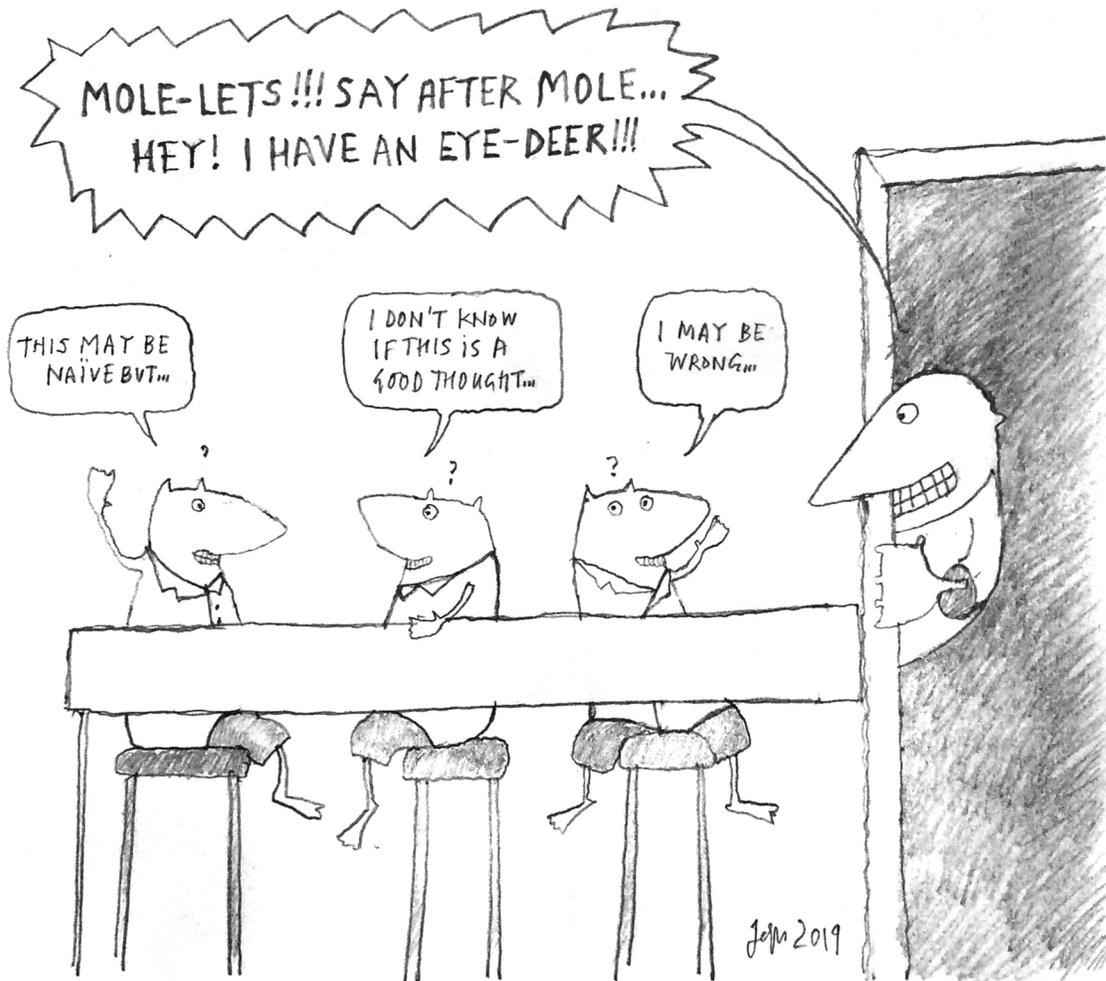


STICKY WICKET

The Gift

Mole



I just had a birthday (thank you). It was the sort of birthday that makes one think of an old Beatle's song (and no, not 'Birthday.'). Or a Paul Simon song (Everything Put Together Falls Apart). But as my dear Mother Mole says, it is always better to have a birthday than not. And besides, I got gifts. I really like gifts. Who doesn't?

There's an idea that I'd like to share with you, a very good idea. It isn't *my* idea, but it is mine to share (and yours as well, as you'll see). I got it from Prof. Puma. I don't know if it was her idea, but again, it was certainly hers to share. It's an idea about ideas. It's very simple, and it isn't.

Here it is: Ideas are gifts. They are wonderful gifts. If someone shares an idea with you, they are sharing something they created, or if not, something they obtained and feel has value. And what do we, as scientists, do when we receive such a gift? Do we say, "Thank you"? Don't make me laugh.

Okay, once in a while, we might say, "What a great idea!" But far more often, we respond with, "No, that's wrong and here's why." Or

we say, "That's interesting, but..." We shut it down, often before we spend any time thinking about it. And of course, it is what we are trained to do. We learn this every time we do an experiment and the answer is "no." We learn this in school when we are asked, "What is wrong with this statement?" We are critical thinkers (hopefully!) and finding flaws in logic or reasoning is what critical thinkers do. But it isn't a good response to receiving a gift.

Prof. Puma suggested that upon receiving the gift of an idea, we go against our training and instinct and, rather than discarding it, build on it. "That is an interesting idea, and if it is correct, it might suggest this..."

"Thank you for that idea, we should think about it."

"That's one great idea for how this can be done, let's think of some more."

It's a challenge. During our discussion of ideas as gifts (it wasn't just the two of us), Prof. Bear described a conversation in which he was asked not to use the word "but." He tried, and failed within a few minutes.

Why is this a very good idea, this idea that ideas are gifts (get the idea)? Actually, when I say “idea” I say “*eye-deer*.” I can’t help it. Once, years ago, I hosted a local television show, and my director insisted that I stop saying “eye-deer” and say the correct “eye-dee-ah.” I practiced and practiced, and finally did it – okay, it took several takes, but I did it. But it didn’t stick, and I still say “eye-deer.” What were we talking about? Oh, why this is a very good eye-dee-ah.

There is a concept that applies to successful teams efforts, and applies very well to the teams we work in, such as our labs. It is the concept of psychological safety, introduced by Amy Edmondson (you can look it up). For teams to be successful, it is important that there be sufficient trust in the group that mistakes are tolerated, joint efforts are valued, and ideas are freely shared. If you are afraid that stating an idea that might be erroneous will detract from your standing in the team, you might keep it to yourself, even if stating it would direct the team to a desired goal, such as solving a problem. Treating ideas as gifts is a major step towards building the trust needed for success.

Think about the disclaimers we so often hear when someone voices an idea: “This may be naïve”, “I may be wrong”, “I don’t know if this is a good thought”, followed by what they want to share. These are the buffers we use to try to create psychological safety, to protect ourselves from the critical assault we expect. So in my lab meetings and journal clubs, or in the Q and A after a seminar, when someone begins this way, I generally pipe in that, “I’m wrong most of the time.” (I tend not to say, “There are no stupid questions,” since someone might respond, “Only stupid people asking them.” Not the desired outcome.)

This all seems pretty sensible. But if you try it, you may find (as I did) that it isn’t easy. It goes against my nature. If I’m thinking hard about a problem, someone’s suggestion distracts my train of thought, and I knock it away in order to continue on my track. I’m trying not to do that. More than that, I am trying to discourage this in my trainees. I want people to feel very free to voice an idea without fear that we will think less of them. To create a ‘safe intellectual space’ in my lab. Because sometimes, great ideas come from an okay idea that we build on. Sometimes, great ideas come from the group of us trying on a bunch of other ideas. Or sometimes, someone just says one right off (even if they began with, “This might be silly, but...”)

My old mentor, Prof. Wolverine, used to say, “If ideas are a dime a dozen, here’s a dollar. I’ll take one hundred and twenty.” Sure, ideas can be the flotsam and jetsam of our thoughts, washing into our consciousness and then jettisoned from our mouths. Or ideas can be viruses that reproduce and mutate in our society as we and others repeat them. (Richard Dawkins famously called these ‘memes,’ to distinguish them from ideas that are not repeated. I think. Or ‘meme’ is just one of those very good ideas that catches on. I just checked, there are over three billion hits for ‘meme’ in Google. Nice meme.) But ideas have value, and *good* ideas have a great deal of value. When we quickly discard an idea without carefully exploring it, we risk throwing away a lottery ticket without checking if it might be a winner.

Prof. Puma gave us a really nice gift. If I didn’t say it before, I’ll say it now. (Actually, I did say it to her, but I’ll say it again). Thank you.