

Critical Connections



Shit, it's gonna take me forfuckingever to figure this one out!

My normal response after reading every script from every movie I ever began working on. Near panic would set me in motion and I would reluctantly commence working on the job I was hired to do. Invariably, meaning every single time, as I got down to doing a job I'd been doing well for years on mid-budget productions, I would suddenly realize that I totally knew how to do this. It's just like the last one I did. And immediately my level of confidence would skyrocket as I accelerated into high gear. It would always go down like that since, without exception, the mass of information that was the script would be coordinated, the necessary horde of people would come together, and the movie would get made.

Years later I was stressing about telling my landlady that I was gonna split for Korea to work for a year. To pay the rent and keep my flat, I'd found a long-term house sitter who was perfect. Problem was, the landlady would probably hit the roof. And if she went ballistic and nixed the house sitter living there, I would either be losing my lease, or forfeiting my job in Korea. Swell. To calm my ass down, I drove up the coast to my favorite beach and parked looking out at the rolling Pacific waves. Winter in LA means rain and under the dark clouds blowing in from the ocean I saw a film crew wrapping a set and hauling equipment through the sand to the trucks parked up in the lot. Watching them, my mind drifted to crazy shit that happened working in the film biz.

I was flitting through memories, remembering challenging movie-making scenarios and meetings when something clicked, and I instantly saw the similarity between this landlady conversation and a meeting. In many meetings, it was a matter of concisely delivering unpleasant or negative news to someone and getting them to agree to an idea after hearing creative and intelligent reasons why this would be an agreeable solution. I'd done it a thousand times in meetings where I'd had to inform a director or producer or other powerdude that something in the script had become impossible and win them over by presenting a compelling alternate option that would be doable and possibly cost less.

On the day, my landlady wished me well and pocketing the envelope of pre-dated rent checks that I'd handed her, turned to the house sitter and welcomed him to the building.

Another time, I was working in Korea as an English teacher at a swanky kids' academy, doing a job I'd never done before and getting paid to learn. Hanging out at home on a Friday night after another long and stressful week, I was drinking beer while stuffing my face with spicy puffy ricey Asian snacks and whining to myself.

Why is everything here so complicated?
So irritatingly obscure? So difficult to master?
Everything's a crisis.
Everything changes practically on a daily basis.
Everything's a problem needing an instant solution.
Everything happens at the last minute...

Hey, wait a minute - rewind that whinefest!

Complication. Difficulty. Crisis. Daily change. Problems to be resolved. Last minute details. That sounds just like making a movie! And I know how to do that! Stunned by this revelation, I think a couple spicy puffy snacks fell out of my open piehole.

Is that even possible? How the hell could doing this compare to making a movie? When the words mid-budget location shoot lasered into my mind, the similarities were suddenly illuminated. I paced back and forth as I grappled with this inconceivable concept and being in motion set my mind free to make analogies and connections. As soon as my mind said this is like that, making the connection between the demanding chaos of my current scene and those same things on a movie, the stress evaporated.

Famous mystery writer Agatha Christie's amateur sleuth Miss Marple would always encounter somebody and say 'He/she reminds me of so-and-so' and making that connection would invariably help her solve the murder.

Well that's what I'm talking about. We all have some level of fear of the unknown, ranging from uneasiness at something unfamiliar to high anxiety about a new situation. Usually relaxed and confident when in our comfort zone and often cagey and insecure when out of it, the ability to connect whatever's going on to something we've seen before is what takes the 'un' out of unknown. And as soon as that happens, our confidence returns as our level of uneasiness, anxiety, or stress recedes into obscurity.

So how exactly does that work? I don't know about you, but I can't think when I'm in freakout mode. All I can hear is a voice in my head telling me I'm an idiot for freaking out. Well here's the deal - in the background, our brain is constantly receiving input, comparing it to other input, cataloging it, and classifying it. Instead of running away screaming, if I can just slow down enough to think about what's going on, I'm providing input that my brain will automatically compare and catalog.

And nine times out of ten, find some other scenario that was a helluva lot like this one. Or sometimes, being more of a doer than a thinker, I just take action. Start the project. Start the conversation. Start the job. Just do it.

Your brain will react the same way, comparing and cataloging what you're doing and coming up with something else you've done that's like this. Either way, your brain will come up with the goods, you'll know that you've got this and don't really have to freak out, et voila! - confidence replaces stress.

Perceiving similarities between something new and unfamiliar and something previously encountered is a mechanism for removing stress and activating our innate sense of confidence. It's a big ask to calm down enough to think, but it's not beyond the realm of reality and it's something we all can learn how to do.

And the beauty of it is that once seen, it can't be unseen.

Not after that initial jolt into recognition of the similar and the familiar in something you saw as completely different and unfamiliar. It was years before I was bitch-slapped by the universe into awareness that I could trust my perception of similarities to bring familiarity, remove stress, facilitate success, and create confidence. But I had to learn how to slow down and think...