

THE STORY OF THE JAR

By
Rich Dixon

A teacher stood before his class. On a table the students observed a large glass jar and a pile of fist-sized rocks.

He carefully placed as many rocks into the jar as possible and asked the students to acknowledge that no more rocks would fit. Then he reached under the table, retrieved a pitcher containing pea-sized gravel, and slowly poured the pebbles into the jar, shaking gently to allow them to settle and fill the voids.



"Is the jar completely full?" Believing they saw through his trick, the students replied that it wasn't.

The teacher smiled, produced some fine sand, and repeated the process. As he finished, he asked what the students had learned.

"There's always some empty space. If you try hard enough, you can always fit more in."

Without speaking, the teacher picked up a second jar and filled it with sand. Then he waited for the students to analyze the results. They gazed at the two jars, the pile of rocks, and the containers of gravel and sand.

After a few moments, a student said, "I get it. You have to put the big stuff in first or it won't fit."

I've done this simple demonstration with numerous audiences, using the jar to represent a variety of concepts. It's a great prompt for discussions about priorities and proactive allocation of limited resources. After a little discussion, most groups reach similar conclusions and the following principles usually emerge in some form.

1. **The jar is always full. Even if it's only air, something occupies the space.**
2. **Everything won't fit. Before adding anything you must remove something else.**
3. **You can add small stuff later, but you have to put the big stuff in first.**

Each principle implies a related question.

1. **Who decides what goes in the jar?**
2. **What can be left out? What can we remove if we really must add something?**
3. **What's the big stuff that absolutely can't be left out?**