are most like us. Here are some suggestions:

1. Audit and re-shape your social network. With the advent of online social network platforms we have an increasing visibility into the make-up of our personal social network. Whom do we interact with most frequently? How similar are they to us?

Scan the periphery of your social network and explore those "weak ties" — the people you may have met briefly and who come from very different environments. Who are some of the most diverse people on the periphery of your network that you might benefit from getting to know better? How could you use online social networks to reach out to people you have never even met but who are engaged in arenas adjacent to your own interests? Each week, resolve to introduce yourself to a friend of a friend on an online network who seems to be the most interesting and most different from you.

2. Revise your conference calendar. How many conferences do you go to each year? How many of those conferences are in fields that you are deeply familiar with and draw people that are very similar to you?

Commit to attend at least one conference every year in a field that may be relevant to your interests but where you have very little experience. Spend some time at the conference trying to understand the key issues that are engaging the participants. Find at least one issue that has some potential relevance to issues that you are confronting and start conversations with people at the conference to explore where and how these issues might intersect.

3. Get more out of your social gatherings. At any reception or party you go to, no matter how similar the others might be to you, there are usually a few people who are from a very different mold. They often stick out like a sore thumb, looking very alone and uncomfortable. Seek those people out before settling in to the comfort of your friends and colleagues.

Early in the conversation ask, "What's of most interest for you here?" Ask open-ended follow-up questions to get closer to their core interest. "Oh, and why's that fascinating for you?" Or ask the universally helpful question to get others to open up: "Tell me more about that." In so doing, you invite three opportunities for fresh insights: what that person tells you, how you react, and how they respond to you.

4. Act out diverse facets of yourself. Seeking novelty in your life? Why not tap into a long ignored passion and carve out some time to re-engage with it. Often our passions are far removed from the comfortable lives we have settled into. By re-connecting with these passions, we are likely to encounter people that are far removed from our daily experience. These new individuals are very likely to provide us with new insight about ourselves and what we have to offer.

Each of us has many selves. With strangers — especially those who are different than your usual crowd — you can project a different part of your personality. As you act differently, so will others in response to you, often leading conversations in new directions.

5. Share an experience in an unfamiliar situation. Because George W Bush and Bill Clinton have quite different beliefs and temperaments, they probably learned more from each other during their joint visit to earthquake-stricken Haiti in 2010. They could observe different ways of interacting with people as well as of collecting ideas about how to help the situation. Seek out opportunities to share an experience with others who have different talents and ways of operating in the world. You'll learn more and you might also discover a hidden or atrophied talent or interest within yourself.

With each of these approaches you can burst constraining bubbles of limited viewpoints and experiences that lead to an ever-narrowing life view. Instead you invite in unexpected encounters with people that can trigger new thoughts, adventures and ways of engaging with others. Rather than diminishing the potential for serendipity, one of the by-products of filter bubbles, you can increase the number and quality of those unexpected encounters. In other words, you can shape serendipity (http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2011/02/make_serendipity_work.html) to your advantage. You can create more options from which to live a richly varied life.