

“We Can, If”

“Propelling questions – using a higher level of ambition to force us to find the opportunity in apparent constraints – require us to work towards solutions that lie outside our experience and comfort zone.”¹

We have all been in “that” meeting - the meeting where we hear a barrage of “can’t because” over, and over, and over again.

We can’t because we don’t have enough people.

We can’t because the time frame is too short.

We can’t because there is not enough funding to make that happen.

The list goes on and on and on.

When possible solutions lie outside of our experiences and comfort zones, a unique combination of **optimism**, **perseverance**, and **persistent inquisitiveness** is needed to confront challenges within constraints.

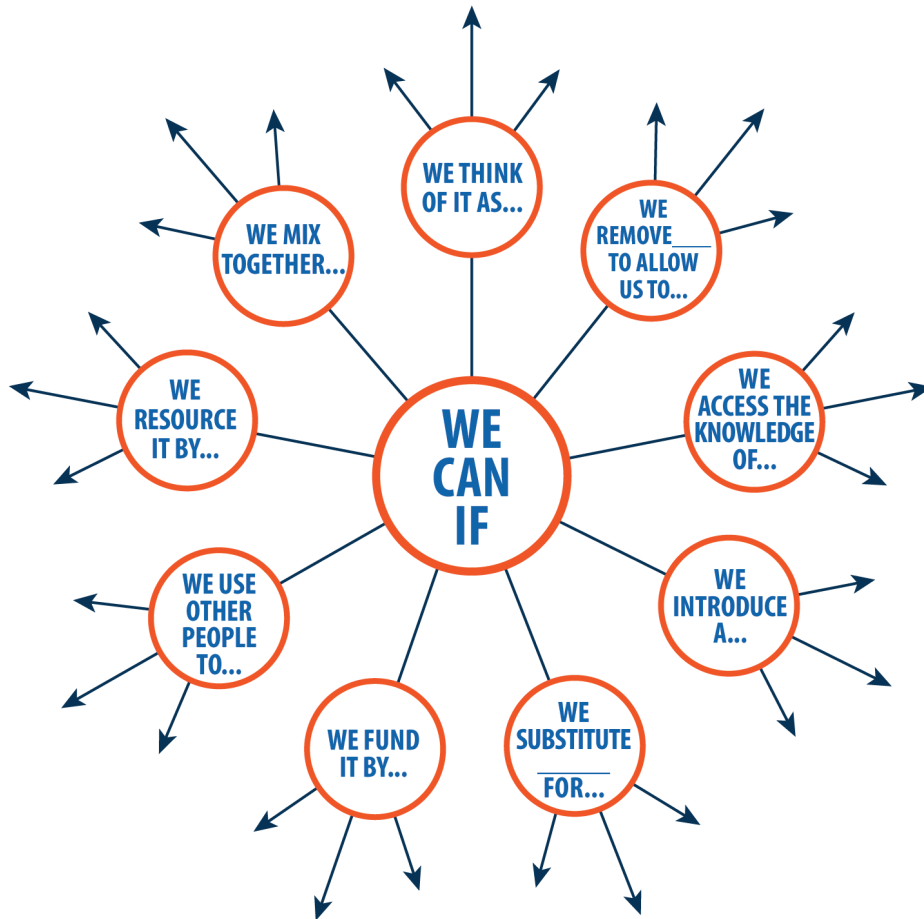
Colin Kelly, Director of Research and Development, for a British bakery, now one of the most successful business stories in European history, understood that “can’t because” conversations reach dead ends very quickly. Although a realistic reaction to challenging problems, “can’t because” often sucks the wind out of possibilities, resulting quickly in senses of defeat and vanquishment.

Instead of allowing “can’t because” to begin the discussions, Kelly shifted the sentence starter to: “**We can, if.**”

“We can, if”

- Keeps the conversation on the right question, focusing on possibilities.
 - Keeps the oxygen of optimism continually in the process.¹
- Forces solution-driven thinking, rather than focusing on barriers or constraints.
 - Begins to identify groups as those who look for and find solutions.

“We Can, If” Map²



Employing the straightforward framework of initiating each sentence with "We can, if..." effectively directs attention towards potential solutions rather than dwelling on obstacles. This approach fosters a proactive mindset, compelling individuals to seek out resolutions and maintain an enduring sense of optimism throughout the process.

As an executive coach, optimizing the usability of this tool for others necessitates a balanced approach with appropriate structure. Morgan and Barden, in *A Beautiful Constraint*, offer the following framework to coach clients through the initial use of the "Can-If Map."¹

Priming: Consider and share a time that you have been asked to consider a barrier or a constraint and find the advantages related to it; thus surfacing the mindset of "can-if".

Legitimacy: Identify and paraphrase shared examples that clearly illustrate how solutions were determined despite facing constraints, further solidifying the mindset of “can-if”.

A Strong Propelling Question: Infusing the essence of the problem at hand, the propelling question should be wrapped in a narrative of why success is important in a particular instance. (An example may include: How might we ensure that we build a successful system of implementation of high quality curriculum, thus ensuring an engaging, rigorous student experience?)

Coaching through the Conversation: When coaching either an individual client or a small group, initiate the “We can, if...” conversation by exploring familiar territories first, then progressively delving into less familiar areas. This approach encourages a comprehensive exploration of possibilities while gradually stretching boundaries and fostering growth.

Stepping Back: “Difficult constraints are not going to yield easily.”¹ Persistence and perseverance are key, followed by the invaluable practice of stepping back to gain a fresh perspective. As an executive coach, guide the client or group through the exploration of at least three options around each launch pad in the map, providing insights into the potential viability and opportunities present in each area.

Coaching clients in transforming limitations to advantages equips them with the invaluable insights to embrace an “abundance thinking” mindset, which they are able to apply to navigate future challenges effectively. By doing so, we as coaches not only enhance our own impact but also elevate the impact of leaders we support, thus cascading greater success across organizations.

“When you don’t have resources, you become resourceful.”

-K. R. Sridhar, Bloom Energy

References:

1. Morgan, A., & Barden, M. (2015). A beautiful constraint: How to transform your limitations into advantages, and why it's everyone's business. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
2. <https://isaacjefries.com/blog/2017/10/30/cant-because-vs-can-if>