Pink Bats: Turning Problems Into Solutions

Friday, October 19
10:20-11:35 a.m.

J. Mark Warren, Training Consultant,
Texas Association of Counties

The great American humorist Will Rogers once said (in paraphrase): “It depends on what part of the country you’re standing in as to how dumb you are.” Welcome to the world of pink bat thinking: It’s all in how you look at it!

Based on a childhood experience with neighborhood backyard baseball, author Michael McMillan realized most problems really aren’t problems at all! Many are mislabeled solutions—and at the very least—opportunities.

A “Pink Bat” is an unseen solution mislabeled as a problem. When we remove our blinders and view the world through pink-colored lenses, it appears different. Your focus shifts from a world of problems to one filled with endless opportunities and solutions. This is particularly important when trying to continue relevance or dealing with inevitable change.

This presentation focuses on “pink bat” stories to help participants feel safe about changing their perspective. Without change, a pink bat solution will remain unseen.
J. Mark Warren, Training Consultant, Texas Association of Counties

Warren attended Texas A&M University and Saint Edward’s University from which he received a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology in 1977. He also graduated from the 157th Session of the FBI National Academy in Quantico, Virginia. Warren worked for the Texas Department of Public Safety for 23 years, 19 of which he spent at the Training Academy where he was the Assistant Commander for seven years. Warren was a member of the Verbal Judo instructional staff from 1987 to 2002. He is a member of the Texas Police Association and a member of the Association of Texas Law Enforcement Educators.
Pink Bats

Based on the book Pink Bat—Turning Problems into Solutions
by Michael McMillan
Presented by Mark Warren
Texas Association of Counties
October 2018

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The Pink Bat story

When author Michael McMillan was growing up, he and his friends were a part of a very passionate and regular back yard baseball game that moved from one friend’s yard to the next. As the friends grew, so did the number of broken screens and windows that resulted from home runs and foul balls. Eventually, the group’s parents got together and banned back yard baseball! For a group of baseball loving kids, their parent’s solution became the kid’s problem. What to do? After talking the ban over, the kids realized that the parents had a point – if a ball kept crashing through any of their windows and landed in the middle of the kitchen table during dinner, any parent, (including Michael’s) would have done the same. So, the boys lamented some alternatives to get their game back. They thought about moving their game to the park but realized that the high school team...
practiced there. Then someone asked, “what about using a wiffle ball?” “No way. A wiffle ball is stupid!” Then, a breakthrough. A friend came riding up on his bike and offers something new – a softer ball. So, they tried it out and sure enough – it threw and hit and had enough authentic characteristics of a real ball to make the group very happy – until someone hit it over a fence and had to retrieve it. The fence was around the yard of Rat Newman, a kid the group knew, but who wasn’t a part of their baseball games. Rat wasn’t a ball player at all. In fact, he spent his time playing astronaut and blasting his was around the “universe” in any number of homemade “spaceships” in his back yard. Realizing that the cool new ball wasn’t going to work – it was too easy to hit it too far and Rat’s fence was way too high to climb easily - Michael had another breakthrough:

*Maybe the problem wasn’t the ball at all.*

For whatever reason, Michael remembered an old birthday gift he’s gotten from his Grandmother several years earlier. He out grew the gift years ago, and had put it away, nearly forgotten. It was a giant, red plastic bat that originally came with an oversized waffle ball. Sprinting home, and tearing through the back of his closet, there it sat, as if just waiting to be discovered again for the first time. He grabbed the new bat and sprinted back to the baseball group that were still scratching their heads about a new plan for their baseball future.

Presenting the bat to the group, explaining where it came from and such, they went back to their field. With every swing of the new bat that connected, they became more and more convinced they had the perfect backyard bat and ball combination. Eventually, the baseball ban was lifted, and they were back in business.

After weeks of hard play, the sun and the elements had gradually transformed the bat from a bright red to a pale pink. But, with everyone so busy playing, no one hardly noticed. The game had become so popular; it was attracting kids from all over town, causing the game to grow so that they had to move it to the schoolyard several blocks from their original neighborhood.

One afternoon, while the group was hard at play, Michael came to bat. Seeing a pitch, he knew he could drive, he swung as hard as he could. The bat hit the ball with a loud crack, and as he took off for first base, he slowed and eventually stopped, because the ball was nowhere to be found.

*The ball had vanished!*

What happened to the ball is the rest of the story: *What the backyard baseball players learned that summer is that creativity is the most powerful force in the world. It can change reality.*
To understand pink bats is to remember a well-known adage – one person’s junk is another’s treasure – this way: One person’s problem is another’s solution.

A solution is staring us in the face is often the easiest to miss. Why?

The “paradigm effect” labels and filters. What we’re supposed to see or are used to seeing, keeps us from seeing what could be. What may be perfectly clear and visible to one person is invisible to another because of differing paradigms. This is the Paradigm Effect. One paradigm blinds you, deafens you, etc to other possibilities and other paradigms. Old paradigms block ability to view new paradigms. New paradigms must get through filters of old. Paradigms can trap us into seeing the world in only one way; and how wrong experts can be because of that entrapment. Paradigms give a particular perspective and depending on one’s perspective determine one’s vision. What is obvious to one is not to another. “In life, everything changes. To find Pink Bats, you must change, too. Without seeing reality for what it is and using your imagination to see it for what it could be, today’s Pink Bats will remain unseen.”

Consider this example from the book: a psychology professor asked a group of his students to watch a short video which depicted two teams (one in black shirts, the other in white) passing a basketball back and forth. Each volunteer was told to count the number of passes by the team wearing white. At some point, a person in a gorilla suit (who doesn’t have their own gorilla suit?) appeared for several seconds in the video. When it finished, the researchers asked if anybody had seen anything unusual. Only half of the volunteers reported seeing the gorilla; the others saw nothing unusual. How could people not notice the gorilla in the room? Mostly because they weren’t looking for it. They were focused on something else. This explains how experts can be more susceptible to perceptual blindness that beginners and why “outsiders” often find solutions that experienced “insiders” miss. Beginners and outsiders are open to possibilities and don’t make assumptions. They don’t share the insider’s biases. www.theinvisiblegorilla.com

Labels also reinforce this phenomenon. In the story of the Pink Bat, when it split down the middle, the insiders labeled it a problem – so it became one and they couldn’t see anything else. Labels exist everywhere and often carry perceptions that are misleading. Back yard friend Rat Newman didn’t see the pink bat as broken, or junk or useless. As an outsider, he saw it for what it was and focused on what it could be.
Pink bats emerge more frequently in troubled times and often when “problems” seem abundant. Speaking of problems, think about a math multiplication problem: when two negative numbers are multiplied, you get a positive product.

**Truly, necessity is the mother of invention: "...Houston, we've had a problem..."**

Apollo 13 was the third Apollo mission intended to land on the Moon, but a mid-mission oxygen tank rupture severely damaged the spacecraft and forced the lunar landing to be aborted. The flight was commanded by James A. Lovell, with John L. "Jack" Swigert command module pilot, and Fred W. Haise lunar module pilot. The mission was launched on April 11, 1970 at 13:13 CST. Two days later, en route to the Moon, a fault in the electrical system of one of the Service Module’s oxygen tanks produced an explosion which caused a loss of electrical power and failure of both oxygen tanks. The Command Module remained functional on its own batteries and oxygen tank, which were designed to support the vehicle only during the last hours of flight. The crew shut down the Command Module and used the Lunar Module as a "lifeboat" during the return trip to Earth. Despite great hardship caused by limited power, loss of cabin heat, shortage of potable water, and the critical need to jury-rig the carbon dioxide removal system, the crew returned safely to Earth on April 17, and the mission was termed a "successful failure".

By the way, a misquotation of the radio transmission made by Swigert and repeated by Lovell has become widely quoted in popular culture as "Houston, we have a problem."

**The buggy whip; invention, innovation, or extinction?**

A century ago, it was a viable business. That’s because the main mode of transportation was a horse-drawn buggy. Then the automobile came along. For most manufacturers of buggy whips, this was perceived as a problem. But what if buggy whip makers would have seen it as a Pink Bat instead...and found different uses for their expertise... or started creating new products to serve the “horseless” carriage market? Imagine the success they would have experienced. The Model T wasn’t the problem. It was the buggy whip manufacturers’ misguided focus that created their demise.

Whether its newspapers, banks or auto manufacturers... we can all become blind if we focus on problems, grow complacent or feel a sense of entitlement. (McMillan, 2009)

Consider the following Pink Bats from business, history and the book:
Pure Fun: Ivory Floating Soap Legend

The Lore Behind Ivory’s Famous Floating Soap

For more than 75 years, legend has indicated that one of Ivory’s most famous features – its ability to float – was actually the result of a mistake! The story begins with an employee who forgot to shut off the soap-making machine when he went to lunch. He returned to find the soap mixture puffed-up and frothy. However, because the longer mixing time had not changed the ingredients in any way, the soap was finished and shipped as usual. About a month later, when P&G started receiving requests for more of the “floating soap,” the accident was discovered. The forgotten lunch-time mistake had produced a floating soap! However, recent evidence from inventor notes has shown that James N. Gamble may have intended Ivory soap to float all along. Did Ivory soap actually float from its debut in 1879? We may never know. But whether by mistake or by design, floating soap is an attribute that has equated Ivory with pure clean through the years.

Today, Ivory floats because we intentionally whip a small amount of air into each Ivory bar as it’s being made. This makes the soap lighter than water, so it floats. This process also makes each bar of Ivory velvety smooth and easy to lather. Whether by chance or intentional discovery... floating soap has set Ivory’s purity apart for more than a century. [https://ivory.com/our-heritage](https://ivory.com/our-heritage)

Plowing Problem

Perceived Problem: For U.S. farmers in the eastern states, a cast-iron plow worked fine. But for farmers who tried using it to cultivate crops in the rich Midwest soil, it was a disaster. In fact, attempting to cut through tough prairie ground with a cast-iron plow was problematic to say the least. Trying to use one in the sticky rich soil without it getting clogged was nearly impossible.

Many knowledgeable people focused on this problem. The more they focused on it, the bigger it seemed to become. In time, most of them concluded this was too big of a problem and gave up.

Pink Bat Solution: After moving to the Midwest, a young blacksmith (an outsider) learned of this situation and began focusing on a solution. One day, as he walked to work, a glint of sunlight reflected off an old discarded saw blade. To the sawmill, this old blade
represented a worthless, worn out piece of steel... a problem. To young John Deere, it was a beautifully honed piece of smooth steel... a solution. After pulling it from the junk pile, he took it to his shop and created a plow that worked great in the “problematic” Midwest soil. Today, the John Deere Company supplies equipment to farmers throughout the world... and it all started with a discarded saw blade—a Pink Bat.

**Dusty Problem**

**Perceived Problem:** In San Marcos, Texas, drivers have a problem keeping their car windows clean due to the unique dirt roads that locals call “caliche.” The blend of limestone dust, gravel and clay creates a fine white dust that billows up and coats the rear windows of residents’ automobiles. For those focused solely on the problem, the solutions seem obvious... build more car washes, resurface the roads, or tell residents to avoid driving down them. But when you see things for what they are, and not what they’re “supposed” to be, and then use your imagination (apply Pink Bat thinking) “problems” look very different. That’s exactly how Scott Wade approaches the situation.

**Pink Bat Solution:** As an artist, Scott views the dust not so much as a problem, but as a unique canvas solution for his artwork. Now instead of complaining about the dust, the town residents are clamoring for the opportunity to have Scott create some original art on their rear window. [http://www.dirtycarart.com/](http://www.dirtycarart.com/)

![A letter from the artist, Scott Wade](image)

“A letter from the artist, Scott Wade

“I’ve always felt compelled to create. I might look at a beautiful sky and there’s some feeling that wells up, like I just have to participate in this crazy, creative world; it’s like a puppy with a stick, begging me to play.
It’s a mystery, where ideas come from. There’s this nothingness that’s constantly tossing out ideas for paintings, drawings, sculptures, songs. They pop into my head, some fully formed, and I’d like to claim full credit, but I know better. Most are never given flesh, but sometimes everything comes together to give the inspiration form... 
...take dirty cars. Admit it; there’s been some moment when you couldn’t resist putting your finger to the dirty glass. Doesn’t matter if you wrote something pithy, or drew something rude or cute, it was just the urge to drag your finger through that dust, to watch as the shadow inside the car was revealed by a casual flick of your finger. Now imagine living on a dirt road for 20 years, a constant supply of dirty car windows. Fingertips led to fingernails for finer lines, and the fingerpads brushed lightly to achieve shading. Then came experimenting with brushes and other art tools and behold! The eyesore is transformed into a work of art, challenging our preconceptions of what is ugly, what is beautiful. 
And then it rains. Mobile gallery becomes a muddy mess, then it’s gone, and finally the canvas creates itself anew. A small lesson in the cyclical nature of all forms. Art can come from the most unexpected places, and you never know where inspiration will come from. It’s good to keep the mind limber.” – Scott

P.S. Scott likes to talk about his creations in terms of impermanence. How does impermanence relate to “Pink Bats”? “In three words I can sum up everything I’ve learned about life: it goes on”. – Robert Frost, American poet
See more of Scott’s work on the last page of this paper.

What’s your Pink bat story or example? Has a Pink Bat solution been lying in front of you, disguised as a “problem”? 

Please consider sharing it, such as these: https://www.county.org/About-Texas-Counties/County-Best-Practices-Awards-Program/Past-Recipients-Best-Practices-Award

Here’s another: http://www.pawsinprison.com/

Please remember: When people are afraid or hesitant to share Pink Bat possibilities you, your Department and even your County - everyone - loses.

Conclusion

• You can live each day in a world filled with “problems”, or
• Rise each morning and embrace a world filled with unseen solutions, eager for you to find them.
• Both these worlds exist; The one you choose is the one you will create.

• [https://www.simpletruths.com/inspirational-books/pink-bat.html](https://www.simpletruths.com/inspirational-books/pink-bat.html)

J. Mark Warren

Is a Training Consultant with the Texas Association of Counties in his hometown of Austin, Texas. Mark retired as a full-time employee on 7/31 came back as a contract trainer for TAC on 9/1/15. His presentations convey a message of inspiration, motivation and new direction and revolve around leadership, interpersonal communication and relationship skills, workplace diversity and professionalism, bridging the generations and customer service excellence.

Mark worked with the TAC Leadership Program and served as the coordinator of its Leadership training from 2002 and County Best Practices from 2009 to 2015.

After graduating from St. Edward’s University in 1977, Mark spent 23 years with the Texas Department of Public Safety, retiring in 2000 as the Assistant Commander of the Training Academy in Austin.

In December 2015, Mark began a series of presentations on verbal de-escalation with the Texas Police Association for the Department of Public Safety and law enforcement and criminal justice professionals across Texas.

For more information on Mark’s presentations, please visit [www.county.org](http://www.county.org), Member Services, Education and Training, Special Presentations, or [www.jmarkwarren.com](http://www.jmarkwarren.com).