

BOOK CLUB SYNOPSIS

Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know

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PROLOGUE

Most people think of intelligence when considering the concept of mental fitness, but in certain circumstances, the ability to rethink and unlearn may be equally, if not more, important.

In the introduction, Adam Grant provides the example of a group of smokejumpers tasked with extinguishing the Mann Gulch fire in Montana in 1949. A majority of the smokejumpers perished. One of the three who survived, foreman Wagner Dodge, only did so because of his ability to override all of his previously learned skills and instincts and create an escape fire to protect himself.

Many are reluctant to rethink in this way because it requires overcoming automatic responses. “We favor the comfort of conviction over the discomfort of doubt.” This book seeks to demonstrate the value of rethinking and encouraging others to do the same.

PART

I

INDIVIDUAL RETHINKING:
UPDATING OUR OWN VIEWS

01

CHAPTER ONE

A PREACHER, A PROSECUTOR, A POLITICIAN, AND A SCIENTIST WALK INTO YOUR MIND

Having conviction and strongly held beliefs or opinions is often seen as a virtue. But, Grant argues, in a rapidly changing world, it may be equally valuable to rethink as to think. We are much quicker to recognize when others need to rethink, not least because, as humans, we tend to prioritize *feeling* right over actually *being* right.

We use mental tools to justify this. Phil Tetlock has defined these as three different mindsets: that of a preacher, a prosecutor and a politician. Preacher mode arises “when our sacred beliefs are in jeopardy: we deliver sermons to protect and promote our ideals.” Prosecutor mode is a response to flaws we see in other people’s thinking: i.e., arguing to prove them wrong. Politician mode comes into play when we hope to win someone over. In other words, the first intends to showcase we’re right, the second to prove that others are wrong and the third to garner support.

According to Grant, these modes prevent people from rethinking their own views. As such, he proposes a fourth alternative: the mindset of a scientist. “We move into scientist mode when we’re searching for the truth: we run experiments to test hypotheses and discover knowledge.”

This is particularly important because, as Grant says, “Mental horsepower doesn’t guarantee mental dexterity.” Research shows that those with higher IQs are more prone to falling for stereotypes because their brains are quicker at recognizing patterns. They may also be worse at updating beliefs.

Grant explores this with the example of those who are good at math. While they may be better at looking at and interpreting data, personal beliefs get in the way of their ability to do so. “The better you are at crunching numbers, the more spectacularly you fail at analyzing patterns that contradict your views.”

Two cognitive biases drive this phenomenon: confirmation bias and desirability bias. The former is “seeing what we expect to see,” while the latter is “seeing what we want to see.” Scientist mode may help alleviate some of the effects of these biases, as it requires being “*actively* open-minded”—seeking not just answers but also reasons why you might be wrong. One part of this may be what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls “cognitive flexibility.”

Grant suggests that rethinking typically follows a cyclical pattern:

1. Start with intellectual humility—“knowing what we don’t know.”
2. Recognize shortcomings, and allow room for doubt.
3. Seek out missing information.
4. New discoveries result—which, in turn, can maintain a sense of humility by reinforcing how much there still is to learn.

“If knowledge is power, knowing what we don’t know is wisdom,” says Grant. This rethinking cycle is the opposite of an overconfidence cycle, which starts with pride, continues with conviction, and then into confirmation and desirability biases, leading to validation and bringing us back to the beginning: pride.

“Our convictions can lock us in prisons of our own making,” Grant argues. They make us resistant to change and prevent us from seeing new possibilities. To help others overcome their resistance when you seek to introduce new ideas of your own, including continuity is useful. “Visions for change are more compelling when they include visions of continuity.”

He provides the example of the Apple engineers who sought to convince Steve Jobs to build a phone. Jobs was opposed to the idea, so the engineers made him understand that they weren’t trying to

change the DNA of the company by turning it into a phone company; rather, they were simply trying to change the technology available to their consumers. Their efforts eventually persuaded Jobs.

02

CHAPTER TWO

THE ARMCHAIR QUARTERBACK AND THE IMPOSTOR: FINDING THE SWEET SPOT OF CONFIDENCE

This chapter begins by discussing the blind spots that impact our thinking. It introduces a medical phenomenon called Anton's syndrome, which is "a deficit of self-awareness in which a person is oblivious to a physical disability but otherwise doing fairly well cognitively." This syndrome serves as a prominent example of how humans are vulnerable to blind spots, but the biggest problem is that blind spots "can leave us blind to our blindness." This can create false confidence and therefore impede rethinking.

The first type of blind spot is being blind to one's strengths, otherwise known as impostor syndrome. Grant argues that the opposite of impostor syndrome is armchair quarterback syndrome, where one's confidence exceeds their competence, and they are blind to their weaknesses.

The Dunning-Kruger effect illustrates this phenomenon. It suggests that those who are most lacking in intelligence or competence in a particular area are most likely to overestimate their own abilities. This effect directly impacts rethinking as it discourages self-awareness: If we think we know something, there's no reason to look for gaps or flaws in our knowledge or to seek to correct them.

Grant explains that there are two main factors at play. One is simply our ego: We don't want to look bad. But the other is "a deficit in metacognitive skill, the ability to think about our thinking. Lacking competence can leave us blind to our own incompetence."

There are some areas in which we're more blind to our lack of competence than others. We are more likely to overestimate our

abilities in desirable skills or “in situations where it’s easy to confuse experience for expertise, like driving.” But, we are prone to *underestimating* ourselves in areas where “we can easily recognize that we lack experience,” like painting or racecar driving. As such, beginners are the least likely to fall prey to the Dunning-Kruger trap; it’s when we begin to gain skills in a particular area that we are liable to becoming overconfident.

Part of the problem lies in our misconceived notion that confidence is a seesaw: Too much leads to arrogance, and too little means being meek. Grant posits that the problem lies in a misunderstanding of the word “humility.” Humility isn’t about having low self-confidence; it’s “about being grounded—recognizing that we’re flawed and fallible.” The sweet spot of confidence is to “be confident in your ability to achieve a goal in the future while maintaining the humility to question whether you have the right tools in the present.” This is known as confident humility. Acknowledging what you don’t know compels you to more mindfully consider the strength of the evidence presented and to read material that contradicts what you think.

This, in turn, highlights the potential benefits of impostor syndrome. Fears of inadequacy can lead to three benefits of doubt:

1. Feeling like an impostor can motivate us to work harder: Confidence can make us complacent, while impostors feel like they have something to prove.
2. It can motivate us to work smarter: It puts us in a beginner’s mindset, compelling us to question assumptions.
3. It can make us better learners: It encourages us to seek insights from others.

The data suggests that confidence isn’t necessary as a precondition for achievement. Instead, people are often likely to build confidence through the process of achieving their goals.

“Arrogance leaves us blind to our weaknesses. Humility is a reflective lens: it helps us see them clearly. Confident humility is a corrective lens: it enables us to overcome those weaknesses.”

03

CHAPTER THREE

THE JOY OF BEING WRONG: THE THRILL OF NOT BELIEVING EVERYTHING YOU THINK

“The goal is not to be wrong more often. It’s to recognize that we’re all wrong more often than we’d like to admit, and the more we deny it, the deeper the hole we dig for ourselves.”

The way we react when our views are attacked has a bearing on our ability to rethink. According to sociologist Murray Davis, ideas that survive don’t do so because they are true, but because they are interesting. Interesting ideas are those that challenge weakly held opinions; however, when a core belief is questioned, people tend to shut down as a result of their “totalitarian ego.” The reason for this is that our amygdala is triggered, activating a flight-or-fight response.

Grant notes the irony in our response to our core beliefs being challenged, as we’re not actually born with these opinions. We can choose our views and what we believe to be true. But once we’ve determined these views, our inner dictator takes hold and activates an overconfidence cycle. “First, our wrong opinions are shielded in filter bubbles, where we feel pride when we see only information that supports our convictions. Then our beliefs are sealed in echo chambers, where we hear only from people who intensify and validate them.”

Yet there’s a way to counteract this effect. Grant argues that we can embrace “the joy of being wrong,” as it means we’re learning something. One way to do this is to separate your beliefs, opinions or ideologies from your identity. It’s attachment to our ideas and beliefs that prevents us from rethinking.

“Who you are should be a question of what you value, not what you believe,” says Grant. “Basing your identity on these kinds of principles enables you to remain open-minded about the best ways to advance them.”

This ability to revise opinions is demonstrated through the example of the “superforecasters” who participated in the Good Judgment project. Those who most frequently updated their beliefs and, in turn, revised their predictions were the most likely to predict events accurately. “The best forecasters went through more rethinking cycles.” In other words, it’s not what we think; it’s how we think.

As previously mentioned, it’s hard to avoid the trap of desirability bias. But successful forecasters can overcome their beliefs by focusing less on their desired outcome and more on being the best forecaster. Research shows that being aware of even just one reason why we could be wrong can be enough to prevent overconfidence.

Another tool is to not take ourselves too seriously. Being able to laugh at ourselves when we’re wrong is critical for progress. Finally, Grant notes a paradox in great scientists and superforecasters: “the reason they’re so comfortable being wrong is that they’re terrified of being wrong. What sets them apart is the time horizon. They’re determined to reach the correct answer in the long run, and they know that means they have to be open to stumbling, backtracking, and rerouting in the short run.”

Despite what we may think, admitting we are wrong also doesn’t make us look less competent. Rather, it demonstrates “honesty and a willingness to learn.”

04

CHAPTER FOUR

THE GOOD FIGHT CLUB: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT

There are two primary types of conflict: what organizational psychologist Karen “Etty” Jehn calls relationship conflict and task conflict. The former encompasses personal, emotional altercations, while the latter is about clashes over ideas and opinions. Based on this distinction, Grant contends that while the former can have a deleterious effect on team performance in a workplace setting, the latter can actually be beneficial.

Relationship conflict may compel us to double down on our views, and it stands in the way of rethinking. Task conflict, on the other hand, can spur diversity of thought and new ideas. It can encourage us to think again. This is where the notion of productive disagreement comes in. It’s not about whether we disagree, but how. Disagreeing in a productive way can help develop our creative muscles.

Productive disagreement also leads Grant to consider the impact of agreeable people—the people pleasers—versus disagreeable people, those who are critical, skeptical or challenging. “Agreeable people make for a great support network: they’re excited to encourage us and cheerlead for us. Rethinking depends on a different kind of network: a challenge network, a group of people we trust to point out our blind spots and help us overcome our weaknesses.”

Challenge networks require some of these disagreeable people, as they are unafraid of speaking up and questioning our thinking. Yet it’s not enough for them to be simply disagreeable. The right conditions must be in place. Studies show that people must feel committed and supported in order to add value. The network or

team should, therefore, have dissimilar traits and backgrounds but hold similar principles. This is equally if not more important for leaders, because as “they gain power, they tune out boat-rockers and listen to bootlickers.”

Grant proposes a number of other characteristics to look for when seeking out the beneficial kind of disagreeable people. Drawing on his notion of givers and takers, he advocates seeking out disagreeable people who are givers. This means that they challenge and criticize not to feed their own egos, but because they care. Based on this point, he adds that the messenger is as important as the message when we deal with criticism. If we believe the messenger cares about or believes in us, we are far more receptive to the criticism.

There is, nevertheless, one potential risk of disagreeableness: It can drown out the voices of those who may be less comfortable speaking up. “It’s common for people who lack power or status to shift into politician mode, suppressing their dissenting views in favor of conforming to the HIPPO—the Highest Paid Person’s Opinion.”

Ultimately, Grant argues that one can be agreeable while cherishing disagreement. “Agreeableness is about seeking social harmony, not cognitive consensus. It’s possible to disagree without being disagreeable.” As an agreeable person, he says, “In fact, when I argue with someone ... it’s a sign of respect. It means I value their views enough to contest them.”

The difficulty of a task conflict is that, if unchecked, it can lead to a relationship conflict. One way to avoid this is to get “hot” instead of mad, which reflects intensity rather than hostility. Specifically, “framing a dispute as a debate rather than as a disagreement signals that you’re receptive to considering dissenting opinions and changing your mind.” During the debate, it is also important to argue about the *how*, not the *why*, which prevents each side from getting too emotionally attached.

Such debates are important because humans are vulnerable to the illusion of explanatory depth. “People tend to be overconfident in

their knowledge: they believe they know much more than they actually do about how ... objects work. We can help them see the limits of their understanding by asking them to unpack the mechanisms.” Our sparring partner can actually help move us forward, rather than prevent our success.

PART

II

INTERPERSONAL RETHINKING:
OPENING OTHER PEOPLE'S MINDS

05

CHAPTER FIVE

DANCES WITH FOES: HOW TO WIN DEBATES AND INFLUENCE PEOPLE

Using debate champions to illustrate his point, Grant begins this chapter by discussing what it means to persuade people in a way that opens their minds, rather than in a way that creates an adversarial environment.

The main type of a poor debater is what Grant calls a “logic bully.” Logic bullies use rational arguments but present them in such a way that it’s impossible for the other person to reply. More logic isn’t more helpful in convincing the other person; instead, it is more likely to cause them to hold onto their own views even more tightly. This persistence can, in fact, alienate them, thereby impeding your ability to persuade.

“A good debate is not a war.” A good debate is more like an unchoreographed dance. “If you try too hard to lead, your partner will resist,” Grant says.

A study that looked at expert versus average negotiators found a number of common characteristics across the former group:

1. Experts plan to find common ground.
2. They focus on the quality, rather than the quantity, of arguments. They don’t bring “too many different weapons to battle.”
3. They avoid going too much on offense or defense.
4. They express curiosity, particularly by posing questions.

In other words, humility and curiosity make for a better debate. We are more likely to persuade someone if we acknowledge good points they've made and are not simply trying to advance our own agenda at all costs.

The rest of the chapter explores these characteristics in further detail. One of the debate champions explains that, when seeking common ground, he starts with what he calls a "steel man" rather than a straw man. Instead of poking holes in the weakest version of the other person's argument, he considers the strongest version. He accepts the validity of the strongest point and begins from there.

It's a little more difficult to create a hard and fast rule for the quantity versus quality of arguments, as it varies from circumstance to circumstance. Grant notes that in cases where the other person is not invested in an issue, quantity can actually be seen as a sign of quality. The effectiveness of your approach is dependent upon three factors: "how much people care about the issue, how open they are to our particular argument, and how strong-willed they are in general." That's not all. The source of your information may be as important as the quality or quantity.

"Psychologists have long found that the person most likely to persuade you to change your mind is *you*." We are ultimately the ones who determine which information we find persuasive. This is why curiosity is so important in a debate. When we ask questions, we give our opponent the opportunity to feel as though they're coming to their own conclusions. It's less about convincing them and more about opening their minds to the possibility that they could be wrong.

There are a number of other tactics to employ when entering a debate. When a situation is becoming hostile, Grant recommends having a conversation about the conversation. This allows you to get away from the content of the argument and enables both sides to discuss how they're feeling about it. Another option is to simply ask what evidence they would need to change their mind. If the person answers "nothing," you'll know that further debate is a lost

cause. If a debate ends in a stalemate, it is important to have a follow-up conversation in an effort to understand how to do it better in the future.

Grant also returns to the concept of confident humility, noting that sharing your views with a modicum of uncertainty can actually lead to more nuanced discussions. “If we hold an opinion weakly, expressing it strongly can backfire.”

This confident humility can also apply in other instances, such as when one applies for a job for which they might not have the right credentials. Grant provides a specific example of this, in which a woman addressed her shortcomings in her cover letter and then proceeded to explain why she should be hired anyway. She preempted the criticisms and showed she was secure enough to admit them, and she ended up with the job.

“An informed audience is going to spot the holes in our case anyway. We might as well get credit for having the humility to look for them, the foresight to spot them, and the integrity to acknowledge them.”

06

CHAPTER SIX

BAD BLOOD ON THE DIAMOND: DIMINISHING PREJUDICE BY DESTABILIZING STEREOTYPES

Prejudices and stereotypes compel us to more strongly identify with our in-group and to disidentify with whomever we consider the “other.” Once we’ve developed these views, it’s hard to overturn them. Using psychologist George Kelly’s term “reality goggles” to describe how our beliefs are used to make sense of the world, Grant says, “A threat to our opinions cracks our goggles, leaving our vision blurred.” This, in turn, makes us more hostile and leads us to more fervently defend our opinion, even if it’s false. Rather than admitting we’re wrong, we become “mental contortionists.”

Those with strongly held beliefs are likely to interact most frequently with those who share their views. The stereotypes they believe then become amplified, resulting in group polarization. “Polarization is reinforced by conformity.”

Grant puts forth a number of possible ways to disrupt these patterns. The first pulls from the concept of the overview effect—the shift in perspective astronauts experience when looking back at Earth from space. From space, astronauts realize they share a common identity with all humans. The idea is that helping people see what they share rather than how they’re divided could help build bridges.

The second concept is the psychology of peace, drawn from a series of problem-solving workshops hosted between Israelis and Palestinians in an effort to help humanize the other side. The idea in this case is that seeing your rival in an empathetic light may increase your likelihood of helping them.

When tested, the first hypothesis seemed only to make a difference when your rival faced an emergency situation. The second hypothesis seemed to hold for the individuals with whom you interacted, but it could not be extrapolated for the entire group to which they belonged.

The third hypothesis seems to be even more effective. This approach calls for naming positive things about your rival and then commenting on the arbitrariness of the animosity. The first step alone isn't enough. In studies of Yankees and Red Sox fans, the addition of noting "the arbitrariness of their animosity" seemed to make them not just show more sympathy for a rival fan but also for the whole team. In the study, "fans showed less hostility when they reflected on how silly the rivalry was."

There's one other piece that appears to further strengthen this final hypothesis: counterfactual thinking. When people think about how their views—or the stereotypes they hold—would be different if they had been born into a different race or during another era, people are more compelled to explore the origins of their own beliefs and consequently to reconsider them. Grant recommends asking others questions that invite them to engage in counterfactual thinking. "Psychologists find that many of our beliefs are cultural truisms: widely shared, but rarely questioned. If we take a closer look at them, we often discover that they rest on shaky foundations."

Recognizing the holes in our own beliefs can help us let go of them; however, Grant concedes that this alone won't be enough to solve deeply entrenched situations such as the Israel-Palestine conflict or racism more broadly. Nevertheless, intergroup contact and conversations may help to plant the seeds of doubt in our views and help us open our minds.

07

CHAPTER SEVEN

VACCINE WHISPERERS AND MILD-MANNERED INTERROGATORS: HOW THE RIGHT KIND OF LISTENING MOTIVATES PEOPLE TO CHANGE

As explained in previous chapters, efforts to persuade can backfire, spurring people to hold onto their beliefs even more tightly. Grant presents an example of this: the efforts in trying to encourage people to get inoculated against measles. A number of government efforts failed, but one tactic seems to be fruitful: motivational interviewing.

Clinical psychologist Bill Miller found that by asking his patients questions rather than attacking or seeking to persuade them, he was more successful in treating them. The premise behind motivational interviewing is that, while we can't often motivate someone to change, we can help them find their own motivation to change. "Motivational interviewing starts with an attitude of humility and curiosity. We don't know what might motivate someone else to change, but we're genuinely eager to find out. The goal isn't to tell people what to do; it's to help them break out of overconfidence cycles and see new possibilities."

There are three steps to motivational interviewing:

1. Ask open-ended questions.
2. Engage in reflective listening.
3. Affirm the person's desire and ability to change.

The key is to demonstrate that you respect the other person's decision regardless of what it is. The evidence bears out the efficacy of such an approach: "Overall, motivational interviewing has a statistically and clinically meaningful effect on behavior change in roughly three out of four studies."

Motivational interviewing is so effective because it allows people to maintain their freedom and autonomy, as opposed to when they're being advised or persuaded. Some people tend to ignore advice, not because they disagree with it, but because they're opposed to the external pressure and the sense that someone else is making their decisions for them.

There are indicators that suggest when someone might be more open to hearing alternate views. Grant notes the difference between sustain talk and change talk. The former is about maintaining the status quo, while the other suggests a willingness, desire or ability to make changes. Motivational interviewers should look for change talk and pick up on it when they hear it, asking questions about why and how the other person might consider changing.

There's one other key technique in successful motivational interviewing: summarizing. This occurs at the end of the conversation or during transition points. "The idea is to explain your understanding of other people's reasons for change, to check on whether you've missed or misrepresented anything, and to inquire about their plans and possible next steps." The role of the interviewer is to be a guide—not a leader—and to help the person accomplish their goals.

Influential listening is another related method. The idea is to show interest in the other person's interests, without judging them or trying to prove your own. Asking curious questions demonstrates that you don't have a hidden agenda. This isn't easy; we have to avoid the urge "to fix problems and offer answers." The objective is to listen and provide sympathy, not solutions.

Good listeners emphasize making their audience feel smart over trying to appear smart themselves, and they present information with permission. They establish a dialogue and then present evidence based on the conversation taking place and the questions being asked.

"Listening is a way of offering others our scarcest, most precious gift: our attention. Once we've demonstrated that we care about them and their goals, they're more willing to listen to us."

PART

III

COLLECTIVE RETHINKING: CREATING
COMMUNITIES OF LIFELONG
LEARNERS

08

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHARGED CONVERSATIONS: DEPOLARIZING OUR DIVIDED DISCUSSIONS

The Difficult Conversations Lab at Columbia University facilitates discussions about polarizing topics between people. Through their work, the lab has found what does—and doesn't—work to help two opposing sides find common ground.

Reading an article that outlines both sides of an argument before entering a conversation about another contentious topic appears to help somewhat: 46% of those studied were able to find common ground and draft and sign a joint statement. But, the lab found that this was even more effective if the article framed it as a complex issue and presented a diversity of viewpoints. The pairs who were shown this type of article were able to prepare a statement together 100% of the time.

The latter approach is more fruitful because it circumvents the obstacle of the binary bias, which is “a basic human tendency to seek clarity and closure by simplifying a complex continuum into two categories.” Seeing issues as black and white can lead people to dig in their heels and can exacerbate polarization. Seeing a range of perspectives on an issue can stop this, overcoming one's natural inclination to simplify. “A dose of complexity can disrupt overconfidence cycles and spur rethinking cycles.”

Ultimately, we believe what we want to believe—a result of desirability bias. Issues are rarely black and white. “But when the only available options are black and white, it's natural to slip into a mentality of us versus them and to focus on the sides.” Grant presents the issue of climate change as a prime example. While media coverage typically puts people into two camps—those who

believe climate change is an issue and those who deny it—the reality is more complicated. Some do dismiss climate change in its entirety, but others are simply doubtful or don't care. The same range of views exists on the other side of the spectrum as well.

Nuance and complexity can enable us to look for what might be missing and to gain more complete insight into an issue. This is equally effective for those presenting the information. Grant cites research that suggests that journalists who present uncertainties regarding an issue don't lose their readers' trust—they're actually seen as more persuasive. The challenge then is that nuance "doesn't seem to go viral."

There is yet another reason that nuance is so crucial: "Psychologists find that people will ignore or even deny the existence of a problem if they're not fond of the solution." Including nuance and complexity can reduce polarization and enable those involved to have more productive conversations.

Employing caveats and contingencies is the best way to communicate complexity. Grant notes that scientists, when they communicate, will often acknowledge the limitations of a given study or include caveats. Contingencies are instances in which certain changes could have an impact on whether we will see the results repeated or nullified. Research suggests that both of these approaches are effective outside of the world of science, too, making those presenting the information appear more credible while helping people open their minds.

The opposite end of the spectrum is what Grant calls idea cults—"groups that stir up a batch of oversimplified intellectual Kool-Aid and recruit followers to serve it widely. They preach the merits of their pet concept and prosecute anyone who calls for nuance or complexity." For example, idea cults in the health arena often defend things like detox diets or cleanses.

One approach that doesn't seem to work? Putting yourself in the other person's shoes. This isn't very effective because we're not very good at guessing what someone else is thinking. "The greater the distance between us and an adversary, the more likely we are to oversimplify their actual motives and invent explanations that stray far from their reality."

Instead of *taking* other people's perspectives, we should be *seeking* their perspectives. Rather than assume we know what another person is thinking, Grant calls for actually speaking to those who don't share our views to better understand the complexity of these perspectives.

There's one other piece to it: You don't have to stay emotionless in these challenging conversations. Knowing that someone cares deeply about an issue, even if we disagree with their view, may lead us to trust them more. "What stands in the way of rethinking isn't the expression of emotion; it's a restricted range of emotion." We must avoid falling into the trap of emotional simplicity. It's helpful to remember that binary bias is relevant not just to issues, but also to emotions. "Just as the spectrum of beliefs on charged topics is much more complex than two extremes, our emotions are often more mixed than we realize."

09

CHAPTER NINE

REWRITING THE TEXTBOOK: TEACHING STUDENTS TO QUESTION KNOWLEDGE

This chapter explores how to instill the ability to rethink in people when they're young. Commenting on the education system, Grant notes that there is too much emphasis on sharing knowledge and not enough on teaching students how to think for themselves and how to question themselves and others.

Grant highlights a growing movement to ask questions that don't have one correct answer. He also describes several recommendations to help students think more critically and "think like fact-checkers." These include: "interrogate information instead of simply consuming it," "reject rank and popularity as a proxy for reliability," and "understand that the sender of information is often not its source."

The remainder of the chapter highlights other learnings pertaining to the world of teaching. One study looked at the impact of a lecture versus active learning. Somewhat surprisingly, students tend to prefer a traditional lecture; however, research shows that they actually learn more from active participation. The act of learning firsthand, while more challenging, also leads to deeper understanding.

"Lectures aren't designed to accommodate dialogue or disagreement; they turn students into passive receivers of information rather than active thinkers." This can create what is known as the awestruck effect, or what Grant argues would better be described as "the dumbstruck effect." People are persuaded by the "shiny package" rather than the substance of the speaker's argument.

Perfectionists tend to struggle the most with more open-ended or active forms of learning. They are more comfortable “mastering old ways of thinking” than forging new ones, a finding that is reflected in the fact that “A” students don’t necessarily perform better in their careers than their peers.

Ron Berger is an educator who has successfully facilitated rethinking and a more open way of learning with his students. To teach his students about the joy of discovery, Berger starts a school year with what he calls “grapples,” or problems that the students work through in phases. “The approach was think-pair-share: the kids started individually, updated their ideas in small groups, and then presented their thoughts to the rest of the class, arriving at solutions together.”

While it’s tempting to give into the urge to swoop in and help students when they’re lost or confused, research shows that the better approach for teachers is to respond with curiosity and interest, allowing students to work through their own confusion. It is also important for students to be encouraged to rethink and rework, as well as gain constructive input and criticism from others.

At its best, education should be less about the simple act of acquiring information and more about developing the habits that enable us to continue learning for the rest of our lives.

10

CHAPTER TEN

THAT'S NOT THE WAY WE'VE ALWAYS DONE IT: BUILDING CULTURES OF LEARNING AT WORK

This chapter explores the importance of collective rethinking. It can be critical, as evidenced by a NASA example in which collective overconfidence nearly led to the drowning of an astronaut. There are ways to facilitate collective rethinking. The key is to establish a learning culture, “where growth is the core value and rethinking cycles are routine. In learning cultures, the norm is for people to know what they don’t know, doubt their existing practices, and stay curious about new routines to try out.” Research suggests that organizations with learning cultures foster more innovation and make fewer mistakes.

How can you to build a learning culture? One crucial component is psychological safety. Create psychological safety by “fostering a climate of respect, trust, and openness in which people can raise concerns and suggestions without fear of reprisal.” This can also be key as far as avoiding errors is concerned, as people feel safe to admit mistakes and are less likely to repeat them moving forward.

The opposite is performance culture. An emphasis on performance leads people to worry about the safety of their careers. They are therefore more likely to hold their tongues due to the pressure to conform.

Asking “How do you know?” questions is an effective way to ensure that an organization remains a learning culture and not a performance culture. These questions are effective because they are inherently nonjudgmental, making it more likely that individuals will feel comfortable answering honestly.

Grant draws on evidence to propose a number of other ways to help establish psychological safety. First, he concedes that changing an entire organization's culture may not be feasible, but changing a team's culture should be. He then calls for managers to model characteristics of psychological safety, like openness and inclusiveness, by doing things such as asking for feedback and normalizing vulnerability. Managers should also admit their own imperfections by sharing personal experiences of receiving feedback.

He acknowledges that this can feel disingenuous at first, and some may be skeptical of their manager's real motives; however, he suggests that this will change over time if managers show consistent humility and curiosity.

Leaders can also lessen the "power distance" between them and the employees in their organization by publicly acknowledging their own shortcomings and criticism they've received. In one such instance, Grant worked with leaders at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to do a version of "Mean Tweets"—where executives read aloud the criticism they'd received in staff surveys—an exercise that proved incredibly successful. Although, Grant adds the caveat that sharing imperfections is only effective if we've already established our own competence.

Psychological safety or a change in mindset may be necessary, but they are not sufficient to shift to a learning culture. The right kind of accountability is also essential: "one that leads people to think again about the best practices in their workplaces." Accountability to outcomes means that people are so focused on the results that they fall back on best practices, rather than question whether they are pursuing the right approach.

"Exclusively praising and rewarding results is dangerous because it breeds overconfidence in poor strategies, incentivizing people to keep doing things the way they've always done them. It isn't until a high-stakes decision goes horribly wrong that people pause to reexamine their practices."

Process accountability, on the other hand, requires evaluating how well various options are considered when making a decision. Those involved must be prepared to explain the “whys” and “hows” as the decisions are being made. Another key component of process accountability is decision authority. Grant observes that rethinking is more likely to take place when the “initial decision makers” and the “later decision evaluators” are different people.

Process accountability and psychological safety must be used in tandem. With only the former, people don't feel comfortable speaking up. With only the latter, people may stay in their comfort zones. The two combined create a “learning zone.”

PART

IV

CONCLUSION

11

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ESCAPING TUNNEL VISION: RECONSIDERING OUR BEST-LAID CAREER AND LIFE PLANS

As humans, we all have preconceived notions of what we think will make us happy and who we want to be. Yet while these thoughts can help us set goals, they can also give us tunnel vision, preventing us from seeing other possibilities.

“When we dedicate ourselves to a plan and it isn’t going as we hoped, our first instinct isn’t usually to rethink it. Instead, we tend to double down and sink more resources in the plan.” This is known as “escalation of commitment.” While sunk costs are a factor in escalation of commitment, what is more frequently at play is a psychological rationalization or justification of what we’ve decided. This, Grant notes, can be the dark side of grit: “There’s a fine line between heroic persistence and foolish stubbornness.”

Another related issue is identity foreclosure. Identity foreclosure often starts when kids are asked what they want to be when they grow up. “Pondering that question can foster a fixed mindset about work and self.” They may fall prey to too quickly choosing one path or identity, preventing them from considering alternative paths. One way to stop this from happening is to frame careers as actions rather than identities.

Identity foreclosure can prevent us from evolving; we can latch onto careers or even relationships that aren’t right for us and thereby create our own unhappiness. “In some ways, identity foreclosure is the opposite of an identity crisis: instead of accepting uncertainty about who we want to become, we develop compensatory conviction and plunge head over heels into a career path.”

Identity foreclosure can result from falling into the trap of the politician, preacher or prosecutor modes. You may be seeking approval (politician), seeing your job as a sacred cause (preacher) or making accusations about the motives of the career choices of others (prosecutor). It can obscure uncertainties, and by the time you realize a career isn't a fit, it can make you feel like it's too late to pivot.

For those who are willing to consider alternate paths, Grant pulls from a framework devised by Herminia Ibarra. She recommends beginning by “entertain[ing] possible selves,” thinking about people and jobs that interest you and looking at what they actually do. Then formulate a hypothesis about how these options dovetail with your own interests, skills and values. Finally, test: Try out these paths via informational interviews, job shadowing and sample projects. This same scientific process and the concept of a “checkup” can be applied to many areas of life.

There are several other considerations to keep in mind when making decisions about your career. Seeking a job that will make you happy is not actually likely to do just that, as being too focused on happiness can take you away from actually experiencing it. Grant recommends looking for meaning—or jobs where we might learn or contribute—rather than happiness. Research shows that we are more likely to develop a passion than to discover it.

Reframing is also essential. We tend to look for easy solutions to our problems, such as changing jobs or moving cities. But that won't fix it. “Our happiness often depends more on what we do than where we are. It's our actions—not our surroundings—that bring us meaning and belonging.”

Careers, relationships and communities are open systems. Open systems “are governed by at least two key principles: there are always multiple paths to the same end (equifinality), and the same starting point can be a path to many different ends (multifinality).” In other words, it's important to remember that there are multiple paths to happiness, and that we shouldn't get hung up on one.

Furthermore, this doesn't mean that we have to upend some element of our life in order to rethink. Rethinking isn't just about making a career change or a geographic move. We can also make small adjustments. Job crafting, for example, looks at making small changes to your day-to-day actions that better align with your values, interests and skills.

“It takes humility to reconsider our past commitments, doubt to question our present decisions, and curiosity to reimagine our future plans. What we discover along the way can free us from the shackles of our familiar surroundings and our former selves. Rethinking liberates us to do more than update our knowledge and opinions—it's a tool for leading a more fulfilling life.”

EPILOGUE

The epilogue provides an illustration of Grant's own rethinking, demonstrating areas that he rewrote, amended or even deleted in the process of drafting the book. He also revisits a couple of areas from the book.

He highlights that while the book proposes thinking like a scientist when rethinking our own views, there are instances in which preaching, politicking and prosecuting can be useful. When it comes to opening other's minds, Grant notes that preaching can be effective when the other person is already receptive to our point of view or isn't overly invested in the issue. Prosecuting can be effective for audiences that aren't particularly focused on being in control.

He adds that, while "simplicity can persuade our own political tribe," the COVID-19 pandemic gave him an opportunity to think more deeply about how leaders communicate. He concluded: "Making a political case might rally the base around shared goals."

"It's easy to see the appeal of a confident leader who offers a clear vision, a strong plan, and a definitive forecast for the future. But in times of crisis as well as times of prosperity, what we need more is a leader who accepts uncertainty, acknowledges mistakes, learns from others, and rethinks plans." We need leaders who communicate confident humility.

ACTIONS FOR IMPACT

Grant offers 30 practical takeaways for improving your rethinking skills.

I. INDIVIDUAL RETHINKING

A. Develop the habit of thinking again.

- Think like a scientist.
- Define your identity in terms of values, not opinions.
- Seek out information that goes against your views.

B. Calibrate your confidence.

- Beware of getting stranded at the summit of Mount Stupid.
- Harness the benefits of doubt.
- Embrace the joy of being wrong.

C. Invite others to question your thinking.

- Learn something new from each person you meet.
- Build a challenge network, not just a support network.
- Don't shy away from constructive conflict.

II. INTERPERSONAL RETHINKING

A. Ask better questions.

- Practice the art of persuasive listening.
- Question “how” rather than “why.”
- Ask, “What evidence would change your mind?”
- Ask how people originally formed an opinion.

B. Approach disagreements as dances, not battles.

- Acknowledge common ground.
- Remember that less is often more.
- Reinforce freedom of choice.
- Have a conversation about the conversation.

III. COLLECTIVE RETHINKING

A. Have more nuanced conversations.

- Complexify contentious topics.
- Don't shy away from caveats and contingencies.
- Expand your emotional range.

B. Teach kids to think again.

- Have a weekly myth-busting discussion at dinner.
- Invite kids to do multiple drafts and seek feedback from others.
- Stop asking kids what they want to be when they grow up.

C. Create learning organizations.

- Abandon best practices.
- Establish psychological safety.
- Keep a rethinking scorecard.

D. Stay open to rethinking your future.

- Throw out the 10-year plan.
- Rethink your actions, not just your surroundings.
- Schedule a life checkup.
- Make time to think again.

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