



Stanford eCorner

Puzzles and Challenges

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Melinda Gates shares a personal anecdote of doing puzzles with her husband, Bill, and how this activity serves as a metaphor for tackling hard problems, pushing through frustration, and learning to appreciate differing perspectives.



Transcript

So just to take you back a little bit in time, when Bill and I were first dating, which was very briefly after I was at Microsoft in 1987, we were in that getting to know one another phase, right, and so when you're getting to know one another phase, you're trying a lot of new things together and I was at the store late one night, I think it was at a drug store picking up some stuff and I happened to go by the aisle where there are puzzles. And I thought 'hey, this is something my family has always enjoyed doing which are puzzles. Maybe - I don't really know if Bill likes puzzles, but I will take one home and see what he thinks, right?' So I picked up a 1,200 piece puzzle, one of those little cheap cardboard ones, it's rectangular, et cetera, and it was the Eiffel Tower and with a beautiful sky behind it, blue sky, very few clouds. So Eiffel Tower, blue sky, 1,200 pieces. And I take it home and I take it to Bill's house and my family whenever we used to do puzzles when I was growing up, we would dump them out on the dining room table and over a series of a whole host of weeks and months you would come by and you would put five or six pieces in and then you come by and put a few more pieces and maybe a couple of months go by and it's all done. Well, I came home and Bill was, he's like 'yeah, yeah, I'll do a puzzle, I love to do puzzles.' I said 'okay, great' we crack-open a cardboard box Thursday night, we throw it open on his dining room table. And one thing I didn't quite understand about Bill at that time was that by gosh, when you sit down to do something, you are going to finish it and you're going to finish it then. 1,200 pieces, the Eiffel Tower, that's not doable in a few hours, okay, and I'm pretty good at puzzles. It turns out, so was Bill. We've actually have a few puzzle competitions just for fun of like equal puzzles of same number of pieces, but that's another story.

But anyway, so we dump this puzzle out and we get going and hours and hours go by and I'm exhausted and I'm like 'okay, give it up' and we're going away for the weekend actually to do something fun with his family and there's just no way that we can keep working on this thing because it was on the dining room table. So we go away for the weekend and we come back, well, another story which I won't go into, but we were - had a little competition going on that weekend too on a Northwest game called pickleball and I dislocated my shoulder, I was with him, I was on his team. So we come back at the end of the weekend and I'm hobbling like this with my - can hardly move my hand, because this dislocated shoulder's in a sling and we come back to the puzzle and we are going to do this puzzle. And what I learned from that is A) we both like puzzles and we like them because they're challenging and they're interesting and there's some similarities about what we both like about puzzles. But if we're going to do a puzzle together, we now do ones that are 600 pieces, because you can do a 600 piece puzzle in one sitting. And today, we do puzzles that are - we don't have a picture for, that's our favorite, they're often wooden. If you're doing a picture that's say of Napa Valley completely irregular shaped edge, there might be a whole vine that goes around it and you don't know it, there might be pieces where there are straight edges in the middle of pieces, pieces where the puzzler has left holes in it, we love those puzzles. And that's a good metaphor for me about how we work together and how I think about problems, which is, with a puzzle you always know that there's an end solution, that the person who created one of these jigsaw puzzles has an end thing in mind. And you're going to get there. But along the way, you're going to experience a lot of frustration, you're going to have to look at things from different points of view.

So sometimes Bill's working on shapes and I'm working on colors, sometimes we switch, sometimes we'll notice something the other person doesn't notice, sometimes you'll have a different perspective, sometimes you will step away for a little while to get a different perspective and you'll come back a few minutes later. But you have to trust yourself when you're doing a puzzle that you're going to get there. And you have to push through the frustration. And to me, that's part of the fun.