

# **Solving Problems**



**The Way of the Breakthrough**

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## Solving Problems

Whether you know CEOs, MBAs, or other people with impressive letters, we all have a human brain that functions similarly in the face of a problem. Those who are better at solving problems possess more effective techniques and have access to more resources, including timely and accurate information.

These are techniques anyone can use to enhance their ability to make the world appear as though it functions effortlessly for them. The ability to solve problems enables turning challenges into opportunities before they become apparent to others. Before long, you have more resources and are spiraling your way up in life.

Failure to recognize that you are facing a problem, even when it is staring you and everyone you know in the face, can be your most significant barrier to progress. Some challenges ebb and flow with time, like the bullying boss who finally gets fired. There are tactics to deal with bullies. However, genuine problems persist.

Denial works until it doesn't. Sometimes, we deny the problem because we have no idea what we'd do about it if we did. But when you trust your ability to solve problems, suddenly, you draw new boundaries and identify things that you refuse to continue tolerating. Sometimes, when you realize you have the power to do something about it, it is the moment you know it was always a problem.

When we accept a problem and decide to do something about it, we often opt for the first idea instead of the best one. Maybe not the first, but the most recommended, the loudest, the one everyone else would do, again, instead of the best idea. You need to learn how to compare the incomparable and decide for yourself what is the best.

### The Plight of Lee Holloway

For Lee Holloway, a solution that wasn't the best cost him his career, relationships, and health.

Holloway demonstrated an early talent for complex conceptual architecture. He could visualize video games, chess, and, later, computer coding and architecture. Holloway became the technical leg in the trio that started Cloudflare.

Slowly, his behaviour in meetings started changing, so the two other co-founders put him on a formal performance improvement plan, to which he replied, "I'll do better." His wife noticed him slowly withdrawing as well, and their relationship ended in divorce.

By the time his second wife was experiencing his withdrawal from their relationship and that of their newborn child, she insisted on an MRI. The MRI scans revealed large, dark masses of emptiness where normal brain tissue should have been.

In hindsight, it became apparent that his behaviour was a health issue, not one of attitude or consciousness. Instead of reacting with curiosity and inquiry, the people close to him chose judgment and reprimand. Why?

Using the best practices did not help in dealing with the problem. Doesn't that mean the best practices need to be updated? There was no historical basis for his behaviour, nor a plausible turning point. Their theory lacked a cause, a critical component required to connect the problem, and the solution was utterly lacking.

Holloway's personality changes were from biological changes. The brain is an organ capable of disease and dysfunction, like any other, but our societal disposition is toward personal responsibility rather than biological pathogens.

We often automatically blame people for their behavior and hold them accountable for it. Yet, we know that the brain is a program that begins coding in an individual, unguided way from birth. However, the alternative cannot be freedom from accountability. As adults, we take responsibility for our actions, have the resources, and are the best people poised to intervene and solve problems.

For Holloway, the original personality was irretrievably lost when the biological changes were detected. Earlier detection might not have changed much, but this is what typical problem-solving looks like – biased, stigmatized, and full of wishful thinking informed by hindsight.

To solve problems effectively, you must systematically eliminate bias, stigmas and wishful thinking.

## 1. The Trick of Serenity

When faced with a problem, we rush into action. Issues aren't fun, and we want them gone as soon as possible, so we devise a solution and execute it. Our leaders prize action and efficiency, and whether those solutions were effective isn't really on anyone's radar – they are too busy dealing with the fallout, which isn't attributed as such.

We are praised for our quick responses. Everyone loves a firefighter. No matter how you load up on techniques, case studies, and facts proven to solve a problem, you can't do it if you don't recognize that you are dealing with one. Denial works, too. "What problem?"

But firefighting gets old and tiring. Customers become frustrated and leave, investors start to see the costs, and you become drained and exhausted.

## The Discomfort of Problems

It's discomfoting to have problems. It's a problem because it's discomfoting; it's discomfoting because it's a problem.

Problems are the things that concern you, that you don't yet see how you can influence. They certainly aren't in direct control, or you would have already done it.

Sometimes, it's the word 'problem' that's the problem. We think of problems as big things. We can describe them in more palatable terms, such as challenges, opportunities, or even difficulties. Use whatever word you want—issue, gap, shortfall, trouble, threat, pickle or dilemma. The very discomfort is what defines the situation as a problem.

That discomfort gives rise to self-defeating behaviour. We try not to see them, but we can be pretty successful. We run from potential pain without realizing why we are doing what we are doing. We seek energy-conserving strategies. We are blessed with the ability to explain away uncomfortable facts, thanks to the gift of cognitive dissonance. These behaviours aren't productive, but they can feel highly logical.

We must start recognizing these seemingly logical but irrational solutions to solve problems. Since we are adept at eliminating issues in ways that don't solve them, we need to acknowledge our self-defeating behavior.

One must progress in solving problems by reducing self-defeating behavior to become more productive. That behaviour is all about identifying a problem as such and then solving it.

### Confessions of a Black Belt

Once, I showed up to help a team for three consecutive weeks. The first week, I flew across the country to sit in a conference room by myself since everyone had called in sick. Well, that's a nasty bug; thanks for staying home. Unfortunately, I knew there was no such bug, so I had ample time to consider why people wouldn't attend.

By week three, I shook their hands and explained that if they knew their job, I knew mine, and it was a good thing we all relied on each other with zero overlap. We're all in this together, and I'm sorry that you don't yet know what I do. Stay tuned, and you'll see that telling you how to do your job isn't what mine is.

When consultants have a reputation for coming in and telling everyone what to do, people perceive them as bringing a perspective rooted in a loss of control. Additionally, a potential source of genuine pain is the added injury of expertise and credibility when the consultant doesn't understand your world.

It's no wonder it took them three weeks to show up and required my intervention. I wouldn't have shown up for a consultant to look down on me and proceed to tell me what to do either – if I'd been able to get away with it. Elsewhere, this kind of retaliation is invisible but present.

### Math Anxiety

Math was not my friend, to put it mildly. According to Shelia Tobias, math anxiety is prevalent. It is a feeling of tension that interferes with manipulating numbers.

According to cognitive neuroscientist Stanislas Dehaene, "innumeracy seems to be a part of our normal human condition." Innumeracy is the numerical equivalent of illiteracy. Math causes anxiety for the normal human brain because numbers are an evolutionarily recent and artificial concept used to understand the world rather than the world itself.

For instance, street children who are bartered and traded know math. They know it because it is integral to their daily existence, and the lessons were marked with emotion. Excitement lodges reward-based lessons just as fear lodges pain-based lessons.

I wasn't a street kid. I got an allowance, and I saved it. I learned early that power is having something that other people don't have. My siblings spent their allowances immediately, and for the rest of the week, I'd still be mentally entertaining what I could have done but didn't.

Learning lessons when you have a reason is simple. With reading, I wanted to go places by myself, which I wasn't allowed to do until I could read signs. Books promised a world of possibility, so learning to read was a natural step for me. On the other hand, I almost failed typing, and now I spend so much time doing it that I've worn out my keyboards.

With math, not so much. I couldn't stand it, and I still view it as a way to take the fun out of everything, to the point where it sounded like the definition of work and a career.

### *Lessons in Math*

I was scolded for turning subtraction signs into addition signs because I thought it was always easier to increase than to decrease. I still remember playing the school game "Around the World" in grade two. In this mathematical game, one student stands beside another student's desk. The teacher poses a mathematical statement. The first student to correctly repeat the question with the correct answer would move on.

I succeeded at this game not because I was good in math but because most kids are happy blurters. Instead of repeating the question first, they'd shout out the answer. I'd start by repeating the question and then steal the blurted-out answer. Thieving worked wonders while simultaneously complying with the order not to cheat off others.

Math anxiety was managed with an attack of volume. I did flashcards, memory work, and extra homework, even having older kids create homework for me and marking it.

When asked if I wanted to become a Black Belt, I knew enough about Six Sigma to realize it was named such a thing because it was heavily based on statistics. If there was a branch of math that I thought was the least straightforward and most challenging to comprehend, it was statistics. Permutations and combinations were what it was called in high school. Statistics for engineers was a required course in university, and now it was about to become my complete and total focus.

Fresh out of university, I was still under false impressions of who I was, what I wanted, and where I belonged. However, I also wouldn't be able to be here now to share what I learned with everyone who has similarly frozen in the face of numbers.

### *Humble Believability*

Every day, you make critical decisions that impact your life and the lives of those you love. One day, you, too, might be collecting data to inform strategic decisions that will impact hundreds of lives and cost millions of dollars.

We've read stories about people who did what was right, and that was rare enough to land in the news. Without having the data, it seems that each of them ends up saying, "Of course I would; anyone would." But it's the fact that their perspective is so beautifully pure that lands them in the news.

As adults, we discover that there is no statute of limitations on the truth. It comes out eventually. Increasingly, the ability to keep secrets is becoming obsolete. DNA testing is revealing truths about parentage that were previously hidden. Doctors know when you lie about your lifestyle, just as your dentist knows your flossing habits are more aspirational than factual.

At work, we don't leave our leadership skills at home, and as soon as we can afford to make better choices, we leave leaders who would wish that of us. If they want programmable hands, we are now in the age where they can help themselves find happiness without sacrificing their own.

It's impractical to rely on a top-down leadership model of governance. The pace and complexity demand leadership from within. It means knowing when your opinion isn't relevant and replacing it with a more informed, believable one. Humble, not headstrong, not always following your own opinion, but knowing whose opinion you should be hyper-focused on understanding.

### Premature Action

When we realize we have a problem, the immediate urge is to eliminate it. This temptation of crisis drives people into action – the knee-jerk kind. You've learned about this bias for action, and it's incredibly tempting when a situation arises.

In Steve Jobs's 2010 commencement speech at Stanford, he implored the graduates to live their lives. "Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma – which is living with the results of other people's thinking."

The long list of things you've been told you should be, do or have resulted from prior generations and ages. What does dogma sound like? It's the police. It's when people tell you what you should be doing, thinking or being. Society as a whole has a set of "shoulds." You should not kill people; you should pay your taxes, and you should mind the dandelions on your lawn to prevent their spread to the neighbours.

From the prominent moral doctrines to the small ways of being in the world, standards are adopted that become voices in our heads, documents in our government libraries, and textbooks in schools. Do not confuse dogma for truth or jump when everyone else tells you to.

Knee-jerk reaction solutions are standard and don't solve problems—they amplify them. We had three issues, whereas we had only one.

The original problem that we didn't solve remains in some untouched form. New problems are created by the interaction of what was there and what we introduced, as well as the ones we knew we'd be introducing and thought we could handle.

Like dandelions, with ill-fitting solutions, change becomes overwhelming.

### Overwhelming Change

Firefighting is so time-consuming, energy-draining, and attention-getting that there is no energy left to figure out how to avoid it next time. All solutions have two parts: the corrective and the preventative. Corrective actions are the immediate fixes, and preventive actions are the changes that must be made to ensure they never happen again.



When it comes to firefighting, we often overlook the preventative work; when we prioritize firefighting, we don't even think it's worth it. We think of the Maytag man not as a future to hope for but as dull, lonely and stale.

Preventative action is the work to end up like the Maytag man – toward a future that doesn't seem fun. The same problem occurs repeatedly, but it's okay because we've practiced what to do when crisis mode hits. Hopefully, it will happen when something boring on the agenda is dull.

All these pain-avoidance behaviours accumulate to create many false starts. When discussing self-destructive behaviour, we want to avoid these false starts. They make problems bigger while wasting and eroding our time, money, and confidence.

Applying the wrong solution is similar. Failure after failure, we try harder and harder until we are backed into a restricting corner and feel like we have no options left.

But is that the case, or have you exhausted your pain-avoidance strategies and moved on to energy-conserving ones, such as waiting for the magical day?

### *Waiting for the Epiphany*

Your current comfort helps you ignore impending problems. We do this when we forget that winter is coming when we're lounging in our backyards. Instead of saving for retirement, we spend money on things we don't need now. We don't have wills, although there are only three truths in life: birth, death and taxes.

Sometimes, we know we need to change, and yet we wait until that last-chance moment when we have to change or else. When we think an epiphany will one day change our lives, we fail to act. Perhaps you believe that once you possess a specific piece of information, all the other pieces will fall into place, and change will be easy and miraculous.

That's not the case. There are no shortcuts here. That's what makes it a problem. Solutions aren't always obvious, and issues require effort to resolve. When you aren't ready to accept that, you wait for the epiphany.

Sometimes, we must go through the same experience repeatedly. Although the same undesirable outcome occurs every time, we fail to recognize it as a problem and take the necessary action. We act like it won't happen again and then get upset when it does. If it sounds mythical, it's Einstein's definition of insanity – doing the same thing repeatedly and expecting a different result.

When predicting the future, it's human nature to overlook the present.

Think about what you'd like to have for dinner. If you do this immediately after finishing a big breakfast, you will have difficulty with the idea of being hungry. Luckily, meals are an ingrained habit, so we don't often find ourselves surprised with the onset of hunger. Many people haven't felt the genuine feeling of hunger in a long time; others live with it constantly.

## *Revelling in the Spotlight*

Another reason we fail to solve problems is the joy of having a problem to brag about. Yes, I said, bragging, as if telling other people with the intent of building up our self-importance. Words are spoken that sound like complaining, but no action is taken, and no information is sought.

This includes first-world problems, such as being fortunate enough to have the problem. Those should be obvious. It also includes things that sound like genuine problems, such as how I will get out of this unsatisfactory or abusive situation.

One of our basic human needs is significance—feeling important in some way compared to other people. Unfortunately, some fill that need with a unique, unsolvable problem.

After all, if it were solved, we'd lose our sense of being unique. As adults, we often hold on to past hurts because they help us explain away any failure to live up to our potential.

Yet, other people go through the same experiences and can emerge better for it. It's called post-traumatic growth, and it's always an option. You can replace a feeling of significance from the event with a sense of importance from a self-authored story. You've already learned about the power of a self-authored story. In *Secret Number Four*, you can create whatever ending you want. The world needs the solution you can offer.

Problems are changes you can control. Solving them creates happiness. Dissatisfaction should start to sound like joy to your ears.

## *No Action*

Some leaders say, "Don't come to me with a problem unless you have a solution." This statement can backfire, leaving problems undiscussed and unaddressed while the opportunities they present evaporate.

The hardest part of problem-solving is merely recognizing it as such, whether it's small and early or as it grows more significant over time. It's different and not always easier when you can no longer tiptoe around it. When that happens, you'll have all kinds of help and advice that isn't genuine and none of the people who genuinely can. It's messy chaos, and that's the essence of buffet-style problem-solving.

Solving a problem requires embracing ambiguity. You must accept that you don't know where your problem-solving journey will take you. It's much easier to do nothing and declare, "What problem?"

## *An Aversion to Ambiguity*

Think of problem-solving like driving through a snowstorm. You can hardly see in front of you, and it's never a straight line from problem to solution. You must trust and relax in your abilities, tools, and commitment.

That's when you get to hold the wheel and go alone. When you are on a team facing ambiguity, there are back-seat drivers, pouters holding critical information, and many hands clamouring for the wheel. On a team, embracing the facts and accepting that you must solve a problem rather than simply

applying a tried-and-true tactic can be daunting. Problem-solving is for individuals who know how to ask experts for specific help.

We have a natural aversion to ambiguity. Ambiguity means the odds are not clear. The future is not laid out. As a survival-driven being, ambiguity means threats can creep up on you. Instead, we lean toward clarity. We pick odds we know over foggy ones even when the odds are worse. It serves our desires for control, action and energy conservation.

Managers are problem solvers, and one thing that can be said about your problems is that they are as different and unique as cobwebs. So how can there be one way to get out of the tangle they cause? The shortcuts paradoxically cause the tangle your brain takes to navigate daily life.

Without them, you'd be paralyzed with information overload, but with them around, knee-deep in problem-solving mode, you can repeatedly find yourself knee-deep in the same problems. Sometimes, they are morphed and masked, but under the surface, nothing has changed.

### *All Out of Answers*

You have a real life, carrying on, with its deadlines, relationships, and bills, and you have to decide what to notice and pry into deeply and what to ignore. The buckets of work, relationships, health, finances and other divisions you make aren't that clean, and the essential things might get lost in the crumbs.

The day finally comes when the truth is unavoidable and unexplainable. Sometimes, they call rock bottom these days, and sometimes, it's the day you get a wake-up call.

Suppose that's where you are, no fear. Game researchers have discovered that the brain likes failure as long as there is a chance to try again. You are finally ready for real solutions when you've exhausted all your options. This is your chance to try again.

It's problem-solving when our businesses, ventures, or ambitions need funding, and we have two dimes to rub together. There is no denying the need, the immediacy, and the passion for action in identifying barriers, creating new alternatives, and determining what to keep doing and what to drop.

It's the thick of problem-solving, and while we might lose our way a few times, it's a forgivable arena, and all are rarely lost at any moment. You might need new insight, a fresh perspective, or a different tool, but this problem-solving is like not having enough plates and cutlery at the buffet. Sooner or later, you will dig, and your bellies will fill.

It's also problem-solving when your friends, family and colleagues aren't acting in alignment with what you've come to expect from them. Sure, you can say, "Hey, I noticed, shape up." You can also say, "This isn't like you; how can I help?"

No one wants to be part of the problem. Still, everyone has a full plate and is capable of standing behind such truths as not wanting to pry, respecting your privacy, and being loyal to our history by giving you a wide berth before speaking out.

## *The Root of Satisfaction*

Being able to solve problems is the root of satisfaction. When life savings can be lost overnight, earthquakes, disease and violence claim more lives, and stuff fails to fulfill, we are asking more significant questions. What is it for?

Increasingly, people are looking for meaning. We seek clues for an easier way to live or a purpose that makes it worthwhile. Failing to find answers, we resort to behaviors that make us feel better, even if we know we will later regret the bag of cookies, the bottle of whiskey, or the spending spree.

We are human, whether we are at home or work. We have personal and professional goals, as well as various ways of defining profit, which extend far beyond the simplicity of a balance sheet. Closing this gap involves overcoming the traps of human nature, as it is the irony of human nature that avoiding change, conflict and risk in the illusion of a comfort zone leads away from the actual, real and achievable zone of comfort.

You can make a difference. Individuals who believe in their ability to do so might be the only reason behind progress; that's precisely what leading change is all about – making decisions which will create a difference.

Struggling through a problem and accomplishing something of importance to you does lead to long-term satisfaction. More than satisfaction. The pleasure is in the internal feeling, the external result, and the knowledge that you can do it again. There's nothing like building up belief in a process and the skill to execute it that gives you the confidence to tackle anything.

You will be open to hearing about problems, complaints and other things that aren't working. Listen, ask many questions, and let the issues unfold in their full glory.

## *The Clarity of a Process*

The clarity you are looking for is the clarity of the process to follow.

The difference between being busy and making progress is the scientific method. Scientists rely on the scientific method, the highest current bar for knowing where to go when you don't know where you will end up, can't see very far in front of you, and know there will be some treacherous curves. The scientific method is like a GPS for problem-solving.

Science is associated with rationality, impartiality, fairness and, ultimately, the pursuit of truth. Just thinking about science triggers moral behaviour. After people are primed with science-related thoughts, they are more likely to adhere to ethical norms and help strangers<sup>1</sup>.

Science is not the affirmation of a set of beliefs but a process of inquiry that builds a testable body of knowledge, constantly open to rejection or confirmation.

## *Define the Problem*

Step one is defining the problem. Einstein said, "If I were given one hour to save the planet, I would spend 59 minutes defining the problem and one minute resolving it."

It's a question that exposes hyper-efficiency and change for the sake of change. When doing anything, ask yourself, "What problem am I trying to solve?"

We define the problem by defining the requirements of the solution.

The power of stopping to define what problem you are solving comes from the discussion; it forces a team to agree and clarify the solution's requirements – not the solution itself, but the size, scope, and nature of the problem.

If you think of your business as a puzzle, the problem is the white space where a piece is missing, and the solution is that piece. Like puzzle building, you must know what you are looking for to find the piece that belongs. Trying every piece takes a long time; we call experimentation one factor at a time. Jamming pieces that don't fit must be removed later; we will refer to that as a rework.

Not only does defining the problem eliminate hyper-efficiency, but it also accelerates teamwork. It's a test of the team's makeup – missing stakeholders and subject matter experts will be apparent, and silence from others will indicate they don't need to be there and should be dismissed. The forming and storming stages of team performance are passed through quickly until the team starts norming around the problem they will solve.

Let go of all attachment to activity. Focus on what needs to be accurate in the future without specifying how to achieve it.

### *Going Against the Grain*

Your negative emotions might be the most unappreciated source of your power. Don't push them away or try to avoid them – you can't, and trying to will only hurt you, even if you can't see the cause and effect. Instead, tap into their power.

When you read the title of some books, you feel like you've just learned everything in the book, and there's no point in reading it because you're convinced. The books I love are the ones that I follow right to the last word.

In **BRAVING THE WILDERNESS**, it was the first time a dedication struck me with insight.

I'd already listened to the whole book, but I got the print version because sometimes my eyes must see what my ears know. The dedication said it all. "To my father: Thank you for insisting that I always speak up and take a stand- even when you passionately disagree."

It was the opposite in my family: "If you don't have something nice to say, don't say anything at all."

That advice is a killer.

Suppressing anger has been linked to breast cancer, prostate cancer, and others. When you bottle it up and shove it down, it doesn't disappear. It festers. Acting inauthentically carries its costs in emotional pain and suffering.

Brené Brown advises speaking truth to bullshit. Life-changing advice is a problem, as far too many people are way out of practice. I know I was. Passionate disagreement isn't venting or spraying your negative emotions where they don't belong.

People know their words have immense power in passionate disagreement, but where do they go to tame and hone it? If you've noticed, you can't simply click a dislike button; you must craft your argument.

### *Unleashing the Superpower*

Growth is excellent, and it doesn't happen when we pretend everything is okay and avoid negative emotions and the people feeling them. Take a stand, especially when you passionately disagree.

Everyone craves significance, and some people find it through the attack. Somewhere after staying silent for the benefit of everyone else while you are dying inside, and somewhere before passionate disagreement, lies the attack. It's the moment the potential hero realizes the raw power within him. First, you recognize that this is not okay. That alone is massive!

In movies, when the hero discovers they possess an incredible superpower, they also quickly realize they must learn how to control it. They go somewhere safe, cause a lot of destruction, and then return with a new level of confidence and a mission to put it to work.

As a woman, I've endured because I was taught it's more important to fit in, get along, and keep the peace. To be a nice girl. I had to hear Tony Robbins say, "Fuck peace."

Peace is not something you keep; it's something you create. It's what happens when you confront people with the negative consequences of their actions. Sometimes, they take accountability and make amends or rectify the situation. But it also happens when you give people a chance to do that, and they decide to shirk and run. Remember, when they do that, it's not a reflection on you – that's all them.

As an instructor, I always tell my students that if they have a question, they should ask it because someone else likely has the same question. When it makes logical sense to you, it might be rational.

### *Feeling the Resistance*

When I passionately disagree with something, my body knows it. It's pure, raw energy. If I try to write in this state, my handwriting is unrecognizable. Typing in this state produces a staccato that scares my cat.

You can't go from being all merry sunshine to leading a revolution overnight, so how do you start to hone your skills of passionate disagreement?

Not only can you journal to discover the bees in your bonnet, but writers often complain about the problem of blank pages. Blank pages result from trying to fit in and keep the peace. In your journal, you can disagree without consequences.

Bring out that raw energy if you want to juice up your workout. It's a semi-safe place to practice because there's a constructive outlet for that energy. While you process mentally, you are also reconnecting your mind and body. If you're anything like me, faking compliance requires separation between what you feel and what you do, and that's a draining way to live.

Therapists can help. They aren't the same, so find one with similar values and an approach that works for you. Think of them as a professional friend – they will actively listen, tell you the truths you need to

hear, and provide you with the right tools. It might be the first time you've felt what it's like to have someone truly listen to you.

As a painter, I've completed many works that I had no idea where they were going or what they were about. But now, before me, is a conceptual representation of something I didn't realize was happening in my mind. It's not about the product; it's about the process.

## Find the Problem Boundaries

Problems can be bounded by impact, extent, duration and symptoms.

Symptoms are the signs of the problem. These are the things we mistake as the problem itself, but when we apply what should be solutions, they don't work. The real issue is not the one on the surface but something else that causes these surface problems to appear.

Impact is how you know it's a problem. It's causing damage or limitation. Customers are complaining, order delivery is threatened, or profits are disappearing. In business, the correct issues are economic. They cause waste or variation. Who is affected and how?

Extent is how far-reaching it goes. Does it affect a single plant or a specific product line? To get to the root of the issue, you need to identify where all the symptoms are appearing.

Duration refers to the length of time that has elapsed. There's a difference between when it started and when it was first detected, so be cautious with its date of birth. Not all symptoms might have started simultaneously, so a timeline of events might be most helpful.

## Enthusiastically Tuning In

About forty of us had to form a single line for the first snowmobiling ride of my life. At the head of the trail, I waited to go last. Not too long into this, I realized I'd made a grievous error. I was bored out of my mind. I don't like being out of my mind. I thought it was a perfect opportunity to try a new technique I'd read about: Change things by changing how you feel about them.

The rule I'd read: When you get enthusiastic, change happens.

I'd read that rule and remembered, oh yeah, the last time I got on top of the world, I got crazy happy, and the world turned, and I slipped down the slope and stopped at the bottom. That kind of change sucked.

Where are the gas and the brake on this enthusiasm thing? I settled into my ride with something to ponder. That's how I got enthusiastic about going slow and steady. And that's when change happens—in less than a minute.

I hit the brake. Was that what I think I saw? Sure was! An unopened can of beer. Not just any beer. Canadian, which happens to have a white label. Can you see white on white while in motion? Enthusiasm turned into even more enthusiasm. The ride was fun because I was now collecting beer and then racing to catch up. Yippie! It was like Easter just for me.

### *Accept What You Cannot Change.*

When I finally arrived at the rest area, a man realized he had lost his case of beer.

“This beer?” I asked, unzipping my coat and letting the cans land in the snow.

As the beer became a problem of distribution, rather than existence, the math revealed that four cans were missing. Well, I had nowhere else to put them. There is no trunk on a Skidoo.

The adults decided to send their four sons to fetch them. And waited.

I don’t have kids, but I was one. What would you do if you were a pre-teenage boy with a beer can that may or may not exist? People think that quantum physics and realities that don’t exist until you observe them are impossible to imagine. It goes like this: Four boys in the wilderness find a beer can. There might be three others. Who gets what and when?

Because one thing is not happening: obedience in bringing it back, expecting the future to be radically different from the one that is obviously in motion and about to manifest.

I wanted to see what happened, but I’d already read *Lord of the Flies*. I’m reasonably sure everyone had to read it for a reason. Down with competition and scarcity and the future they create.

See what’s coming. Accept it. Please do something about changing it. Or do something about not complaining about it when it happens.

### *A Future Already in Play*

Lounging in the sun on our skidoos a few miles away, I saw someone approaching me, like a javelin’s path. Not fast, and with some degree of chaos, but on a sure path to collide.

I gave it twenty minutes and twenty feet before I started my Skidoo and got out of the way. He thanked me, and I said, “No sweat.”

That’s what it is. It’s called riding, not fighting. You don’t fight it; you learn what flow means. What flow feels like. That’s what no sweat is all about. Because when you have miles of warning, shouldn’t you be able to move a couple of feet?

I like to be able to jump at a moment’s notice when Opportunity knocks. Other people have been booking coffee chats for two weeks now. In my experience, Opportunity isn’t that patient.

Behind the times is, literally. Check your agenda. Are you present? For all the advice in the world to be present, your agenda might be a strong indicator of where you are living.

I’ve talked with a few people who have been in immediate trauma situations. For instance, getting hit by a logging truck and living to talk about it. Of course, it took months to get to the point where they could say anything.

They say that time stretches out such that a few seconds feel like hours. Brain scientists agree and can explain why – you need the details to think about how to prevent this from happening again.



Do you know what you want? I highly recommend accepting reality with a dollop of enthusiasm as the way to get it.

### Let Go of the Answers

The brighter you think you are, the more irrational behavior you may be likely to demonstrate. Don't worry; you won't notice, and we all know it's not polite to point it out to you. You can decide for yourself because that's precisely what you do: create your irrational behavior.

When I teach this problem-solving process, I ask learners to write down what they would do to solve the problem if they were allowed to proceed as they typically would. We seal those solutions and open them four weeks after they've learned the tools and techniques.

Every time, learners say in some form, "I'm so glad I didn't do that – I would have caused more problems than I solved." Although it may appear to be slow progress initially, the time invested upfront is more than repaid.

### The Convincing Data

I was no longer permitted to do analysis; I was given directives to produce infographics. "Does the survey indicate these findings?" I'd ask. They'd shrug.

Instead of being asked to find the root cause of a problem, I'd be asked to produce specific proof to justify action plans. I could no longer follow the data where it led; I had to remain within the walls of a department, the scope of a project, and the limits of who I was allowed to talk to. Sometimes, in tiny print at the bottom corner of a slide filled with tables and graphs, the words "for illustration only" would appear.

Getting data to speak is powerful, but first, you must want to hear what it has to say. We applaud leaders for listening to their customers because it's a rare thing to do. Why is it that when leaders are supposed to do what is profitable, listening to customers is also profitable? We want to work for leaders who listen to their employees, and again, this is rare, remarkable, yet profitable. These are proven practices that aren't being followed. These are people who have voices, rights and passions.

Data doesn't. Data is easy to ignore, abuse and malign. It takes a lot of work to unleash the power of data, and it begins with setting aside your own opinion. As that young Black Belt, I was lucky to be free of opinions. I had to learn the tools because I had no other easy option.

### The Default Options

Cognitive biases are straightforward options. They work seamlessly and effortlessly and are widely accepted due to the universality of their experience. As human beings, no one is free of them. Being fundamentally irrational is a unifying human condition. Those irrationalities include using data to further your ability to control your future. It's also human to not realize that those irrationalities aren't working to produce the future you intended.

We are increasingly equipped with more powerful tools and larger datasets. While it's possible to see the benefits in this and capitalize on them, it's more likely that they will be used for infographics rather than analysis, agendas rather than progress, and proof rather than problem-solving.

We still need quality of thought and won't get there without first accepting and embracing the perfectly imperfect human way we think and behave. It's not logical or rational, and I've seen it play out before me with some of the most intelligent people you'll ever meet who have earned prestigious degrees.

### *The Hardest Admission*

The more intelligent someone seems to think they are, the less convinced they are that they have a human brain and that it might function just like every other one known to science. They believe they are rational. They are conscious of their thinking and weigh options; therefore, they think they are not subject to irrationalities.

There's also a guy who still believes the world is flat.

Irrational behaviour touches every aspect of your life, large and small. It's not just the moments you chastise yourself for a dumb comment or maneuver. Irrationality colours your plans for tomorrow and ten years from now. It's in your relationships, conflicts, hopes, and goals.

The good news is that rationality can be learned. Becoming a Six Sigma Black Belt didn't teach me that; it gave me more powerful tools. The most potent tool I already had was knowing I didn't have all the answers. But I can find them. Knowing you can figure anything out is the gift of rationality, and relinquishing your ego from the driver's seat is the first step. After all, you can't learn anything if you already think you know everything. How easily can you say, "I don't know"?

### *The Enabling Perspective*

Your brain is your most valuable asset as a knowledge worker. Do you know how your brain works?

If you want to work smarter, better, faster, you need to know how your brain works. As a manager, you can help your people be more productive. Leaders who understand this can make better decisions, dream bigger visions, and avoid expensive disasters.

It works the same as everyone else around you, and when you understand these basic five things, people start to make sense. Your teams will be stronger, your relationships will improve, and two heads will finally be better than one.

### *Programmed for Survival*

Although your reality differs from when we lived in caves, your brain is the same as theirs. According to author John Medina, "The brain appears to be designed to solve problems related to surviving in an unstable outdoor environment and to do so in nearly constant motion."

In the days of troglodytes, being thrown out of the group meant certain death. These days, for employees, the vast majority of whom are living pay to pay, getting fired is the financial equivalent. For both, this means we are wired to be prosocial. That is, to protect relationships and their opinion of us.

In the famous Asch experiments, subjects were asked to answer simple questions with obvious answers in the presence of others and after others had responded.

When the others all gave the same but incorrect answer, the subject followed suit an alarming 38 percent of the time. Throughout 12 trials, 3 out of 4 participants yielded to the majority at least once.

Afterwards, subjects estimated that they changed their answer by only a tiny fraction of the amount they had. Brain scans now reveal that when people conform to group expectations, they actually change their minds, rather than simply going along for the sake of conformity.

Creating a safe, trusting, and supportive environment as a leader will eliminate the toxicity generated by perception management, the productivity loss caused by fear, and the attrition resulting from immoral behavior.

### *Decisions are Emotional*

Why would people not be aware of how much their answers have changed? Decisions aren't taking place in your conscious as you weigh the pros against the cons.

Instead, we take shortcuts. In 2002, Daniel Kahneman won a Nobel Prize for his work with Amos Tversky. The exciting thing about this prize is that these two are psychologists, and the reward was in economics. Why the crossover? Traditional economics is founded on the idea that humans are rational actors. We understand cause and effect and apply that knowledge to make informed decisions that lead to the best outcomes.

Tversky and Kahneman put that notion the way of the Dodo bird. We don't take rational analyses; we take shortcuts. Those shortcuts are called cognitive biases. As someone who thinks for a living, these should matter more to you than the degree or credentials that form the basis of your reputation. Why? The more of an expert you become, the more biases you accumulate.

Experts estimate that between 80% and 99% of all decisions are made unconsciously. They can measure that it takes up to seven seconds for you to become aware that you've made a decision. The decision begins with emotion, and then the brain creates a logical justification to reinforce it.

As a leader, you know to appeal to emotion with your messages and follow up with your logical argument. Maybe you are brave enough to learn how to make more evolved decisions.

### *Echo Chambers Are Everywhere*

As our brains work away, conforming to fit in, changing our minds, and altering our brains, we become inauthentic. We do what we think we should, and we were programmed to do so before we even knew what an identity was.

When you know you're trying to fit in instead of genuinely belonging, you rob the world of your strengths and likely suffer as a result. As Dr. A.J. Drenth writes, “We often feel bored, depressed, and restless because we are failing to function authentically by our personality type.”

Not everyone has regrets on their deathbed, but if they do, Bronnie Ware, a hospice nurse, published the most common five, and they were met with universal affirmation. The fourth is, “I wish I’d had the courage to express my true self.” The fifth is, “I wish I’d lived a life true to my dreams instead of what others expected of me.”

A life without regrets requires the courage to discover and follow your true path, doing what comes naturally and adding value to others. As a leader, you can help people into roles that better suit them, and the benefits will be reflected in the bottom line.

### *Beliefs Equal Reality*

In 2005, Dr. Lipton published **THE BIOLOGY OF BELIEF**. In 2013, Kelly McGonigal gave a TED Talk to apologize for telling people that stress is destructive, as it was based on the belief that stress is inherently harmful and that it's the killer—not stress itself, but the belief that it's terrible.

In 1947, Readers Digest published Henry Ford’s quote: “Whether you believe you can do a thing or not, you are right.”

Ford knew it, Lipton proved it, and at least McGonigal found out the truth and is spreading it as best she can. The truth will always set you free if you let it take hold of you.

Naysayers freak me out because they don’t realize they could as conveniently believe the opposite and have a much more enjoyable experience and a better outcome. The nocebo effect is just as powerful as the placebo effect.

If a doctor tells you that you only have six months to live, and you believe him, you will drop dead on day 183.

As a leader, you can create optimism, hope, and self-efficacy. Tell them you believe they can do it, and they will prove you right.

### *Gifted with Consciousness*

Successful individuals possess a mindset that enables them to improve continually with perseverance. For all your best intentions to improve, human nature will often work against your efforts. Recognizing these tendencies will allow you to grow, innovate, and amplify your impact more quickly. Let’s clear your mindset about these tendencies.

Marissa Levin, founder and CEO of Successful Culture, says that after over 25 years of entrepreneurship through 3 companies, ideas rarely go as planned. She and her partner have just launched the Women’s CEO Roundtable. They have tweaked the program five times in the first four months. A failure? Hardly. It’s excellence in the making.

I remember interviewing for a job where I'd be reporting monthly metrics. The interviewer asked me how I felt about doing a repetitive task. I replied that it might look repetitive on the exterior, but I am always searching for ways to do things faster, better, and more efficiently. A constant drive to work smarter ensures that no job is ever repetitive.

I didn't get that job, and it wouldn't be the first or the last time leaders prefer a monotonous status quo over continually improving. I've seen it so often; I had to learn what was happening inside these great minds.

### *The Better Than Average Mindset*

We all think we are better than average- that is, except for depressed people.

Psychologists often laugh about this tendency, just as economists do about lottery tickets. However, the economist doesn't know the value of hope. A lottery ticket is not a financial purchase but an emotional one. Sometimes, the only way to get through them is by holding onto the hope of perhaps winning big in the Friday draw, no matter how unlikely.

For real people, when asked if they are better than average, they can easily find an instance when they were, so of course, they say yes. You aren't evaluating yourself holistically against everyone else in every dimension. Instead, I think that everyone is better than average at something. What's the barrier to improving the bias that is better than average? When it triggers another one, it is referred to as the halo effect.

When we think of the one thing we are rare and remarkable in, the evaluation spills over into other aspects of our lives, situations where we might be outstanding but not excellent. Seth Godin says "excellent" is the death trap of businesses. You want to be remarkable.

The way to be remarkable is to take the things you are terrific at and find someone who is even better. They might be more skilled, have more time to invest in it, or be hungrier than you are.

Delegate tasks you don't like to do because someone else's passion can take them to the next level. Outsource tasks you find boring or repetitive. Find and hire subject matter experts, whether you assign them the work, ask them to coach you, or enroll in one of their courses.

### *The Urge for Control*

Many leaders find delegation scary. We don't just think no one can do it as well as we did; we also worry that they might do it better than we did. It's not the outcomes that cause fear but the loss of control.

Control is the perceived ability to alter events significantly. In one study, participants had the option of one machine-delivered shock or two self-administered shocks. Shockingly, 35 percent chose the double dose.

In post-evaluations, we often underestimate our control over a situation. We underestimate our power when things don't work out and overestimate it when they do.

In the late seventies to early eighties, Ellen Langer and Judith Rodin examined the effect of choice and enhanced responsibility on older adults. One group was told they could arrange their furniture, go where they wanted, spend time with who they wanted, and so on. The second group was told the staff was there to care for and help them.

Eighteen months later, residents in the first group showed improved health. In the second group, a higher proportion had died.

Self-control is the healthiest expression of this need for a sense of control, but it's also the hardest. It's much easier to try to control other people. In an attempt to prioritize survival, the brain is reluctant to waste energy, so we tend to do what comes effortlessly.

As a leader, you can cultivate self-awareness, which in turn leads to greater self-control. You can ensure that you are only taking deliberate action. Give your people the freedom to do what you hired them to perform.

### *The Power of Denial*

We love our opinions, even more so when they've been shaken. If you've ever tried to play reverse psychology on someone, you've seen that heavy pressure can lead us to take the opposite stance.

Researchers have shown that after we've been rattled, we tend to persist longer in our point of view. Professors Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler write about the "backfire effect," in which corrections increase misperceptions among the group in question. The more ideological, the more entrenched.

Taking up the air so the other person can't speak is the move of a bully.

Whether we fail to see, willfully resist seeing or creatively invent ways to rationalize away what we do see, our capacity for self-deception is impressively scary.

It took science 104 years to accept the existence of bacteria in the stomach, despite thousands of witnesses and two years of work by the Barry Marshall and Robin Warren team, which is shaking the bedrock belief of medicine with proof. For 104 years, scientists had seen the bacteria, yet not seen it.

We have worked hard to build a reputation, not just in our career path and recognized accomplishments but also in the stories we tell ourselves and the descriptors we attribute to ourselves.

Some of these stories are so old and well-buried that we are unaware of their existence. They are feeding our decisions without our awareness. Confirmation bias refers to the tendency to seek out information that supports our existing beliefs, even when equal amounts of information are available.

If you are overwhelmed, stressed, drained, or exhausted, at least one thing is not working. You know it in your gut and heart, if not your head.

### *Fundamentally Irrational*

I was amazed when I learned about Mike Hughes and his mission to prove the earth is flat. Hundreds of years have passed, and there's only one guy left, I thought. However, I wasn't prepared for the extent of my misconception.

According to a new report, two-thirds of the population aged 18 to 24 isn't convinced. It isn't just millennials. More than 600 people paid \$250 to attend a flat earth conference. Gatineau, Quebec politician Nathalie Lemieux is "flat curious," according to her Facebook post, in which she asks who decided that the Earth is round and why we should believe it.

I was reminded of the George Bernard Shaw quote. "No question is so difficult to answer as to which the answer is obvious." In this series, astronomers who have collectively spent over 1,000 days in space share their observations and the science behind what makes our Earth precisely the way it is. If there was one takeaway, it was that we shared this one resource. We all have one home, and we all share it.

It's revealing that she thinks it's the product of someone's decision. If flat-earth believers don't understand how knowledge is generated, the problem is far worse.

There is no Dictator of Science who decides. You should believe it precisely because of the process and to the extent allowed by the inherent flaws of the process.

Going from a world of flat-earth believers to an accepted heliocentric view was no small feat. People had to defy the church, rise against power, and dare to disagree. Getting the word out to persuade people to agree with you or think for themselves and make their own decisions was a significant challenge. It took science to uncover the truth, and it took courage and bravery to share it.

### *Creative Explanations*

If you ask one of the flat-earth believers, all things can be easily explained away. The ability to creatively explain away facts and to believe what we want, despite evidence to the contrary, is hardwired. It's called confirmation bias.

Confirmation bias is our powerful tendency to find evidence that supports our beliefs or desires. The proof doesn't have to be accurate or solid, just self-soothing.

More than ever, in a world where fakery is prevalent and proof can be easily fabricated, knowing how to evaluate facts and evidence is the responsibility of every adult. Especially those in policy-making positions, those with the power to vote, and those with a voice and a platform.

However, in my experience, when I share information about irrationality, the more intelligent and powerful someone is, the less inclined they are to accept the facts.

Politicians need to get elected. Getting noticed helps, and since Lemieux's noteworthy remarks were posted, her name has been discussed more than ever. We can only hope that voters remember why they know her name. After all, where does a politician sit on climate change if they aren't convinced about the nature of our climate?

We also get our need for attention and significance by believing in something odd. We achieve our need for belonging by knowing we fit in. Humans are creative and often get what we need, but it is not always what we want.

Progress only happens when we accept that some fact we believe is no longer valid. A piece of information goes from a point to a false assumption. Whoops, we thought that was true, but it's not. That's the fluidity of knowledge.

### *Taken on Faith*

Compared to the model of the universe, the model of how our brains work is more complex to prove. Currently, there is no tangible evidence. There is science and evidence, but we are far from pointing at something physical and saying, “See that?” as the astronomers did.

Maybe one day, and then will it take five hundred years to convert enough people to make it the status quo? Converting society to an irrational model from the current rational one is a far higher order than converting it from a flat-earth to a heliocentric one. For all its untouchability, the earth is a tangible thing. Thoughts aren’t. Yet?

That is when students will learn in school about their irrational human behavior and what they are supposed to do instead of acting irrationally. When will we stop judging everyone but ourselves as stupid, lazy, self-interested and emotional?

Until the justice system punishes people for what caused a problem and, equally, for what they could have done to prevent it, perhaps when it punishes people for actions, rather than just for outcomes, it is because accepting that punishing someone for running through a stop sign will not deter others from doing the same is not adequate. It’s irrational punishment, irrational logic, and irrational retribution that do nothing to correct the damage nor prevent future recurrences and little to soothe the victims.

Perhaps the concept of justice shifts away from being solely about punishment. Instead, maybe it views the data as a means of continuous improvement for society and humankind. The long arc of history reveals this: the pursuit of equality has shown an increasing trend, accompanied by many high costs and personal sacrifices.

### *Meekly Humble*

The meek shall inherit the earth because it takes meekness to avoid being fooled into the illusion of rationality. They acknowledge their shortcomings and accept them as such.

The only way to progress is to assume that the current status quo isn’t working. It doesn’t offer a model that explains enough current observations to predict and manifest specific futures. It’s not excessive skepticism that leads you to reject even the model of a round Earth, but rather healthy testing of facts.

The model of rationality is precisely that. It is too brief to explain the current reality and doesn’t offer a reliable way to create better futures. But the model of rationality protects itself. The believers think they decide and behave according to their thoughts.

When things don’t work out, mistakes are made, but not by them. Untarnished by failure, unaided by new insights, they do it again. As Einstein said, it’s “insanity.”

The model of irrationality is distasteful, and no one said medicine is supposed to be tasty. That said, it’s medicine because it is what makes you better. You can’t improve anything without accepting it first.



## 2. The Inequality of Opinion

It's challenging to set aside our own opinions and adopt someone else's instead. It happened so often that the authors of **TUNE IN** developed a phrase they used regularly with CEOs and business leaders. "Your opinion, while highly interesting, is largely irrelevant."

Your own opinion can influence how you interpret what you hear, how you phrase questions to obtain the answers you want, and even justify ignoring what you know you've heard.

Policies are just another form of opinion. Sure, it's a documented opinion, but unthinkingly following it can get you in as much hot water as ignoring it altogether.

One CEO received internet accolades for supporting time off for one of his employees. When Madalyn Parker needed some time off to focus on her mental health, she sent an email stating that she would be taking two days towards that end.

Parker's CEO, Ben Congleton of Olark Live Chat Software, personally thanked her for doing that. Her story led to the sharing of more stories about people who had done similar things with less-than-desirable results. Those managers and CEOs who fired, threatened, or otherwise retaliated against employees stated that they were following policy. Notice that I did not refer to them as leaders.

Following authority and doing what you've just been told is a powerful force. Stanley Milgram tested the propensity to follow orders after the holocaust. Fifty years ago, compliance rates in his experiments requiring subjects to inflict lethal doses of electricity to participants they couldn't see shocked the world. Last year, Polish scientists demonstrated that we are still willing to harm others in the pursuit of obeying authority.

### The Customer

The customer is the one whose opinion matters the most. If you are swallowing your opinion in favor of that of your boss's, then your boss is your customer, even if the corporate culture says that the customer is number one.

Listening to what your customers want and expect of you typically exists at some point in the lifecycle of a business, but not necessarily at every stage. At one stage, you think you are too big to care, and at another, you genuinely are, as Mark Zuckerberg may experience.

When you are growing, competing, or facing threats, it becomes imperative to tune into the wants and desires of a cluster of consumers, as you have bills to pay and wealth to grow. When we have to do what doesn't come naturally, we need to do our research.

### Market Research

If you want their next dollar spent with you, you must learn how to make that happen. Market research is all about understanding the landscape of potential buyers and where else they might spend their money.

Research to gather data and test your assumptions and opinions, and listen for the facts.

A marketing expert recently told me that many think Coke's biggest competitor is Pepsi. Instead, it might be coffee or tea. Coke thinks of share of the throat – all the liquids you consume instead of Coke as their competition. People who care about one brand or another are typically stubborn. Instead of getting them to switch, you try to get them to think of Coke as a breakfast option, rather than coffee. Today, I'm a SodaStream convert for the good of the planet.

### *Understand the Customer*

When you understand the customer, you know the when, where, and why they raise their hand to say, "Yes, please!" You may have a product, need a volunteer, or require their expertise.

Retaining a current customer in every business is often less expensive than recruiting a new one.

You might think you know who your customers are because you see them every day. Perhaps you've created an avatar of your ideal client, but are they showing up as ready, willing, and able to make a purchase?

### *Understand the Feedback*

It seems every retail receipt comes with an opportunity to provide feedback. Does your receipt come with one? Do you follow up with a survey to determine if the purchase was made before service delivery?

As I've been in market research mode, learning who would care about the methodology I've created and how they'd want it, I attended numerous networking events. I didn't provide feedback on any of them. There are some that I went to once, and I will never return. The organizer will not know why.

When you decide to hire someone, it's essential to conduct thorough market research. Your customers are the potential candidates, and you need to know about them to win them over.

Keeping existing employees is an economic advantage over replacing them when they leave. So much so, investing in helping them improve is still better than letting them go – to a certain extent.

They say managers hire for skills and expertise and then fire for attitude. What if they added attitude to their hiring criteria? You will be more likely to hire without regret when you take the time to discover their personality during the interview process.

### *Your Worth*

What people are willing to pay you to do is one of the ways you are unique. There are things you are passionate about, and then there are things people would pay you to do. Not all the things that people would pay for are things you are passionate about. You might downright hate the work, even if it pays well, makes people look up to you and is in high demand.

When you do work you dislike, even if you're great at it, it will take a toll on you. Over the long term, you will burn out. In the short term, you may drown your frustrations and lack of fulfillment in various ways.

You might be the only one who knows how you release the pressure, but it's likely unhealthy, anything from food to finances.

With pay transparency on the horizon, your worth is no longer based solely on your past earnings. It's based on how you fit with the market. When you identify what you are uniquely good at that aligns with your values and passions, you will discover that your worth may be much higher than you previously thought. It's up to you what to charge, but you should know your worth.

## The Innovator

There are ways you are unique, and when you know these, you can become happier, wealthier and healthier. If you don't believe you are unique, this is the one post you need to read today.

Recently, I gave a talk in which I made a statement about everyone being unique. I thought it was a phrase I wouldn't have to defend until that's exactly what I was doing. When more than one audience member confronted me with the argument that they were not unique, I felt a kind of sadness I couldn't explain.

First, let me define uniqueness. Unique doesn't mean special. You are not special; everyone is unique, which makes you unmemorable. Special is better; unique is different in a singular way. You are different, but in a way that does not imply any ranking system or order—being unique means you are not interchangeable.

Unique means that how you approach a situation, think about an issue or solve a problem is distinct to you. One person said that a lawyer is a lawyer is a lawyer, but if that were a true belief, we wouldn't care about which one we hired. Instead, we care about their personalities and how they treat us; we might even care about who they know and what those people say about them, and we might investigate their track record and experience.

## Understand Yourself

Regarding self-awareness, we aren't as clear about our personalities, strengths, emotions, and beliefs as we think. Like the fish who asks, "What is water?" you don't know because it's always been there, and you take it for granted. You need other people to act as your mirror. The best way to get to know yourself is to meet different people.

One consultant I met told me how solid her brand was and how much she liked it. When she told me the name of her company, I immediately thought she was a sex therapist. I was utterly wrong, and even now, knowing what it is she does, whenever I hear the name, I have to kick my brain out of the sex therapist image. But I'm not her target market, so my opinion is largely irrelevant.

A hiring manager needs to understand their company's culture, but if they haven't worked elsewhere, they may struggle to describe it. Employees who align with the culture perform far better than those who try to fit in.

My financial advisor keeps telling me that my risk appetite is extreme. Imagine the amount of second-guessing and discomfort I experienced while working in insurance. By the very nature of their operations, insurance companies are risk-averse.

### *Your Strengths*

Your set of strengths is one of the ways you are unique. Strengths are the things you do with ease that you enjoy doing. You don't know these things because they come naturally to you.

You assume your strengths come just as quickly as everyone else's, and when you observe the contrary, you think you are dealing with someone mean, lazy, or unintelligent. Let me assure you; they are likely none of those things. They might even be better than average.

When you appreciate your strengths, you become humble and compassionate at the same time. You are a person people want to be around, someone they want to hire and do business with, not only because they know they are getting the best but because the emotional experience of dealing with you is better.

No one wants to do business with someone third-rate or worse at something. Even if you are great at it but don't appreciate your strengths, you risk talking down to prospects or engaging in negative selling. I've had people approach me and tell me how horrible my brand is, that my website is shameful, or that my LinkedIn profile is pathetic, and therefore, I should hire them to fix it. I will never do any such thing.

Sure, I will hire someone when it becomes a priority, but it will never be someone who makes me feel bad about it. When you appreciate your strengths, you can approach people you can help with the mindset of assistance rather than one of disgust.

### *Your Passions*

Your passions are the things you care about. Not everyone cares about the same things you do, and that's great because there are many things worth caring about enough to make a positive impact in this world; we need everyone to make a difference with the things they care about.

I am passionate about helping people feel like they are making the most of their potential contribution to life and the world. Not everyone cares about everyone else's ability to self-actualize; they only care about their own.

There is some bad advice about following your passion. I am saying that it should be one piece of the overall pie. It needs to intersect or overlap with everything else that matters, for instance, your strengths, as just mentioned. If you are great at it, like doing it, and are passionate about it, that is different from things you are passionate about – period.

I have things I'm passionate about, but I'm not exceptionally skilled at them, and no one seems to care if I am. Passion matters, but when that's all there is, you need to learn about the other essential ingredients that also matter, such as your worth.

## The Stakeholder

What question do you get asked repeatedly? People see you as the expert in that area if you are invited. It might have nothing to do with what you studied in school or something you would never have considered. If you resist going in that direction, ask yourself why you don't want to go there. Your pivot might make you much more money and make it easier to do things you love.

Just make sure to test the idea before you leap. A yes isn't a yes until you make a sale. There will always be lots of options. That's the way the world is becoming. However, you can't do all of them at once. You have to prioritize.

Prioritization becomes problematic when the choice isn't clear. When you know that time is money, it can be hard to focus on one thing for a period and see that it will pay off. To choose the priority that matters and have confidence that you made the right decision, you need to know you made the best possible decision.

## Understand Your Relationships

Candidates might be your customers, or you might be their customers. In every relationship, one person holds more power than the other. When there are more jobs than qualified candidates, the candidate has the power.

In our relationships, we want our friends to say "yes, please" when we ask them to come to our party. How about when you need something that doesn't sound like there's something in it for them?

We all have, or should have, people who will show up when we are at our worst. Those people show up for one reason: we would do it for them.

When we say we invest in relationships, that's precisely what we do. There's a concept of an emotional bank account. Credits are earned when others do kind things for us. Those credits pay for our missteps. Forgot to get your wife a birthday card? It's a good thing you brought her breakfast in bed when she was sick last week. Of course, over time, credits and debits aren't so granular.

Maya Angelou said that people will forget what you said and did, but they will remember how you made them feel. My customers are the people who make me feel good, and I try never to take that for granted. When you do, like a savvy customer, that person walks away. Maintain strong relationships by consistently striving to understand your customers.

## Your Values

The things you care about aren't the same as those of other people. Values are something you decide in a conference room or journal. They leak out in our emotions. It's another way you're unique.

When we get into a conflict with someone, there is a difference in values at the core. I often conflict with Lean leaders who have a command-and-control value system. They expect people to do what they are told and praise obedience. I have an enable and empower value system. This means that I expect people to think, be themselves and innovate.

I know I can't change someone's value system. There is enough evidence from numerous years to demonstrate the dramatic difference in success levels when employees are obedient versus when they are given the tools, time, and space to approach their work in the best way they see fit.

Like Mike Hughes, the 61-year-old limo driver who built a rocket to prove the Earth was flat in 2017, people hold firmly to their belief systems no matter the contrary evidence. My time is better spent on people who value enablement and empowerment and aren't sure how to achieve it.

When you know your values, you aren't wasting your time preaching to the choir of people who are already aligned with you and don't need what you have to offer because they already possess it. You aren't wasting your time with people you will never win with. Time is better spent with the people who need and want you and know it.

### *Your Community*

Your community knows how unique you are, including your worth. They see the price they are paying to solve the problem as it is currently being solved, and they know what price they will pay if they don't. Additionally, they understand the benefits they will gain from solving it.

You may not know these things, but the community that is the right fit for you is saying "Yes, please" when they hear your offer. It's much easier to sell something when you know that your service will genuinely help them in a way that leaves them significantly better off. When you know their return on investment is a step change, you have a more challenging time convincing someone it's right for them because you believe it.

We often hear people trying to convince us we will be much better off if we buy, yet we don't believe them. The truth isn't there in their face or voice. It's just a pitch that falls flat, and we don't buy into it.

When we understand our community, we can use their language, which feels like it's in our heads. We know their triggers so we can approach them at the right time. We know their problem, and with that knowledge, we know, not just think, that the solution is a perfect fit.

When you understand your strengths, the response to your sales pitch is "Yes, please." Better, they are telling their friends how they need you.

If you try to be everything to everyone and do everything, you will invest a lot of fruitless time talking to the wrong people, taking on work you don't like, and failing to secure repeat business because you did a job that left them unimpressed. Discover the ways you are unique, and your business will skyrocket.

One of the shortest and easiest words to say is also one of the hardest to say, yet it is one of the most powerful words you can utter. A positive no has the power to change something.

### *Your Knowledge*

If stupidity is bliss, and being better than average requires hard work, then genius is frustrating. Whether you are at the top of your learning, having forgotten what you know or cursed by knowledge, forgetting what life was like when you didn't know what you know now, your genius is invisible to you, but that doesn't mean it isn't there. You are a genius, and you are going to discover just how.

It isn't easy to know what we know and to get it out of our heads. There are ways to get that knowledge out so you can start working together to solve your client's problem. If your knowledge is hard to articulate, here are five ways to discover what you know.

When I developed a methodology for knowledge workers to achieve the same quality as they do in manufacturing, I called it The Genius Way. The creation of The Genius Way started with taking copious notes in meetings. There were no contextual notes about things relevant to my job, but rather the fights I was losing, the actions people justified that taught me how to mask my internal reaction, and the lies people told – whether they realized it or not.

When you have to write stuff down, you have to process what's going on. Students who take notes in their own words move from knowledge to comprehension in the classroom. Students who type verbatim notes tend to receive lower grades than those who take notes in their own words.

Recalling and describing things also requires processing the information more deeply. If you think in terms of emotions and images, you may struggle to find the right words to describe something you can both see and feel. Talking it out with a trusted companion can help you gain clarity that you may not be able to access otherwise. They can help act as a sort of teleprompter, helping you discover the right words and insights.

## The Frustration of Genius

It's human nature to want answers about our world. We created demons, gods, lore and legends to explain why things were the way they were. Perhaps we were living on the back of a tortoise; possibly there is a God in the Heavens.

Depending on where you lived and how you were raised, you were told stories about why things are the way they are. You are given answers through society, culture, and upbringing as soon as your three-year-old brain is capable of forming the question, "Why?"

It's the point of education. Collectively, they bring their 200,000-year-old brain up to today. Most of us aim to fit in, conform to the rules and follow the flow because it is a proven path to success. It is supposed to make you happy.

Your compelling life project is that you are unique for a reason. What's the reason?

For Jo Cameron, it was the revelation that her experience of pain is different from everyone else's. She has a specific gene that makes her immune to pain.

You might think this was discovered in her childhood, but no, this woman was in her seventies. She'd thought that people who told her about the pain of childbirth were exaggerating, but she was too polite to say so. The world is thanking her for stepping forward because there is so much new research and hope for so many people suffering from chronic pain.

You follow the rules of your parents and society, assuming that doing so will lead to certain rewards, like social and financial security. At some point, security reveals itself to be a cage. What is the most secure thing in the world? A prison, and you've just found yourself in one. Hopefully, not literally. A healthy

teenager rebels against their parents and finds their way while learning how to do so at a time when the law becomes less forgiving towards mistakes.

### *Inherent Ease*

To discover your invisible genius, you need to pay attention to your negative emotions, rather than trying to ignore, accept, or suppress them. I know you have a frustrated genius inside of you, and we'll find it and let it out.

Where it takes a lot of effort to become better than average, genius is instinctual. You are better than average without trying. The effort isn't something we can evaluate quickly. We can see the sweat, bruises, and muscles from physical work. As a service professional, we can't see you sweat, and you can't see others sweat.

When it's invisible, it gets a lot harder to compare. We assume that the effort required of us is the same as that required of everyone else.

We can't see other people's efforts; we can only see their results. If we don't put effort into something, we assume no one else has to either. It's like breathing. I can breathe without thinking about it, and I guess it's true for you, too. Then I discovered meditation, and I found that thinking about breathing is not something that comes easily.

Theory of mind isn't something we are born with; it develops around the age of two or three years old. Until this age, you assume that what is in your head is also in everyone else's head. When you realize your thoughts are your own, it's a hop, skip and jump to know you can lie.

It's one thing to think differently; it's another to act differently. Not everyone discovers that things that come quickly to them don't come soon to others.

### *Failed Expectations*

Now that you understand the impact of inherent easiness, you can discover your genius by examining where people have fallen short of your expectations.

You base your expectations on what you could or would do. When people fall short of that, you can see where or how you might be inherently better.

You are naturally good at it, whether through years of honing your mastery or by living it, and they might not be. Something you know or something about your process isn't working for them.

This applies when they are doing something that is core to what you do. That is to say, it doesn't apply to things you haven't tried. If you haven't tried something, you have no idea how hard things might be or where things might go wrong. You might suspect you can do better in that arena, but the proof is in the trying.

When you have proof that you can do it easily better, you have a window into your invisible genius.



When I hear others say things like “Why don’t they get it?” or “Don’t they know?” I try to help them shift their perception gently. What if those people are average or even better than average? What does that make you?

Since we can’t see their efforts, only their results, we judge ourselves by our intentions and others by their outcomes. Instead, you need to get curious about their intentions. Watching, asking, and listening will help you hone in on what exactly sets you apart.

If they do know, then many things can happen between knowing and doing. Fear, priorities, and rationalization affect us all and keep us from doing the things we know we should. As you learn more about your clients, you will want to know these things.

When you’re curious, it’s hard to come across as arrogant or a know-it-all. When you are genuinely interested, you can’t help but build empathy. As you develop empathy, people will respond to you more effectively.

You will become curious about the source of your frustration. Getting curious builds your empathy and helps you hone your value. It enables you to ask great questions and probe deeper into the answers. There’s no such thing as a rhetorical question when you want to find your genius. What don’t they know, or what don’t they get, that you seem to think is obvious?

### *Feeding Esteem*

Like the kid who was the only one to point out that the emperor didn’t have new clothes, you have something you are absolutely genius at that the world needs. When you are shocked, and no one else seems to be joining you; when you are frustrated by the same lack in others over and over again; when you roll your eyes at the world, what is it that you know that no one else seems to grasp, see, or experience?

Like Einstein, being a genius doesn’t mean standing out in everything. Einstein couldn’t pass for a model, was a poor student, and struggled with relationships. Being a genius is knowing your one thing and dropping everything else.

You will see your confidence soar when you know and own your one thing. You don’t remember your genius if you’ve been told to stand up straight for years yet still can’t. It’s hard to slouch when you have that inner confidence and ease.

People gravitate toward confident people; when your invisible genius becomes something you can name, your confidence becomes undeniable.

### *Selfishness as a Virtue*

Perhaps the kindest thing you can do is to be selfish.

When I met David Chilton, author of the bestseller **THE WEALTHY BARBER** and a Dragon on the television show *The Dragons Den*, he made a comment that I’ve heard so many people say, and I’ve bet you’ve said once or twice yourself.

“It’s no big deal.”

As a dragon, they were presented with investment opportunities. To make the decision, some mathematical calculations were required.

Chilton mentioned how easy it was for him to do the math, and even as he explained how simple it was, he also described how the other dragons struggled with it. The ease with which he displayed his ability was met with shock and awe by the other dragons. And the audience couldn’t keep up either.

But he shrugged it off as if it were nothing.

Chilton is a down-to-earth, awe-shucks kind of guy. If you’ve ever had the experience of shrugging something off when others were dazzled, you’ve glimpsed a glimmer of your invisible genius.

As you learned earlier, we are herd animals built to conform to what we think other people want of us.

Chilton might be minimizing his ability to make those who can’t keep up feel less stupid. However, that approach, whether conscious or not, backfires.

As Shonda Rhimes explains in her memoir, **THE YEAR OF YES**, she minimized her accomplishments when discussing her past actions. She realized she was making people uncomfortable when she decided to take ownership of her success and stop doing that.

When I hear someone I look up to talk about how it wasn’t that hard or that big deal, it makes me feel lower. I know the gap between where I am and where that person is, and when they diminish it, I feel like I’m stupider, slower, or in some way less than what I’d originally thought.

Own what you are great at if you are concerned about the comfort of others. You don’t have to be insufferable about it, but modesty is not the best policy. If you devalue yourself, how you value others comes into question.

### *The Power of Authenticity*

To be authentic isn’t just about being yourself. It’s about making decisions based on what’s right in your head, heart, and gut. When you do that, you will make decisions and behave in a way that remains consistent, regardless of the situation. Sometimes, that will be harder than others, but such alignment makes you a predictable and trustworthy person.

Becoming authentic is a journey as you learn more about what you stand for, what’s true in the world, and about personal transformation. It doesn’t happen overnight; you are never so-called done because the world changes daily. Being authentic is not a result but a continuous journey as you evolve with life.

When you are primarily concerned with your interests, you discover what fulfills you, what makes you happy and what you are good at. The world needs that, and you are the only one that can deliver it.

## *Putting Yourself First*

Being authentic is the psychological equivalent of putting your mask on first. This is drilled into us so much on airplanes that we've all learned to tune them out. Yet, in life, being the person who puts you first is the person who is best suited to helping others.

When you prioritize yourself, you bring more positive energy into the room.

Good, selfish salespeople ensure there is a fit between what they know they can provide and the genuine needs of the prospect. Their sales process involves discovery, asking questions, and probing deeper. They aim to ensure they can make a transformative difference, targeting clients who will advocate for them rather than those who request refunds or post negative reviews. That's about caring for your interests and the interests of others.

Bad, selfish salespeople don't care about my needs; they want to make the sale. It's all about them and nothing about me. They reek of desperation and make it dead easy to say no quickly, firmly, and efficiently and to spread the word to their prospects.

## *Helping Others*

As Bob Rosen says, "When you take care of yourself first, you show up as a healthy, grounded person in life."

Focusing on your self-interests helps you learn when to say no positively, rather than trying to please others or meet your needs through manipulation and neediness. Working within your circle of influence instead of your circle of control suggests that you may be overly focused on yourself.

Lousy selfishness is expecting others to deliver on your needs without concern for theirs. Good selfishness ensures that pursuing your interests doesn't negatively impact others. Lousy selfishness is throwing your colleagues under the bus to get a more significant raise or a coveted promotion. Good selfishness is when you bring your best game and focus on finding a new job with the rest of your energy and attention.

Your invisible genius is easy to see when you can find your authentic self. I'm doing the best I can, and as Sarah Knight says, you do you.

## *Become the Master*

Your clients hire you to fill a need. Do you know what this need is, from the pain point that triggers it to the point B where they see you as being able to help them achieve it?

You want to work with people you know, like, and trust. When we work with people who don't meet those criteria, it becomes evident. They end up being the demanding ones, the complaining ones who ruin our days at the very sight of their phone number on the call display.

Who are they?

Three ways you can describe your current clients are their demographics, psychographics, and geographics. Demographics encompass factors such as age, social status, and educational level. Psychographics include attitudes, aspirations, and interests. Geographics might include where they live and whether they interact face-to-face, by telephone, or via the internet.

If you are working with people you dislike, consider terminating your relationship with those clients immediately. It will give you more time to focus on this course and attract more clients you like, and your emotional energy will immediately lift. You will see a weight come off your shoulders and watch your shoulders rise.

Having clients that you don't want to get to know will ensure that you miss out on opportunities. You won't know what other needs they have, referrals they could give or other insights that will help you grow your business. Working with clients who bore you is undermining the potential of your business. You want interesting clients who grab your attention. Those are the clients for whom you will do your best work, who will evangelize you and bring you more work from their network.

### *Trying*

Any herd animal knows that the safest place to be is in the center of the pack, while those at the periphery are at the most significant risk.

Herding behaviour occurs when we look to our peers to determine what to do rather than independently seeking information and making an informed decision. We act like someone else did that analysis and can copy their answer.

When we unthinkingly follow, bubbles form, and markets crash. The housing bubble occurred because few people understood what a subprime mortgage entailed.

It's too good to be a genuine deal and is too complicated for anyone to resist. For things with intrinsic value, popularity is random.

In a study involving over 14,000 participants, an artificial "music market" demonstrated that an early advantage snowballs into popular winners. Thanks to the herd mentality, we find it more agreeable when others like a song.

The researchers found that average-quality songs exhibit unpredictable performance. While the worst rarely did well, and the best seldom did poorly, the performance of anything in the middle was anyone's guess<sup>2</sup>. Early random advantage greatly benefits song popularity and drives demand, but it could have been any song.

Studio executives, book publishers, and talent managers make their living attempting to back the best, but they are immune to failure. Perhaps the game's name suggests that it's best to pick one and invest effort in strategizing to gain popularity rather than focusing on initial quality.

The best will likely rise to the top, and the worst will likely sink to the bottom. For the majority, the idea of a meritocracy where quality and success correlate is false. It's not what you know; it's who you knew first.

Get out there and try as many different things as possible, and know that when things don't work, you can try again.

### *Polishing*

Failure is not about not making mistakes; it's about not trying anymore. Fall and get back up again. People who have never made a mistake have never tried anything new, and discovering your blue ocean will encourage you to take on new challenges.

Serial entrepreneurs are successful entrepreneurs. First, businesses fail, and second, companies are less likely to do so. Bryan Harris of Videofruit failed 28 times before he found success. He decided to try things and tell people how they worked out. His business boomed, with clients taking the shortcut based on the success of this experimentation.

Rare and remarkable takes practice. Whenever you've seen someone do something gracefully and efficiently, it's the result of years of practice. Malcolm Gladwell suggested in **OUTLIERS** that it might take 10,000 hours. In **"TALENT IS OVERRATED,"** AUTHOR **GEOFF COLVIN SUGGESTS** it might take 10 years. Either way, that time is spent learning and growing, not repeating the same actions. It's a pursuit of mastery, which isn't for those who quit.

The pursuit of mastery is a growth mindset. Knowing that practice pays off, you can learn, grow, and change daily. You aren't stuck with what you were born with, and you're never too old to learn new tricks.

### *Connecting*

Your invisible genius is not clever. Clever is a turnoff. Clever stops short of genius because it lacks curiosity, empathy and respect for other people's intentions.

Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon, tells the Princeton Class of 2010 about his cleverness getting him in trouble. As a boy, he spent the summer with his grandparents. When he was about 10, they travelled with their Airstream trailer. He was in the back seat, his grandparents in the front. His grandmother smoked, and he hated the smell.

Obsessed with calculations, he'd figure out "useless statistics" on things like grocery spending, gas mileage, and, on this day, smoking. He heard that every puff of a cigarette takes some minutes of your life. He got to work calculating and finally tapped his grandmother on the shoulder. He said, "At two minutes per puff, you've taken nine years off your life!"

He expected to be applauded for his cleverness. Instead, his grandmother burst into tears. Gently and calmly, his grandfather told him, "Jeff, one day you'll understand that it's harder to be kind than clever."

Bezos told the class, "Cleverness is a gift; kindness is a choice."

## The Quest for Value

My father is an accomplished radar engineer, having developed and worked on leading-edge technology. After he retired, he showed me a chapter of a book he was reading that explained stealth technology. He said that after he read it, he finally realized the simplicity of what he knew. He could write textbooks, but distilling them to their most fundamental concepts and revealing the core of the complexities that experts master isn't natural.

You, too, might be so accustomed to avoiding right angles that you don't realize your whole career was built on that principle. When it comes to what you know but don't know, you and your customers have this expertise problem between you. Bridging that gap is a result of a relentless pursuit of value. Seeking to understand before we evaluate, categorize, and judge isn't what we do as human beings, but we can learn when to go with the flow and disregard mainstream advice.

## Asking the Customer

With the proliferation of survey tools, you don't want to be the one annoying your customers with endless requests for their input, but you also can't afford to ignore them. Knowing when to help customers and when to leave them alone is the difference between loyalty and engagement and wasting time and money.

If you are anything like me, you are bombarded with requests for your feedback at the bottom of every receipt, at the close of most websites and peppered throughout your inbox. You ignore the vast majority of these. Conversely, when you have essential and valuable feedback, there's nowhere to send it.

Getting the voice of the customer is fundamental to standard business advice, yet you have to reconcile that with the fact that Steve Jobs was known to skip that step. Surveys are notoriously unreliable, expensive, and time-consuming; therefore, when should you follow Steve's steps to obtain the data?

## Engage Them When

Seth Godin says knowing your customer profile isn't enough. The Voice of the Customer (VOC) is a complete set of customer wants and needs. It is stated in their language, organized into a hierarchy of themes, and ranked for relative importance and performance/satisfaction.

Starbucks taught us a new language for coffee, transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary, including the price customers are willing to pay. You can't introduce a new language without a two-way interaction to explain and field questions. If you skip the introductory engagement, be prepared for when and where it will happen. You don't want long lines and wait times created by customers trying to get up to speed.

Domino's went transparent by sharing what they are doing every step of the way and providing customers with a timeline of progress on their orders. Internally, you will forget what it is like not knowing everything about your business and the customer experience. When you want to introduce transparency, you may need to engage actual customers, new employees, and even competitors' customers to increase mutual understanding.

Bombardier asked customers to submit their Skidoo idea, but when Joseph-Armand Bombardier dreamt of building a vehicle that could “float on snow,” he did it himself. I spent an entire day on that site, submitting one idea after another based on my ownership of three snowmobiles and thousands of kilometres of riding. While other customers and I can help provide user insights, we’d rarely be able to offer earth-shattering improvements.

After a proper apology, correction is a personal matter. As a corporate traveller, I’ve had more than one bad hotel experience. One chain offered me an automatic discount, and the other called me and asked if an upgrade would improve it. Crowne Hotels, the latter chain, wasn’t responsible, but they took accountability. They had me at the phone call.

They need you to listen. If a customer can’t reach you, and your service desk serves as a moat around people who understand the impact of the problem and have the influence to fix it, you risk losing customers who will go and complain to someone who cares – the worldwide web. You don’t need the embarrassment of hearing about problems from social media.

### *Leave Them Alone When*

You want to know future choices. People make confident but false predictions about what they will do.

We all think of ourselves in the future like we’d think about someone else. When we do that, we present ourselves as more innovative, better, and sociable, but that is not true.

You are changing the game. Henry Ford famously said they would have given customers faster horses if he had asked them what they wanted. While customers can provide insight, they aren’t going to give you the keys to the universe.

If all incoming emails trying to engage us were welcome, we wouldn’t have something called SPAM, popup blockers, or do-not-call lists. Similarly, when customers provide you with the information needed to establish their accounts, it doesn’t mean they are granting you a license to use it unless you explicitly request or state it.

If you want to support your point with a statistic, you can design a survey that provides precisely what you need. Test your survey questions for bias to ensure your customers don’t feel led.

You are pretending to be social. You might be able to trick people into “likes” and “follows.” Still, when they realize that it comes with more ads rather than access to discounts, unique experiences, or other perks, it might feel like you’re crashing the Facebook party, jamming Twitter feeds, and exploiting consumer information.

It happens more often than you may think. Consider the case of an insurer that sought to understand why its claim satisfaction rates were low. Customers want a decision – yes or no. Internally, a decision marked as “pending” was still considered a decision. The internally reported “decision rate” was high, but customers are in limbo when they get a pending decision.

### *When in Doubt*

Customers who aren't the ones you want or need to satisfy may reach out to you. Instead of telling them to leave you alone, hit delete, even if you have to set up a rule to do so automatically, because they just aren't getting the message. Some people don't realize you aren't that into them.

Like a busy person, a customer doesn't want to have to tell you something you should already know or should already be apparent. When you can react, ask for the customer's opinion. Customers will expect changes, and enacting those changes requires investment. Segmentation may be in order depending on the size of your customer base.

If you aren't sure how to apply segmentation, you don't know them well enough. It's more likely that you already have too many things you want and need to do. If a customer's demands are just another item on a long list, you may want to prioritize those things first. The last thing you want to do is get a list of desired actions and let it collect dust.

Do you want to skip the survey due to low response rates, questionable reliability, and the effort and expense it can entail, but still want the information and feedback? Skip the survey and sanction freedom.

Making the effort to design and execute a sound survey will provide you with numerous opportunities; however, sometimes, asking questions may not yield the necessary answers. In these cases, here are seven ways to skip the survey without substituting your opinion.

### *Alternatives to the Survey*

In the world of quality, getting the voice of the customer is pivotal to defining value. While almost every methodology suggests doing it, there is more than one way to consider it.

When Obama was running for president, Google's CEO Eric Schmidt interviewed him in front of an employee audience. As a joke, his first question was, "What is the most efficient way to sort a million 32-bit integers?" Obama answered, "Well, I think a bubble sort is the wrong way."

Obama was right. Google is renowned for its data-based culture. When pondering decisions, clicks decide. Split tests reveal which colours, phrases, and images are most effective. They design experiments and test options.

Experiments and testing are used to separate facts from opinions, perspectives, and experiences. Creativity blossoms when the proof is proof, and the distance between the black and white of hard facts is vast.

### *Observe their Actions*

In his book **ICONOCLAST**, Gregory Berns explains how Hamburger Helper made significant progress by abandoning survey data in favor of direct observation. Under the direction of Melissa Studzinski, they observed one customer mixing up the product while balancing one toddler on a hip. She knew that "convenience" was essential, but observing this situation gave new insight into the customer's needs.



“Predictability” was a commonly desired trait on surveys, yet, historically, General Mills presented new flavours, pasta shapes, and packages to keep up with the interest and novelty factor. However, observing a harried mom with two toddlers while shopping, the realization of this effect dawned on me. It just made things more difficult for moms to find what they already knew their kids would eat.

General Mills achieved substantial cost savings and an 11 percent increase in sales following a decade-long slump. They demonstrated that precise definitions are integral to streamlining a product, learning work processes, and increasing quality.

### *Mingle at Conferences*

You hear the truth when you merely listen to what people are saying. The limits made from asking the wrong questions are gone. Now, you must ensure you don’t give yourself away, interrupt or judge. When a response is needed but not one of the options, you won’t force people to choose the best-suited but incorrect answers. You hear in their words what they want to say.

Like the desired improvements I overheard during one unreported conference, instead of asking for documented responses, listen to what people say to each other. In person, be the one who listens, not the one who does all the talking.

Social media allows you to tune in without disturbance, without putting people out and without the constraints of a survey. Listening to what other people are saying might be the cheapest, easiest and most reliable way to get the authentic voice of your customer.

### *Focus on a Group*

Bringing together a diverse mix of people helps mitigate the limitations of a survey. In a focus group, up to ten people discuss a similar topic.

Unlike the interview, participants in the group will temper responses. They may think of things they wouldn’t have otherwise. They may also agree or disagree without even realizing it and go along with everyone. Overall, attitudes will come to light in a focus group while individuality fades.

A focus group might be the ideal solution when you want to gauge a general reaction to a particular topic. They excel at articulating benefits, drawbacks, and interesting points during the development phase.

### *Find Their Voice*

Understandably, surveys aren’t universally appealing, nor should they be your only tool for gaining the insight and feedback you need to work smarter. Use what works to get what you need quickly and effectively.

It’s incredibly challenging to obtain permission to try something new. I understand the reasons, which helps with both strategy and patience. I had to learn why because it didn’t make sense to me that they would say they want innovation and then ask, “Why reinvent the wheel?”

Life is so confusing when you realize you hear both messages. When you don't know which to pick, you do nothing. Smart move!

### *Be Your Customer*

The CEOs who went undercover as entry-level employees made for some enthralling programming as they served front-line customers, endured the challenges of training and struggled with staff dynamics.

We are often consumers of our products and services rather than customers of them. When something goes wrong, we don't call the 800 number; we call Lisa in Moncton. We are aware of the internal personnel who can expedite our orders, make corrections, or even make score personalizations unavailable to regular customers.

These differences between how employees navigate the experience and how customers do can range from shocking to profitable. You can't make these comparisons and draw these insights until you are an incognito customer and know the shortcuts you would take to make it faster, easier, or better.

### *Destruct the Playbook*

One of the most informal surveys we all do is to ask experts for advice. These questions probe what they did that worked before, how they did it, and what they would do differently next time. When you want to break through the status quo, you don't look to repeat history.

Obama's historical win had much more to do with finding the facts. His team relied on understanding the factors at play, forming a strategy, measuring progress against that plan and growing every available opportunity. According to campaign strategist David Plouffe in his bestseller, **THE AUDACITY TO WIN**, decisions were non-events. "No drama, Obama." Few regrets and mistakes were made when the situation offered little room for error.

Instead of asking people questions, is it more relevant or helpful to stand back and start from scratch? Are there rules, policies or governance in place that will influence your success? Create your solution without repeating the old games of the past.

### *Point Out the Disharmony*

Recently, a quote circulated to the point that a manager broke and vented on LinkedIn. The quote was from Steve Jobs, discussing why we hire smart people and then tell them what to do. I suppose he has never experienced it himself.

I was hired for my skills, such as survey analysis, and then instructed on what graphs to produce from the data—completely different. I was hired for my ability to reduce costs and improve processes, and then I was told to pursue Lean Six Sigma.

Being told what to do when I'd results that indicated I'd experience in this area. In contrast, you did not, and then being offered step-by-step instructions contrary to what I'd do was the most frustrating experience of my life. I wouldn't change it, though, because it taught me how to identify, articulate, and coach in a completely different way.

Finally, I got the opportunity to point out that a continuous improvement methodology should continuously improve itself. If they agreed to the principle, why weren't they following it? Look for the things that are said and not done; you might find the catalyst for the change you need.

In my case, after 40 years, it should look so different from its initial self that an early expert would no longer be able to recognize it—especially considering the technological advancements that occurred during that time.

There are reasons to consider joining, and one of them remains valid to this day. One is that the messaging and branding are solid, so customers would be adequately impressed, if not educated enough, to know how to verify if they are doing what they claim to be doing. Creating the illusion of trust appears to be a worthwhile return on investment (ROI) for some organizations.

However, if you want to improve, reduce costs, make customers happier, lower prices, or find other ways to develop your business, the call to reinvent the wheel is undeniable. Dilbert pointed this out in 2003.

### 3. The Science of Making Improvements

Everything is an effect of something prior, and there is an equal and opposite effect for every effect. You may have learned this in physics, chemistry, or another science class.

It happens with emotions, too. As a child, I saw a comic strip that wasn't funny but explained the world as I knew it. The boss yells at the father, who then yells at the wife, who then yells at the kid, who then kicks the dog. As science has proven, emotions are contagious – we pass them along more effectively when they are negative.

However, as Simon Sinek says about post-traumatic stress, you have all the right emotions, just not at the correct times. If you think for yourself, there are likely times when you had the right emotion, just not at the same time, and you weren't being clinical or textbook. You were human. Just as you are facing change and a different future, with a perspective shaped by your collective historical experiences of this kind, so is everyone else.

A healthy workplace and world happen when we are all honest with ourselves and brave enough to own our truth. Neither is easy. Both are worth it for health, happiness and wealth.

### Toward Better Futures

Every generation strives to improve upon the one that came before. We have ambitions for bigger houses, higher ranks, and better kids. Of course, parents can draw on the best of what their parents knew, combined with their own experiences, and formulate a new manifesto that incorporates a wealth of knowledge gained by a whole generation.

So why is it going so wrong?

Kids often want to blame their parents, and millennials are no exception, but this doesn't solve any problems. The future relies on this damage getting undone.

Parents raise every generation with a different set of beliefs, a society with distinct expectations, and a peer group with unique assumptions. For this reason, each generation has its own set of behaviours.

I recently sat down with millennials and HR professionals from the Gen X and Baby Boomer generations to explore how we can work together more effectively.

Millennials in college and university studies, as well as those recently graduated, were clear about what they wanted: flexibility, autonomy, and respect. Don't we all?

In my business, they have a long way to go before earning that privilege. They can thank their parents, society, and technology for their ruined expectations.

To achieve that end, they have some protective scaffolding and must find the courage to confront, tear down, and replace it. Do they have the resiliency and motivation to do it? I do not have high hopes for them, although I hardly know them.

### The Downside of Obedience

When I wrote my final physics exam, one of the marks I needed to get into engineering, I sat down with a weltered face. That morning, I had been hit across the face with a hairbrush. Before writing, my teacher asked if I needed the number for crisis support and protection services.

Recently, a good friend of mine told me how she protected her son from knowing their dog was dying so it didn't affect his exams. I love her loving instinct, and while she wonders about how to create resilience in her son, I hope she never finds out how I wrote my exams.

Life is far more challenging than what you've led your kids to believe. Things like death happen. Being able to deal with negative emotions, trauma, and unpleasant experiences in life is essential for adults.

One young man — let's call him Adam to protect his identity — was annoyed that recruiters were dismissing his experience. He'd been writing code since he was 13, and no one respected his expertise. When I told him I started writing code when I was five, he didn't respect me either.

"Why not?" we asked.

His reply indicated he had heard the recruiters but hadn't heard them. All his experience was working for his father. 'Experience' encompasses much more than just doing the work.

Despite having a universal dismissal response, he didn't try to figure out why. He held on to his feelings of superiority, perhaps even doubling down on them, and now rejections were occurring in mere minutes. After all, we know how the human brain pulls such tricks.

### The Rise of Extroversion

Another millennial offered up the annoyance of having to work alone. She explained that, due to a two-year age difference between her and her older sister, the classrooms and curricula had been redesigned to emphasize teamwork and collaboration. Desks were clustered, and all work was group work.

With shock, so many unexplained problems fell into place for me.

Personally, as an introvert who ranks as close to introversion as you can get, this makes me want to cry.

Someone decided that a generation of extroverts was a good idea, crushing all introverts into behaving inauthentically, feeling wrong, and being set up for failure. Thank you, Susan Cain, for attempting to repair the damage.

Teams cannot solve problems. We recognize this as cognitive biases accumulate, and there is no way to overcome them all within a team. Instead, problems must be championed by individuals with access to experts. However, we have trained the entire generation to focus on people, not problems, and to function as a group rather than an interdependent collective.

We've created a generation that struggles to solve problems, lacks resilience, and believes it's all about them. Can they even see the issues? The fact that attention spans are in the drain doesn't help.

I don't know why certain people get such power to make collective decisions. Some woman decided that we all must suffer through Amber Alerts, even when the system is so buggy that it wakes me twice before 6 am and scares my cat into the crawl space for four hours. I might not be able to opt out, and perhaps no one has written an app yet, but I have control over the power button.

Young people can regain independence and autonomy today but must work for it.

### *Ambivalence and Apathy*

When people lose their power, they look to regain it in places where they shouldn't have it. It's not a good way for anyone to march forward. Fighting for control over other people is not the way to go.

I headed over to interview Adam informally at the close of the discussion. I told him of my technology background and contacts and asked what he wanted to do.

"I don't know. Anything," he replied. A good answer is specific, helps me hone in on possibilities, and connects with his motivations. I got nothing.

"Ok, what languages do you know?" Again, a generic answer that didn't help.

I asked him for his contact information. Do you have a business card, resume, or any other materials?

"Ok, well, why don't you write your email address down here," I said, offering him my notebook and pen.

"Oh, I am not good at this," he said. "We are a technical generation."

While I watched him struggle to write his name painstakingly, I remembered the first time I sprung out of naptime by offering to help Rachel write her name. I realized that there are some lessons you should master by the time you're three, and if you miss them, you should go back and pick them up.

With his chicken scratch on my notepad, I left. Writing by hand is how the brain processes information. Technology has eliminated a whole generation of thinkers, with education playing a significant role in accelerating this process.

Just like that, three strikes, he was out.

Strike One: You must be able to learn from experience.

When things happen to you, such as being rejected repeatedly, and you can't figure out why, then I don't want you on my team. I need people who can see and accept reality.

### *Hiring Minds, not Hands*

I assume Adam took his power and handed it to someone else. External validation is his undoing. Earn praise from your parents, good marks from your teachers, and the respect of your peer group. 'Yes-men' don't add value like someone who can speak up.

One, I won't be there to notice these lessons are happening and be able to point them out. If you think learning comes only from a classroom, a teacher, or a textbook, life will be overwhelming for you, and I don't want an overwhelmed team member.

Two, you have to be able to speak up. Speak up and say, "No, I don't write. Hand me your phone, and I'll enter my info." If you instead go along with an instruction that I've given you, knowing you are going to suck at it and you can't offer up a better alternative, you are never going to get the autonomy you desire.

Third, you must be genuinely interested in other people. Adam didn't take a business card from anyone in the meeting; everyone could hire him. He doesn't know who I am, didn't take my card, and has no way to follow up with me. You must be able to discern what others want and need from you, which requires a genuine interest in understanding them.

There's no time to become your parent and grow into a functioning adult. If there's one lesson, it's that you have to do it yourself for yourself if you want it done. Toughen up, listen to your wisdom, and find a problem to champion.

If you can, you might be able to lead your entire generation.

### *Everyone a Leader*

Do you know the difference between a coach and other people you can recruit to help you? A consultant will give you advice and answers. A mentor provides you with specific, career-related advice and a helping hand because they have valuable contacts and industry experience. Therapists are trained to deal with complex emotional issues and past traumas. I believe we see evidence of mentoring and consulting in the movie, but the strong emphasis is on coaching.

A coach will partner with you to bridge a specific gap between where you are and where you want to be. The International Coach Federation defines it as "partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential."

If you believe you have all the answers, as I think you do, the coach helps you find them. Introspection doesn't come quickly to everyone, and frankly, people have less and less time to do it.

Believing in our full potential isn't something that comes naturally to people. Our experience with mistakes colours our perspectives in predictable ways. It all depends on our reactions to errors. Do we try to avoid them at all costs, or do we learn, grow and make bigger and bigger mistakes?

Too often, we have the vision, and then we don't believe we deserve it or are entitled to it. We stay in jobs with uncertain futures, toxic relationships, and bad managers because we are too sure our resume isn't good enough for the job posting we've clipped and been carrying for two weeks.

Seeing yourself accomplish your vision isn't always a matter of the steps you have to take, but instead, being able to identify yourself as the success in that vision. Answering your vision question might take you into how you think about your value and potential. Remember, you have limitless potential, and your doubts are based on lies, misinterpretations, and other falsehoods.

### *No Going Back*

The past contains baggage that weighs you down and prevents you from breaking through. How can you let go of the past?

In business, the following assumptions were noted during my initial interviews. These assumptions are now turned into scientific experiments. Using the principles of the Design of Experiments allows us to test many assumptions cost-effectively. Not opinion, not popularity, not selective memory. Fact.

Without this work, most businesses would fire everyone related to something that isn't working and start fresh with new faces. Sometimes, that is leaping from the frying pan into the fire; other times, it destroys all possible chances to learn what went wrong, and there is no hope of avoiding it.

Often, making peace with what is right now means accepting responsibility for things we've put onto other people. In one company, the performance of each team depended on the performance of every other team. It was easy to point fingers, shift blame, and create diversions instead of accepting and working on problems.

One manager heard me and tried a different tactic. He accepted that everyone else's performance would be as it always was. With that information, he implemented processes to correct them and then proceeded with his work. With those actions, his performance immediately got him a call from his leader: "What are you doing differently?"

Making peace with what is makes a massive difference because it gives you the power to change it. With radical accountability, you can change anything.

### *Marching Forward*

Taking the first step might be the hardest. After that, it's a matter of staying in motion. Creating that initial momentum is all you need to focus on right now.

The first item might not be anything you do. The first item might be to stop trying to control everything and pay attention to the universe trying to help you.

What's the right thing to do next might not be easy. You are aware of the difference between the two, and only you can determine if you possess the necessary qualities. Never worry about making what initially looks like the first item into item number 10 and adding 10 easier things to do in front of it, such that by the time you get to it, you've built up the endurance, skill, or whatever you needed to get it done.

In business, nothing happens unless you put someone's name next to it with a date. Writing down your tasks and goals will train your focus on them. Finding an accountability partner might help you create the external pressure you need to get it done.

Take a deep breath and consider what you need to do to succeed. There might be some things to stop doing and new ones to start. Be gentle, be patient, be loving, and be persistent. Habits are formed over a long period and sometimes require some effort to untangle. Some habits can disappear in a snap, but when they don't, give yourself good advice and keep on.

We need a strong reason to tackle challenging work, and when you know what could get you excited, start connecting that vision with actually achieving it, watch out. Things are going to happen.

### *Bravely Exploring*

When will you stop being afraid? We proclaim bravery until we rationally consider the possible outcomes. We are concerned that it may not be worth the effort as it might expose other tasks we need to complete.

We are afraid of success as much as we are of failure, of change as much as we are of staying the same. For anything you chase, there is something that comes with it, even if it is saying no to something else. Identifying those fears and shedding light on them is often enough to realize that they were stopping you and won't anymore.

Try, try, try again doesn't mean the same thing. It can and should reflect the benefit of experience in every iteration.

Holding on to anger, bitterness, and jealousy will only undermine you. They say that these emotions are like swallowing poison and expecting it to hurt someone else.

Enough of the poison.

Forgiveness becomes possible when you realize that you wouldn't be where you are now without them. Every unwelcome experience is a lesson for your entire existence. Radical accountability will help you discover your role in manifesting that experience. Gratitude for where you now help shift your perspective. Love bridges the gap. Forgiving does not mean forgetting. It also doesn't mean condoning. It means not allowing it to hurt you anymore.

Breaking everything down to understanding where you are headed long-term and connecting that with the actions you take daily is the basic formula for success. Daily life conspires to blur our visions, make our actions chaotic, and render our success out of reach. A dual focus on what you are doing and why you are doing it will keep you at your productive.



## The Simple Solution

Nothing happens in isolation. When change happens, it results from being squeezed into a new way of being, willingly or unwillingly. We unconsciously modify our behavior to suit the conditions, people, or environment. The change contortionist makes change look easy by constantly taking charge of those levers.

Understanding how people think and feel about the current state of affairs, their desired future, and how they envision that future are three significant levers of change that need to be clarified at a personal and genuine level for all key stakeholders, including yourself.

What is your motive? Clarifying your motive and intent goes a long way for everyone who thinks you are taking the lead because you want to prove you are more intelligent, faster, and better than others. If you are doing your job, you will not have the tenacity to get through the complicated work. You will cave in and intervene at the first noticeable symptom, preventing you from achieving a complete diagnosis and solving the problem. You will change it, but a change is not a win.

What is a win?

In the long run, my objective is the least amount of work with the optimal payback. It's what started my journey away from the tyranny of traditional quality methodologies, even if it was a long journey with a lot of hard work. Now, I have an award-winning, simple, more effective and efficient solution. That's just my nature.

## *Simply Mutual*

I like playing with ideas, not dolls. I didn't quite understand what you were supposed to do with the latter. My dolls and I always played at nap time. That's when mommies get to do whatever they want. This makes breaking out of naptime as a kid such a brutal jail to escape.

For me, there was a girl named Rachel. My parents were worried about me not having any friends, so when a potential friend appeared on the horizon, all rules would be broken in the name of possibility.

I realized Rachel didn't know how to write her name. I told her that if she rang my bell at nap time, I would teach her how to write her name. Immediately, I had to teach her how to tell time because, as I told her, all bets are off if you are late.

When she learned to write her name, naptime was replaced with Rachel time. Just as quickly, Rachel's time fell away to newfound freedom. However, my parents were relentless with this friend thing. Three cheers to Rachel – she has learned a skill that many millennials are still lacking.

When my family moved to Calgary, the friend thing started up again, and this one wanted to play with dolls. This girl didn't like my answer and decided to claw out my eye. Despite her reaction, I still believe in the power of a positive no. Step back a few paces first, and consider putting on your running shoes.

As I made my way home, wondering if monocular vision would be my permanent future, I asked if this injury would be enough to allow me to stick to my books.

## *Accountability*

I was driving to work one day when I noticed I couldn't read the signs anymore. I thought it might have something to do with the burst of red in my eye that morning, so I went to the doctor. Instead of answers, I left with a new prescription, a whole diopter lower in both eyes. The following month, the same thing happened.

The third month, I went to a different doctor. He told me I would hand him my driver's license as his Christmas present. It's unfortunate; any chance to save things is now gone. Then, he gave me my next pair of lenses.

I drove home thinking about moving home and how it would be something I wouldn't be doing anymore. I thought about everything I liked doing and how much of it would be taken away from me. Some freedoms would come back with new tools and training, but to someone who values Independence, this was not the deal.

Tough conversations need to be had in the relentless pursuit of a goal. Who is doing this?

"Not me!" Of course not. When mistakes are made, it's never me who does it.

"I did it," I said. Thanks for your honesty. Why?

"I couldn't stand to see that, and nothing was happening. So, I had to do something about it."

"Okay, here's what we're going to do," I heard myself say.

Are we all aligned now?

"I can go with that," I said.

"Me too!"

"Count Myself in."

And that was the end of that. It was the start of a lot of hard work, and when it was over, it was over. We've had a solid couple of decades at a -7.5. Way to go, team!

## *Beliefs*

They say to be careful what you believe because your beliefs create your reality. Henry Ford tried to spread the word when he said that you can think you can or can't, and you are right either way.

Beliefs lead to laws, which create the way most people live. Since perception is so open to interpretation, we perceive what we expect to see based on our existing beliefs.

There is also a version that blows your mind. The one about your world, where no one else has a say, and you can choose what is fact and what is fiction.

It's not just something esoteric in your head, and you can force yourself to say a different sentence, and your world changes.

It's more complicated than that, including believing it. It's challenging because it places a great deal of accountability and power in your hands. Most people are all about "Me, Me, Me," meaning they would instead hand it right back. Those who are always "I, I, I" are creating their problems and don't even realize it.

Not me. I've been blamed for stuff I didn't do, praised for things I thought were complete failures, and did things I knew were wrong because I had to do what I was told. I'm glad we're entering the age of robots because humans were designed for higher purposes than being obedient task executors.

If I told anyone I meditated to save my sight only to realize I needed to plant a lawn to do it, they'd think I was nuts. One thing is sure: I am not letting my laziness dictate my vision.

Forget 'they'; don't wait for others to fix things for you. When the available options are poor, create a new one.

## Two Different Worlds

Knowledge work is different from the manufacturing floor. The work goes on between your ears, not fundamentally with your hands and muscles. It's thinking for a living rather than doing it for a living.

Increasingly, this is how we earn our living. We work on projects that are invisible, fleeting, and unique. It's not the same every time – if it were, or when it becomes that way – we would turn it into software, program a robot, and move on to something else that utilizes our human edge. The things machines can't do – to think, feel and innovate.

Consider a support department in the automotive industry, such as human resources, finance, and engineering. These people are trained to be and hired for their creativity, problem-solving prowess, and ability to use their brains rather than their hands. These are knowledge workers in service functions.

When creativity, innovation, and problem-solving matter more than the seconds on the clock, messiness is a benefit, so argues Tim Harford in his book **MESSY: THE POWER OF DISORDER TO TRANSFORM OUR LIVES**.

Disorganization separates ideas that aren't associated with each other. Like the accident of chocolate and peanut butter, you have a new thing. A new thing that wouldn't have been found (if you believe the commercials) is that chocolate and peanut butter were well-disciplined to stay where they belonged.

The rigidity of a disciplined workstation might undermine a knowledge worker's ability to contribute to their maximum potential.

More than one breakthrough was made because things were broken, out of place, or missing. Necessity is the mother of invention; you don't want invention to happen when speed is what matters. While organization is helpful, it's not the pinnacle of productivity. Remember to start by choosing the most assistive environment and tweak from there.

## Determine the Impact

Your change will impact those around you, and not all of it will be for the better. To sustain a change, it needs to be an all-around improvement. For instance, is losing weight an all-around improvement for you, or will the need to shop for a whole new wardrobe, say no to favourite foods or dedicate time to exercise be extra hassles? Those are not improvements if you are honest from your heart.

When you can identify change costs and balance them with the benefits of passionate motivation, you can anticipate objections in advance.

Just as some people resist your change, others will welcome, help and support you. These may be new people that you will add to your life. They may have already achieved your change goal, and you can look to them for advice. They may be people who will offer words of encouragement. People who can share your pain of change may be going through the same effort. As the saying goes, many hands make light work.

Failure is not in falling; it is in staying down.

Making change for the better means not simply transforming it into something else or relocating it, like a game of Whack-a-Mole. It means testing change and observing what happens with a wide field of observation.

Stop and observe if your solution will deliver the expected change without causing new or different problems. This question asks you to consider several solutions rather than the first one that comes to mind. A step in the right direction might be a step worth taking.

## *The World Around You*

The environment around you impacts your productivity more than you may realize. What is the environment? It is the space around you and everything in it. It's as big as the community and culture and as small as color and design.

If you don't control it, your environment controls you. As Marshall Goldsmith says, "Our environment is the most potent triggering mechanism in our lives—and not always for our benefit."

Environmental conditions can prompt you to act in ways you may not recognize as your own. In 1971, Stanford psychologist Phillip Zimbardo undertook a prison experiment. His objective was to investigate the psychological effects of perceived power. Volunteers, all young male university students, were randomly assigned to serve as either correctional officers or prisoners.

The experiment was abandoned after only six days due to the volunteers' shocking degree of immersion in their roles. Some guards enforced authoritarian measures and even subjected some to psychological torture, while the prisoners fell into the abuse and even harassed prisoners who tried to stop it. The name of Zimbardo's book, **THE LUCIFER EFFECT**, suggests that it's not a character that determines your behavior; it's the conditions.

The environment is everything in your field that you can absorb with your senses. It encompasses the physical, auditory, and visual senses. While there is much in the environment that is easily ignorable and much that is categorically dismissed, the environment is full of triggers.

Constantly, you are being bombarded with people, events and circumstances that have the potential to impact your thoughts and behaviour. This can be helpful, but the environment often presents abundant and powerful triggers that you may not appreciate and aren't always aware of.

### *A Selective Mindset*

How you take in the environment is more a product of your brain than your eyes. Although your brain is processing and absorbing a vast amount of information, only a tiny fraction of it is brought to your attention.

The name of the system making these choices about what to bring to your attention is the reticular activating system (RAS). It uses your past interests to filter what it should bring to your attention and what is noise.

At a cocktail party, you can tune out all the background noise, but you can hear your name from across the room and instantly stop paying attention to the conversation. Your name is significant to you, so your RAS immediately shifts your attention to it.

If you've conducted extensive research on something you thought was relatively obscure, and then you start seeing indications of it everywhere, you've a sense of how the mechanism works. For some people, it happens when they buy a car, and then suddenly, it seems like the car they chose is one of the most popular models on the road.

However, if you've ever tried ignoring something, you also have realized it's not that simple. Researchers asked participants not to think of a white elephant, and suddenly, white elephants dominated their thoughts.

Repressing thoughts does not work. Once an idea has taken hold, it is like an open loop that remains active until the closing action is taken. Until you've completed something, your brain will continue to remind you about it.

From a calendar on the wall to a vision board, what you see in your environment can positively stimulate progress and cost minimal time and effort.

### *Constantly Distracted*

Visual cues help encourage the correct behaviour. You see them in public when you look at the readily recognizable signs that don't require language to communicate, such as exit signs, stop signs, and bathroom signs. At work, a sticky note holds tidbits of helpful information that would otherwise be difficult to find.

When used well, they can help us remember, communicate and train. When overused, signs and other visual reminders drain our focus. Paraphrasing the words from the less famous Tesla, signs block out the scenery and break our minds.

We take visual cues from our environment, so take some time to engineer what behaviour that environment should trigger.

Now, it's time to imbue your environment with encouragement. You can add posters with encouraging messages, inspiring quotes, and photographs of people who remind you of why you're working so hard.

Your unconscious and subconscious mind are picking up these environmental messages, so make them deliberate and positive and present them in your visual field in a way that doesn't distract you but helps motivate, inspire, and encourage you.

Most of us face the challenge of having too many things we want to do and not enough time to accomplish them. One of the impacts of this mismatch is the constant mental reminders of the tasks we need to complete when we are finished with our current activity. Those continuous reminders are productivity robbers. While it's in your attention, you aren't focused on what's at hand.

### Assess the Options

With machines, you can experiment to your heart's delight, but people aren't controllable. Therefore, your options are somewhat limited but by no means less delightful.

At some point, you have probably made a decision by listing all the pros and cons. As you did so, you probably realized there were other factors to consider, which aren't necessarily pros or cons, just interesting. Record these points as well, under a third column labeled 'Interesting Points'. Your answer may not reflect the length of either column, but you may have reached a newfound clarity. Thank you for analyzing the PMI (pluses, minuses, and interesting points).

Doing nothing is a valid option that is often forgotten. Time is required for any process to stabilize, and in most cases, doing nothing is the best course of action. Any method that is out of control, that is, unstable, is complicated to affect in any direction and may result in undesired outputs. Select strategic action over tactical action, and choose to do nothing sometimes, but spend the effort observing and learning instead of making changes.

Changing many things at once will be difficult, if not impossible, to determine what worked, what didn't work, and by how much. Change one factor at a time if possible. If not, consider a statistical design of the experiment.

Checking if a change produces the intended result is natural, but identifying unintended changes is not always obvious. Changes can appear where least expected, seemingly unrelated. When planning for change, take a realistic and proactive approach to assessing your processes to identify potential risks in advance.

### Focus with Intensity

There are people to whom you will want to say, "Oh, they just don't get it."

You need to stop and get curious when you want to do that. Why don't they get it? What is in the way?

Make sure to ask open-ended questions. Avoid labels and judgments. Let the truth lead.

When you hear someone say something that raises your hackles, resist the urge to react; instead, calmly and patiently ask them, “Why?”

“Why” questions might make the speaker defensive. However, the opportunity might be buried in some of those probing why questions; make sure the 'why' focuses on circumstances or other non-personal details.

Knowing why will tell you a whole lot more than you can imagine. Keep asking them why until they exhaust their explanations, rationalizations, and examples.

As a salesperson, your job is not to convince people why they need what you offer. Your job is to find the people who already know they want it.

Listen to those who don't understand, and learn how to steer them away from your business, not how to draw them in. The assimilation of knowledge from points learned in a lab, recorded in a journal, and integrated into the mainstream can take a considerable amount of time, even today. People who get outdated can be categorized into two types: those who are unaware yet and those who prefer to stay comfortable.

You want to learn how to ignore the people who want to be comfortable and find those who are genuinely invested in you. When it's yet, you can offer the shortcut.

### *Pick a Side*

You might believe that having more choices leads to greater happiness and that offering more services attracts more clients.

Barry Schwartz popularized the idea of the paradox of choice. The theory suggests that when more options are available, the opportunity to make the right choice exists; however, in practice, it often leads to increased dissatisfaction. The truth is that having more options can lead to misery, exhaustion, and stalled progress.

The reality is that when you aren't sure it's the right choice, you don't take any action. In an experiment where doctors were given the option to select one drug to prescribe, they did. However, when two drugs were available, they chose the third option – do nothing.

When the opposite is different in many ways, you can be more positive if you make the right choice. When the options are closer, it's hard to know. The brain doesn't like that kind of ambiguity, and we don't want that kind of work; plus, who has that time? Instead, we take things we know nothing about, try them on mentally, and then make a decision. We do it with food, experiences and even people.

"What is the right choice?" and then, "Did I make the right choice?" become two major decisions when many options are available.

Potential clients who recognize the need for a professional in your industry may encounter a lengthy list of possible providers and struggle to determine where to begin. Being polarizing doesn't mean you have to start a fight, champion a fringe cause, or get involved in politics. It only means making what people say yes to as clear and upfront as possible.

## *Get in the Game*

School teachers have long utilized data and feedback to enhance their teaching methods and improve student performance. Yet, scores took off when teachers turned off the technology and had to use pens, paper and their creativity to figure out what the data was saying.

Being in a state of flow is the optimal human experience for achieving productivity. It means being fully engaged in a task, losing track of time and making decisions in the moment. It's your work when you can't articulate precisely what you will do to accomplish it; you only know you can. If it's work you dislike or don't excel at, don't do it.

Technology can make problem-solving feel external, powerless and passive. Get your hands in the game to remember that you have skin in it regarding your tracking and feedback. Technology can be helpful, but when progress stalls, consider taking a break from tech and getting your hands dirty.

## *Problem-solvers Insanity*

Like Einstein's definition of insanity, people in the grip of solving problems often continue doing more of what they already do, hoping for better results to manifest.

The brain loves novelty. Anything new and different is a source of distraction. Getting caught up in distraction happens when you are constantly pursuing disconnected activities and changing tactics. Lately, I've heard an interesting twist on the pursuit of bright, shiny objects – people often declare this as their weakness and take pride in it.

It reminds me of the old interview question: 'Tell me about your weakness.' The savvy interviewee understands that they are supposed to say something that sounds bad, but it's a good thing. With grins, interviewees would tell you how they can't help but go for perfectionism. Over the last decade, with the rise of the "minimum viable" movement, it may have finally become apparent that perfectionists can be innovation killers and relationship crushers, halting progress with a single finger. Yes, perfectionism is a negative trait and is no longer a strength to be hidden.

Willpower is more about the environment than an act of consciousness. For people who struggle with distraction, creativity can lead to practical solutions. One author restricted his laptop's internet access, another rents a Spartan hotel room, and another author retreats to a cabin.

Distraction is but one form of entrepreneurial insanity, characterized by changing tactics too often or merely completing activities for the sake of achieving them. Either way, you are avoiding the strategies that matter for long-term sustainability and profitability.

Focus on one thing you can complete at a time, then automate it and move on to the next.

## *Repetitive Injuries*

My plumber, who provided a quote a week later than everyone else, also never followed up to ask me why I didn't hire him. In business, as uncomfortable as you think it might be, you want to ensure you get



feedback to avoid making the same mistakes. Hire someone to do it if you must, but it's insanity to repeat the same mistakes.

It's surprising how often this happens and how easily these problems can be fixed. Don't be an ostrich with your head in the sand to the issues in your business. Identify the cause of the issue and resolve it to prevent leakage from your company, as that's what's currently happening. It's costing you future sales. If you don't think you have the time, consider the time you spend on damage control, whether that involves lost sales, returns, or customer complaints.

You can hire people to help with tasks that need to be done but that you don't want to do yourself, rather than letting them go undone. However, there are also three people you should recruit to your business and not try to do it yourself. At the least, you need a lawyer, an accountant, and a bookkeeper.

A lawyer will help ensure you are covered against risks in your business. They will help you determine if incorporating your business is a legal or financial decision. They can advise you on the type of insurance you need, but most critically, they are your go-to for contracts. When it comes to an accountant, you want one who will help you minimize your taxes, not just file them.

### *Going for Broke*

David Chilton shared the story of how he became involved in business with the creators of the Loonyspoons cookbook series. During initial conversations, he couldn't believe how they managed their finances. Both had quit their corporate jobs to develop the cookbook. They sold their cars and paid their mortgages with their credit cards. When bills came, they shoved them in a drawer because they couldn't pay them anyway.

Chilton shook his head repeatedly, telling the audience this wasn't in line with his advice. He described the cookbook as having to sell more than any other book had sold for them to make it a wise investment. It struck me like winning the Powerball of the publishing world, and now, we laugh because that's precisely what happened. They were 100 percent committed, and it paid off.

It doesn't always.

The founders of Warby Parker had plan B jobs that were pretty good, unlike most of us, who have the greeter position at Walmart as our backup plan. When Adam Grant had a chance to invest, he decided not to. Not only did they seem uncommitted, but their Plan B also seemed more promising. He has a TED talk describing how he can no longer make family investment decisions.

The Loonyspooners knew they were loony. They laughed about it all the way to the bank.

For your comfort's sake, you may want to know the length of your runway — how long you can work on developing something while still paying the bills. A great financial advisor will help you paint a complete picture of your financial lifetime, enabling you to make informed decisions about your finances with a clear understanding.

## Unqualified Advice

Hire a coach to minimize the learning curve, but ensure the coach is in the correct position to assist you. They have good reviews and have been in your shoes, having suffered the same blues. Suppose they haven't. Question their ability to further you on your path or the possibility of veering in the wrong direction.

A coach will provide you with personalized training to help you take your business or yourself to the next level. Trying to do it yourself is set up to fail, as there is too much foundational knowledge in the area that was established before you came along. You won't have enough time to catch up and thrive. You need someone to shorten it and lower it for you. The better the coach is, the shorter and less steep the learning curve.

You should also know that some advice isn't worth taking. Someone told me I'm not Elvis. He told me that I wasn't a well-known name, so why was I operating under a domain name that was my given name? He said you must have a business name; you can't just be you.

I can just be me. Having done my homework on personal brands, I could laugh. I laughed wildly when I read his business-name branded website, full of talk of a particular "we," when I knew it was just him.

I had used "we" when it was just me. The advice from about a decade ago was to do precisely that. They said no one knows you are a dog on the internet, so be a big team.

That advice fell away as the truth of business came to light. We do business with people we know, like and trust.

## Authentic Leadership

Biologically, the potential for rejection can stop you in your tracks, and the perception of it is horrifying. In the days of caves, if the clan rejected you, you would die, not out of embarrassment. If you didn't have the clan to help feed, clothe, and protect you, the elements would indeed claim you. No clan down the road would take you in. That was it.

Today's world is very different. There is more freedom than ever, with open communities and increased tolerance. More people are experiencing what it's like to live freely without harming anyone else, and this might be where you're missing out.

In many societies, respecting your parents or elders is taught to every child. There is nothing wrong with that lesson. Respect isn't the same as compliance or obedience. It's seeking to understand why, but as children, we aren't taught that rationale is our right.

Mother Teresa said that looking at the masses does nothing, but looking at one inspires action. In **AGAINST EMPATHY**, author Paul Bloom makes a case for rational compassion. Instead of getting drawn into the power of one person's story, we need to step back and consider what is compassionate for humanity.

## The Basics of Data Analysis

How you invest your time is equally crucial to how you choose to invest your money. Data can reveal what your eyes cannot if you are prepared to seek the truth.

When we all lead by bringing our unique perspectives, contributions and questions to the table, better solutions can be found.

Many people believe they can do so much more than the results they've delivered in the past. Science has shown that we can observe the brain's activity, and you are utilizing all of it.

What they can't see, and what you aren't using to its full potential, is your consciousness. Who would have taught you? Monks who seek training and dedicate years of committed work can achieve remarkable feats, such as raising their body temperatures. In a cold room, they drape their bare skin with cloth soaked in ice water. Shortly, steam begins to rise from those clothes.

It's one thing to take control over processes within your body that you were always told you didn't have to think about; it's another to control the material world.

There is a cave that bears the impressions of human hands. This is not a concrete cave, and the hands weren't laid while the rock was drying, so to speak. The story goes that a yogi was demonstrating to his students the oneness of the universe, showing them that no one and nothing is separate.

Dr. Joe Dispenza is reducing the time it takes to do the miraculous. Instead of decades of meditation, he holds retreats of five days where people go home with their issues resolved—health issues, like cancer, with tumours wholly gone.

What's possible when it comes to mind mastery will boggle your mind. What's mind-boggling is the science that explains how and why specific abilities currently classified as psychic are latent potentials in everyone.

## *Latent Potential*

The latent potential in everyone shows up in the placebo effect. This is the experience of getting the sugar pill, not the medicine and becoming healed.

The placebo effect is the bane of research scientists. Belief alone is powerful; they must design studies to minimize the influence of religion as much as possible. No one knows who gets the placebo and who gets the so-called medicine.

For Dr. Joe Dispenza, belief is the medicine. Up to one-third of all healings are attributed to the placebo effect. While he travels the world, coaching people to do this for themselves, he says that hearing stories of tumors that disappeared before scheduled surgeries is mundane.

Mundane because they are so common, yet are nothing short of miraculous to people still living and believing in default mind mastery. In that default mode, health is handed over to doctors, not something for which you are personally responsible. Rebelling against a prognosis handed to you by an authority in a white coat isn't widely praised, talked about, or shown the way.

When I was undertaking the work of finding my way, I was widely referred to as a rebel, whack job, and downright stupid for choices that I made that went against the grain. Such as living off the grid and leaving a trusty corporate job.

After my diagnosis and prognosis of impending blindness, I never said a word to my doctor. I didn't storm out of there, fist raised, "I'll show you!" rolling off my tongue. I quietly left and immediately went to work.

### *Practical Empowerment*

When they tell you it's a stress-induced disease, the reality is that you did it to yourself, so you better figure out how to stop doing it to yourself; then, you can work on correcting what you did to yourself. Acceptance always gives way to the power to choose a different response.

It is much less work to believe the doctor and let him be right. In my world, that path would lead to work such as moving back to the city, learning braille, and possibly pursuing a whole new career. As I weighed the work that the so-called easy path would entail, the tough choice became a no-brainer decision.

You can't complain about what you get when you aren't willing to work and instead take what's handed to you. The difference between bragging and complaining lies in the amount of time and effort you are willing to spend in trying to change things. With a budget of zero, it's called bragging.

I completely understand how your time and effort budgets might be in short supply these days. The point is to choose your priorities with open eyes—more than anything that determines your future.

What's your latent potential? Can you read minds or jump into someone else's? When we leave behind the rules and limits that we've been taught, sold, and trained to believe, what's possible is up to us.

How's that imagination working for you now? Excellent execution requires everyone to be operating as a leader. Leaders let the idea's merit win instead of allowing the idea's origin to matter. Leaders know when their opinion is irrelevant and unwarranted, and they stay silent when that's the case. They seek to listen and understand, not to explain.

### *Willingness to Imagine*

While I was able to stop a prognosis of impending blindness, I continue to look up and learn from the people who exemplify each level and follow the scientists and their proof.

To me, it's how I define fun. I know there is a way you define fun that people think is weird. I also believe that if you did it, the world would thank you. However, if there's one thing that we need courage for more than anything else, it's the courage to live up to that commitment. You can't help but be compelled in that direction when you get it right.

We all fear getting it wrong, which also leads us down the wrong path of so-called good advice from well-intended consultants, but that's what the road to hell is paved with, so they say.

The primary purpose of using data to manage is to identify the choices that are right for you and you alone. When you figure it out, the world will thank you. You get to the finish line of accomplishing your compelling life project, and it helps so many people that it feels like the world is thanking you.

Our desire to understand and control our worlds leads us to rely on data. Relying on past data for future decisions is becoming less reliable. Change is getting more complicated. The future is becoming less reflective of the past. Understanding the sources of randomness is more demanding.

As Levin says, “We always overlook variables we didn’t consider in the initial planning. Or, circumstances and events beyond our control that we couldn’t anticipate may necessitate adjustments to our approach.

The point was always to learn and imagine what you might be missing.

## Leading Change

While it’s often said that no one likes change, the truth is that no one likes it unless they can control it. That word, control, and all the biology that goes with it. We want it, and we can’t afford to lose what we have. We love change when it means getting the things we want, especially when our hard work and criticized visions come to fruition.

The thing about change is that it happens whether you want it to or not. When it happens to you, it’s rarely welcome. When you’ve planned on working until 65 and get laid off at 59, that’s six years of earning potential that might not manifest. The number of people I’ve met lately who fall into this category both saddens and astounds me.

The thing about change is that the opportunity to grab it is always right now. You can take control of change and get the future you want. They say luck is when preparation meets opportunity. After finishing this post, you’ll be well-prepared to start getting lucky.

Becoming a master of change is a new skill that we all need, as the world is changing faster than ever. Being unwilling to accept the status quo, I always tried to change it, leave it, or create something new. In my background, I learned about the PDCA cycle. It’s the process of setting a goal, checking progress, and learning how to improve through the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle.

With our ambitious goals, this cycle may take a year. For productivity goals, this might unfold throughout your day.

## Planning and Doing

Planning means knowing where you want to go and how you will get there. Hospice nurse Bronnie Ware can tell you that people regret the paths not chosen. In hindsight, risk often appears to be an adventure and a source of fun. To break through the paradox of choice, it is essential to analyze and mitigate the risk and then move forward. That’s what planning is about. Determine your aspirations, assess the risk, and scale it down to a manageable size; then, get started.

Masters of change are doers. The more changes you can tackle, learn from and start again, the better you get at it. I've moved 28 times. Each time, I've lost something precious, broken something irreplaceable, and left at least one loose end untied. That said, I have gotten better at it.

There is no replacement for the act of doing something. You can learn about it as much as you want and ask for as much advice as possible, but until you jump in and try, you will discover that you didn't even know to ask the questions that mattered later.

When I first learned to snowboard, I was told to keep my knees bent and my eyes on the horizon. Two days of bruises later, I know there's a lot more to it, and yet, that's my instruction to newbies, too. When I graduated to snowmobiling, I was told, "That's the gas, and that's the brake." Now I realize there is no such thing as a brake.

It might take 10 years and 10,000 hours, but proficiency in something takes time. Time will pass anyway, so you might as well make it count.

### *Checking and Acting*

There's a difference between one year repeated for 10 years and 10 years of experience. In the former, no learning, growth, or development occurs. To make your 10 years count toward proficiency, you need to be checking in with your results.

With snowboarding and snowmobiling, progress was easy to check. I spent more time on my feet, avoiding bruising, while also navigating more complex terrain and challenging conditions. Snowmobiling wasn't about going faster; it was about learning how to make the machine happy and being in control 100 percent of the time. Happy machines last longer and require fewer replacement parts, such as belts.

Whatever your change goal, there is a measure that matters. You don't necessarily have to assign numbers and tracking to it, much as I didn't with learning new sports. You don't need a scale to track your weight loss; you can see it in the mirror and see how your clothes fit.

Make it a hands-on system if you decide to measure it with numbers. Please resist the urge to use technology to do it for you. In *Smarter, Better, Faster*, Charles Duhigg recounts the story of teachers who switched from technology-based systems to paper-based ones, achieving step-change improvements in their results.

The action step is about incorporating what you learn from doing and checking. That's always incorporated the necessity to realize I need to learn something new.

Sometimes, it's as simple as asking a question. Seeing an expert pull something off that shocks and awes you, and you ask them how they did it. Good luck with that question; usually, they say, "I don't know."

### *Recruiting Instruction*

The best teachers are a couple of rungs ahead of you on the ladder. They haven't yet forgotten or ingrained the knowledge it took to get there. Experts have forgotten what talented naturals never knew. The people you want on your learning journey are slightly, but definitely, ahead of you.

Take advice only from people in a position to give it. Everyone loves to give advice. Other people's problems look more straightforward to solve than our own. Do you want to lose weight? That's no problem. Exercise more and eat less. If it were so easy, there wouldn't be a huge industry.

People in a position to give advice are those who authentically live and breathe what they do. They are financial advisors with solid portfolios, and their credit cards are paid off. They are real estate agents who do not pay rent in apartments. They are marketers you've likely heard of and whose clients you've also likely heard of. When you need advice, you want out of there so quickly that you are free to listen to anyone, but be selective and qualify all advice before taking it.

I've invested a lot in building my knowledge. From my engineering degree to numerous premium online courses, I analyze the return on investment to learn new skills and methods. I don't hesitate to invest if I can trust that the teaching will manifest.

When you understand the simple progression of these steps, change becomes something you can master. As a change master, nothing is holding you back but your aspirations and the individuals you choose to recruit as teachers.

## Delegating Authority

Being told what to see is a powerful experience. Someone wrote the children's book "The Emperor's New Clothes" so that every child would learn the lesson.

Unfortunately, it's much easier to hand over your trust in a higher power to follow the status quo rather than rally against it. It takes a lot of courage to trust in your own experience.

In 1961, Stanley Milgram demonstrated our willingness to submit to authority in his search to understand how ordinary Germans could have done such horrible things in the Second World War.

Healthy, well-adjusted people were quite willing to inflict massive, even deadly electric shocks. In the experiment, participants were required to administer a memory test to an actor on the other side of a wall.

When the answers were wrong, a person in a white coat would tell the participant to deliver a shock to the actor. For each incorrect answer, the dial went up 15 volts. The end of the dial was labelled "XXX."

At the researcher's instruction, participants in the white coats turned the dial to the end.

Letting someone else tell us what to do means we are absolved of responsibility. It's a significant energy-conserving behaviour, but it's also not an accurate perception. "I was just following orders" does not absolve one from punishment.

The problem doesn't care who is the most charismatic, loudest, tallest or biggest. The people in the room do. Guess what else the problem doesn't care about? People care about who reports to whom and who makes the most money. When we come together to collaborate, this creates a problem.

For excellent execution, we need everyone to bring their best.

## *Liberating Voices of Truth*

How to Break Free from the Grip of Authority? When subjects objected but were told, “You must go on; you have no choice,” they refused and did not proceed. The word “choice” may have helped them realize they had one.

Breaking authority, he found, takes seeing the effect of what you are doing with your own eyes. A second way revolt happens is if you have to force someone personally. A third way subjects could resist was by watching authority break down, such as witnessing an argument between two authority figures.

In a team, admitting you don’t know becomes an invitation to adventure. When you do it in a group, you show everyone that you can handle the truth. Permitting them to speak up will save you from much irrationality.

We’ve made progress because we’ve the smarts to know that we must organize to survive. To that end, we explore various models and approaches, all of which involve some form of ranking. Rank relies on dogma to exist, so a population that behaves is both cause and effect. Obedience to order is a fundamental aspect of society.

You give the answers to the teacher; you obey your parents when your mind isn’t big enough to wander on its own. It’s an order you have to rebel against; that’s what teenagers are supposed to do.

Sorry, but brave souls willing to go along with what other people want from you, we need your perspective, input, disagreements, and hidden resentments. We need you to speak up.

This means that followers need to develop their leadership abilities, and leaders need to learn from David Marquette’s approach to turning followers into leaders.

## *Creating Leaders out of Followers*

David Marquette, author of *Turn the Ship Around*, had to learn this hard in one of the most extreme command and control environments – the US Military.

A captain in the Navy, Marquette was assigned to a ship with new technology. Because of the latest technology, the crew literally couldn’t execute his commands. In a short span, he had to go from giving orders to allowing his crew to tell him what needed to be done.

When Marquette says to turn the ship around, he means that he must eliminate the command-and-control culture and replace it with one where everyone is a leader. People have the authority to make decisions for which they are qualified and in the best position to make them. Red tape is cut, and bureaucracy is eliminated.

Next time, catch yourself in your defensiveness and ask to hear the other side. “Tell me more” and “Why do you say that?” are handy phrases for such crucial conversations.

However, despite all the good advice and sheer rationale, why are leaders like Marcus Buckingham, author of **NOW, DISCOVER YOUR STRENGTHS**, telling us that the bar has hardly moved in the last twenty years?



## Prioritize Quality

We might even learn that the most efficient ways to get things aren't always practical.

Efficiency is all about the speed of completing a task, while effectiveness is about doing it correctly. They don't always go together. You learned about hyper-efficiency and doing things too quickly, creating a smokescreen of activity to mask the actual work you know you should be doing.

Relying on others may seem like a short-term efficiency, but ultimately, it's not productive for either you or them. According to Jim Rendon in his book **UPSIDE**, the environments in which we flourish are those characterized by warm, loving companionships, ample space for growth, and relationships where we are not being controlled.

When we exert our lazy influence over others in an attempt to control them, we are preventing their growth, which is not loving behaviour. The Golden Rule instructs us to treat others as we'd like to be treated.

Learning to stand on our own two feet is a vital part of becoming a productive member of society. When we aren't relying on others, we all have the opportunity to flourish. The counterintuitive rule is standing up for what you've got covered and relinquishing what you know you can't, won't, or don't want to cover. Authenticity is knowing what to delegate.

Some of us need to follow Marquette's lead and turn followers into leaders, while others need to find their inner Rosa Parks, their intuition of resistance, and their better insight. Will we find a rational solution together? It might be the only way.

## 4. The Art of Maintaining Gains

New frontiers await. As the pace of change continues to increase, we need to learn in ways we've never understood before. The old way of learning is lagging, creating feelings of being overwhelmed, frustration, and anxiety. It's time for a new way to learn.

While that can induce panic, please remember that panic and excitement feel the same. Excitement reflects a positive mindset, which should be yours, considering that you are taking control of your direction and taking your power back from where you misplaced it.

We've all been trained to misplace it with our teachers, parents, priests, and doctors. The dogma of earlier generations was created by people who were no more intelligent than you, who sought answers from others who were no more intelligent than themselves. Now, remember that honest introspection will always be the best answer to these coaching questions.

Some people enjoy school and excel academically, only to struggle in life. Others fail at school and do well without it. Many manage to do well but never realize their full potential. What if it was all in the way we think about learning?

## The Corporate Update

When I was raised, I felt that a parent's job was to program a child, and the role of teachers was to reinforce that programming. Teach them rules, help them get up to speed to join society, and encourage them to try harder if they don't pick up the lessons well.

One of the things I wanted permission to change in what I was teaching employees wasn't just the content but how I would teach it. If there was one thing that needed improvement universally about the old way, it was how it was taught. I tried it, too, only to realize the horror first-hand.

My Lean Six Sigma experiences were similar: I spent a week in a classroom environment at a time, totaling four weeks. Just sitting still all day long was a problem for adult learners. For managers who were selected for their hands-on abilities, it was excruciating.

How would I teach it? In the same way that I was taught snowmobiling. I used the approach that I am not a blank slate, and neither is any other adult learner. Unlike the one used with kids, it employed an adult education approach.

In my first job, I had both a contribution assessment and a performance review. At the end of the year, you'd sit down and tell your boss what you added. A baseline contribution was assumed. That baseline was addressed in a separate review at a different time, if my memory serves, and who knows if it does.

Other organizations thought it more efficient to combine these two processes.

Efficiency is not always practical. When they combine, a different strategy emerges, one that took me a while to figure out.

## The Unspoken Strategies

The corporate strategy is not to take any bold, fun, interesting, or risky actions. If you're daring, you might fail and not get your raise, while others do hardly anything yet never say they expect otherwise and still receive substantial raises. It's all about baby steps, a manager told me. I stopped being happy with that pace about forty years ago.

Perhaps you've noticed that the stock market doesn't like shocks, and neither does the CEO nor anyone under him. If risk is your thing, an organization may not be the right fit, but the stock market is your game.

If it's fun or engaging, everyone will want to be on board, and nothing will happen. Meetings are often pushed back due to conflicting schedules. When they do occur, they are random, disjointed affairs, and everyone leaves without what they need.

If you manage to keep meetings focused on the critical few decisions, there are too many assumptions, blind spots, and limitations to make the right choices. They fail, and it's a skill to explain how you had nothing to do with it, yet they are far from irrelevant—quite the tightrope.

It's about letting authenticity lead and seeing where it goes. It's amusing that Montessori was the school built on that principle, and I only have two memories of it: seeing Justin Trudeau as a toddler and getting

angry that they were trying to make me color within the lines their way. Perhaps the school delivered instruction according to its intention, but we all had our intentions confused.

### *Keep it Simple*

What worked for me in snowmobiling was as simple as my first lesson. This is the gas, the break; try to keep up.

That was it; yet, in that simplicity lay the reality that if I kept the same distance from the leader, I'd always be traveling at the right speed to make the corner, land the jump, and skim the water. I had to learn independently because following isn't something I do.

Instead, I did the free-body diagrams I learned in physics and thought about rotating engines, as I learned in engineering. The observation was my friend, as I noticed my teachers' wear patterns, complaints, and experiences. I observed the motion and applied the calculus I had learned to describe it. Then, I started wearing earplugs and drowning them all out.

This conviction led them to let me change the curriculum. It is far more about coaching and less about indoctrination of the rules.

Explain the basics, then observe their actions.

Frankly, there's not much to the rules, although some people get freaked out when they're taken away. For some people, rules are a source of comfort.

How are rules that limit you, box you in, and prevent you from seeing real solutions comforting? We get used to them because we think exposing them makes us vulnerable.

When you speak the truth, it hurts someone, and they smack you. Since then, the pain has ruled your voice. Perhaps you used your voice as a means to get someone back. Sticks and stones, or words, whatever it may be, it is always people who are doing it.

It's a different world now, though, and the truth could do some good these days. It creates a psychological safety zone where we can all breathe a sigh of relief.

### *Clarify Goals*

Everyone's definition of success is different. That means your goals should be your own, specifically tailored to where you are today and where you want to go. Being productive will get you there, and you must ensure that it's somewhere you want to be when you arrive.

Your definition of success is unique to you. It means reflecting on your preferences and ambitions rather than those you were taught or thought you should have. It's up to you to set a goal that resonates with your passions.

While your definition of success may include big, hairy goals and dreams, you achieve them by breaking them down into short-term objectives, which are written down and reviewed regularly.

Your short-term goals should also be SMART. That is, specific, measurable, actionable, relevant and time-bound. You know what you will accomplish by when and that it's within your capability to do the work.

Are you spending the most time on the most important things? Use feedback data to validate where time is being spent. You've been tracking your time, and it's worth examining whether your stated priorities align with how you spend your time.

There are only so many things you can do. You need time for yourself, including time to reflect and rest. Relationships take time. Don't take it on if you don't have the time to succeed at something. When you prioritize the most important things, it becomes easier to say no when you feel obliged to say yes.

Your action plan should meet the conditions for SMART goals: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. They should begin by outlining your strategic objective and then detailing the tactical steps that will be taken.

### *Grow Investments*

Don't spend time, money or energy on things that don't create transformations. Every dollar you spend should deliver a return on that money. Lean manufacturing offers eight ways manufacturers waste time, money and energy, and you should ensure that they aren't unnecessarily costing you.

In your world, it's about finding the return on investment. If it's not worth it, don't do it.

If you have expenditures and aren't seeing the value, start shopping for alternatives, asking for refunds and cancelling memberships. Stand up for yourself as a consumer in this economy with the power of your spending habits.

Even an analysis starting with good, clean data does not guarantee a solid conclusion. Just as we prefer not to hand control over to data, we recoil at letting some tool decide for us.

Author Gerd Gigerenzer of **GUT FEELINGS** tells the story of one economics professor trying to decide between two opportunities. Turning to a friend for advice, the friend reminded him he was skilled in pro and con analysis. The professor replied, "Come on, this is serious!"

Any factual analysis, such as a pro versus con comparison, can feel like a relinquishment of control to the facts, to an undesirable solution, and a fate that lands in our laps.

Just because analysis yields a conclusion doesn't mean you must accept it. It's another data point to consider, helping you tune in to your intuition. With your gut instinct, you may discover the solution you need.

### *Rationalize your Change*

If you are making a permanent, irreversible change, you don't have to worry about relapse. However, if you expect people to change their actions, methods, and timing, you must consider how to embed those new behaviors.

You must create the change at a system level, not just at the process level. Make the improved way the most straightforward, the only, and the most obvious. Align reward, recognition and feedback systems. Ensure they have sufficient time to complete it, are comfortable and confident in their ability to do so, and understand why the change is necessary in a way that matters to them – personally, not just to the company, but to them.

Allow for a period of change and create reinforcements to help them through that time. Monitor your results and enjoy the payoff of all your hard work and improved awareness.

Depending on your business size, you may face several types of change, all requiring consideration of a specific scope, timeline, and intent.

Top leadership is often solely responsible for setting the organizational or group culture and is the only group that can change it. Top management has an area of control that includes project selection and scope, which will drive the teams' objectives. Project leadership manages the effectiveness of the change.

Project management is responsible for implementing any changes to the project scope. Project team members manage the change by executing their specific tasks. Engaging customers and businesses with a determined change might be required, and corporate communication or marketing typically fulfills this function. Finally, training becomes involved as stakeholders must be prepared with the new skills needed for the change.

### *Align Enthusiasm*

Some stakeholders need to be brought on board; others need to be brought on board; others need to be brought on board. Over-enthusiasm for change is just as problematic. It can lead to rushed timelines, setting the foundation for burnout, disappointment and an eventual turn of enthusiasm.

When people have no control over change that impacts them, the results can be catastrophic. Put yourself in their shoes; listen to their concerns, ideas, and degree of interest. Evaluate how they may respond. How can you get them on board if their support is required or even helpful?

Some common and natural – if ridiculous sounding - reasons that can remain unconscious and derail efforts include hearing that there can't be a better way. After all, they are the experts and would know about it or come up with it. They'd tried, failed, and settled, and who are you to say differently?

Instead, they tell you there are people with more significant problems than mine. Pick on them, they say, if outright denial isn't their strategy.

Ultimately, people don't want to be proven that they need help; they want to do it themselves. Competence and capability are there to be nurtured, not crushed by competition. Sometimes, they know where they screwed up, but they don't have the budget or time to try again.

When you empathize with a resistor, you can explain the benefits so that they can care about or address their problem with a solution. For instance, do you have to create and discuss the opportunity for a safe learning environment?

If you can't find a way that your stakeholder is better off, and they would see it that way for themselves, do not be quick to dismiss their objections. A better solution may exist.

### *Identify Restrictions*

The first time I went snowboarding, I fell constantly for 8 hours. Then someone big, strong and experienced swooped in like a dancer behind me and said, "It's like this."

As soon as I felt it, it was clear. It was about mastering gravity – your center against the softness of the powder, the pull of gravity, and the friction of your edge.

When I went snowmobiling, I initially thought it was like a couch with a motor. That didn't work well. Finally, I analyzed the situation and realized I was on a snowboard with a motor. When that kicked in, I realized that my center of gravity was sloshing around too much.

Becoming connected to the machine required recruiting all my muscles. My neck had to hold my heavy helmet up and forward while the wind wanted to whip it back. I realized the padding on the seat wasn't there because you were supposed to sit on it.

One day, it was my thumb that was saying no more. I couldn't feel it move, and since it was the one on the throttle, that wasn't a good place to be. I called thumbs down. That's when I discovered the difference between a carbonated sled and a fuel-injected one. My thumb no longer had to push the gas; it felt like I had a new life.

Buying a new sled instead of getting a more vigorous thumb was the weakest, most effortless link I could fix to achieve part three of my instruction: try to keep up. Do you know where to focus your limited time, money, and energy to make a significant impact on achieving your objectives?

### *Delay Automation*

The first thing people want to go for is automation. Technology is shiny, new, and chic. However, you should know that automating anything means producing more of whatever it is currently producing.

The sheer volume can be a problem alone. Even while that is their goal, Lucy and Ethel end up eating the chocolates.

Another aspect of technology is that it can be challenging to change once it is in place. Not just because of the cost to implement and the difficulty of proving the benefits and payback of changing it but also because it ingrains a behavior, a culture, and an expectation.

If you want to automate, take your time to plan it carefully. While it may seem like the quickest and most effortless solution, appearances are often deceiving.

### *Beyond Obvious Solutions*

Have you heard of the tennis player who tells his doctor, "It hurts when I do this"? The doctor says, "Then stop doing that."

When you want to solve a specific problem, Google is full of answers. When not, you must tap into your creativity and think of inventive or innovative new solutions.

We often find ourselves stuck in a situation we don't like because we can only think of how much better things would be if we could eliminate it. Yes, life would be better without it. However, when elimination is an overly ambitious goal or too challenging to tackle, accepting things as they are is not the best approach. You can always choose progress and create momentum instead of trying to take the status quo.

Too often, we don't bother doing anything because the problem is too big to tackle, or the only solution we can see is the result, but the next right step is unclear. Tweak your perspective on the problem, and new ideas will emerge.

Quick wins add up fast and are much easier to accomplish. Improving a little every day requires discipline and commitment, but it adds up reliably, much like the compound interest of success.

You can think of quick wins as low-hanging fruit. They are ready and easy to pick and don't harm anything while you do it. Typically, they are inexpensive or free. You don't want to invest in quick wins because they often prove to be temporary once the problem is resolved.

Three types of quick wins help create the time and space for problem-solving. They help eliminate noise, pressure, and activity so you can focus on solutions.

### *Create Momentum*

Perfection might be the most frequently mentioned "flaw" in interviews, and it truly is a debilitating one. It's impossible to achieve perfection, and in pursuit of it, nothing gets done. It can be a fear of failure that keeps us from completion, or it might even be a fear of success.

Swap perfectionism for progress. All software ever purchased is imperfect – patches and fixes are never-ending realities.

There is a minimum viable level of quality, and then there are levels of sound, great, excellent, and remarkable. No one is suggesting that you should set your expectations at the lowest end of the scale. Instead, it's deciding what's acceptable and recognizing when you've achieved it.

When you do, please ship it, as Seth Godin says. You can always replace it with a 2.0 version later.

When you view success as incorporating increased value to humankind rather than merely personal financial success or fame, you have the potential to find more innovative and effective solutions.

The bigger problem you aim to solve, the more motivated you will be to solve it. You think moving the ball forward is more straightforward than launching it out of the park, but when you see a bigger problem, more assumptions fall away than you realize you had.

Nine out of ten people would take lower pay for the opportunity to have more meaningful work. We all want to leave a legacy and make a difference. Find your purpose, and you will find the motivation to achieve great things.

Seek to serve a greater purpose, and when you do, not only will more people rally around to help and support you, but you will also be able to push through difficulties and find deeper wells of creativity and courage.

### *Diversity Ideas*

You already know to pick your battles wisely. When you see an opportunity to challenge a status quo or norm, staying mum while researching is essential. A challenge without an alternative is seen as a complaint, whereas having a solution is an opportunity for improvement.

Never before has it been as easy as it is now to ensure you aren't reinventing the wheel. Best practices and the experiences of other people proliferate on the internet. Not only can you learn what they did right that worked, but you can avoid their mistakes. Both will save you time, money and energy.

Identify the leaders in your industry, but don't stop there. Deconstruct the essential components of your business model and identify leaders in those areas, regardless of the industry or sector in which they operate. Minimize your learning curve by leaning on those who have gone before you.

When someone says they can't imagine a future event, it's more likely a reflection of their limited imagination rather than the event's likelihood. If you don't have a similar experience in memory, it is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine.

Diversity of experience is the food of imagination. If you can imagine it, you can do it. Visualization is a powerful tool used by top athletes and trainers. It has been proven that your brain and body respond as if what you visualize is happening. If you want a safe place to practice, the best spot might be in your head.

Don't let someone take you out of your vision of a better future just because they can't see it happening. The point is that you can. If you can imagine it, you can create it.

### *Pursue Self-Actualization*

Oprah says, "Everyone wants to fulfill the highest, truest expression of yourself as a human being." She was only a child when Abraham Maslow created his hierarchy of needs and argued that humans have a strong desire to realize their full potential, to reach a level he called "self-actualization."

Self-actualized people represent optimal psychological health and functioning. These individuals are active problem-seekers and solvers, exhibiting a deep understanding of what cannot be changed, as well as the spontaneity and resilience to change what can. Doesn't that sound like serenity, courage and wisdom?

Uncommon productivity is being able to do that: seek and solve problems, accept what you cannot change, and tackle the things you can change. It's not getting confused, distracted or paralyzed. It's leaving problems alone that aren't yours to solve.

Self-actualization helps you stay focused, motivated, and committed. It's facing fear and doing it anyway. It's getting back up when you've been knocked down. It's going against the grain and being a leader when everyone else wants you to get back in line.



To simplify without being simplistic, uncommon productivity is about deciding what problems you must solve, from the minuscule to the massive, and then doing it. You can be uncommonly productive with new knowledge, insight, and skills.

## Slowing Down for Success

Lean manufacturing advises slowing down to speed up, and I love this not-quite-precise adage because we all have the feeling that we need to do more, faster, and worse, that it's not getting done, and we're falling behind. We are falling behind our peers, our competitors, and our dreams. So, how are we supposed to slow down?

In some organizations, the drive to achieve as much as possible leads to a longer to-do list than Santa's. One year, my allocation was over 175 percent. While you might think that would mean I would be working a ton of overtime at a breakneck pace, what happened would boggle your mind. I had months of free time—and a great performance review.

If all that work can be accomplished alone, then your weekends are in jeopardy. However, you need a team to perform most of the work. With even one over-allocated person on the team, it's enough to halt progress when that person isn't available.

It wasn't just me who was over-allocated, but rather a badge of honour that people would use as a surrogate to quantify how in demand they were. The more in demand, the more job security, or so the argument went. When everyone is overallocated, the conditions are ripe for accomplishing nothing.

Project managers play a critical role in developing accurate plans and establishing priorities. I have found myself in positions where the vast majority of my role is lighting a fire under my project team, making sure my project's tasks were at the top of the list, and there was progress, internally competing with other project managers, operations managers, and other authorities with agendas in a dance of internal waste.

## Allowable Procrastination

When you are over-allocated, management knows things on your plate won't get done. Joy and bliss, which often go unfulfilled, are choices everyone has the pleasure of making for themselves. One worker used the opportunity to avoid taking a training session. Another procrastinated on starting a dreaded project. Another had a task he wasn't entirely sure how to do, so he let it drift. And on it went. The more complex and ambiguous tasks went further down the list.

Lean manufacturing recommends scheduling equipment to achieve a maximum uptime of 80 percent. After all, maintenance and unplanned downtime will eat into capacity. It's the same with people. We have vacations and illnesses that take us away from work.

There are also unseen capacity robbers, like days when nothing seems right. The resulting progress is startling when organizations can commit to doing less and scheduling people at a maximum of 80 percent. You have no more excuses when facing the stern, necessary stuff.

Instead of constantly juggling work, it gets done. When something difficult comes up, there is time to deal with it, and there are few options for distraction. Instead of switching to something easier or more fun, the tough stuff gets done. The right experts are available within a decent amount of time. There are no excuses.

When we commit to doing less and harness the power of focus, we can effectively learn, grow, and accomplish the more complex things in life —the ones that deliver long-term value and make our days easier, better, and more fulfilling. It's an effort that is worth the time. What can you give up today?

### *Clear Definitions*

I couldn't give up my desire to share the information and lessons of my unique existence and experiences in ways that could help others avoid my painful lessons. I needed to learn how to be a teacher in my journey to arrive here.

I enrolled in an Adult Education Certificate program at a college. That was my first mistake. By the time I was staring down the last course, I had a frustrating insight. I learned that a piece of paper is required to teach at the college. It's a vastly different thing. Think of it as employee onboarding for the college or a quality-control program for college instructors.

The last course covered grades and how to mark and submit them. In short, what you needed to know to operate as a teacher within their system. Not how to use rewards and feedback systems to motivate, inspire and inform.

At five, my mother asked me if I was hungry.

"What does hungry feel like?" I asked. When you are hungry, you eat. When you are not hungry, you shouldn't be trained to eat by the clock but rather by your stomach. Your body knows; it even knows what it needs. Not the clock, your parents or the government.

I stuck to that notion. Some nights, it meant falling asleep at the table to a plate of untouched food. Was I supposed to get obese instead? As an adult, I will tell you what being overweight feels like.

It feels like wanting to say something you know that the other party doesn't want to hear. If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything, but what? You eat something to keep the words down.

### *Practicing Speaking Truth*

Speak your truth quietly and clearly, if only to yourself, your diary and your yoga mat.

There was a time when I used noise to find silence. I was in my first year of engineering, trying to survive the year they weed people out, trying to survive my home. I studied calculus, physics, and chemistry to the pounding of Van Halen, Def Leppard, and Queen. Now, I enjoy the hum of silence as the universe's symphony. The only way I got here was by dismantling every thought my music was trying to drown out.

Speaking the truth is to lead with love. Not good intentions, love. The road to hell was paved with good intentions. Good intentions can lead to controlling, manipulating, or dominating someone else. It's all

about what they want, not what you would like for them. You can help them find it, but you don't get to provide the answers or grade their work.

The truth does set you free. Who cares if they reject it? I've found nothing funnier than someone trying to deny the truth and nothing more fun than hanging out with the universe.

If I ran the world, I'd make everyone go outside and spend at least one hour a day in green spaces. I'd create a video channel featuring GoPro footage of animals for calming on demand.

Whenever I met someone who was out of alignment, I would sit them down, have them watch that channel, and force them to observe their thoughts. Especially the one that makes them get up and leave.

Too bad that force always backfires. When you get in nature, or at least alone, you can better hear your truth amidst the noise.

### *Answers in the Back of the Book*

Once in my career, I overheard an executive tell another, 'If we want to know if a problem is solvable, we give it to her. '

In snowmobiling, they were also cautious about keeping some secrets from me. At this point, they thought the ego might kill her. Act natural, they whispered.

I put on my armour and donned my helmet, and when I realized no one could see any part of me, I decided it was my opportunity to act like a six-foot-tall chest-beating privileged white man. Maybe you can be a dog on the internet, but check out what I can be on a Skidoo. Fearless. Relentless. First.

Yes, brand matters and even Skidoos eventually fall apart. Girls don't ride, Skidoo told me. Lady ridden, my a\*\*, the dealer said.

You can only fool them for so long: I'm neither a girl nor a lady. At some point, the truth always leaks out. There's no more beautiful a machine, thank you, Skidoo Gods. And thank you for asking for my ideas and listening to them.

One day, I encountered a calculus question that I found particularly challenging. I flipped to the back of the book, not so much to find the answer as to reassure myself that one existed. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that the back of the book stated there wasn't one this time.

People are the same. We define possibility based on what we see other people able to accomplish. When one person demonstrates something possible, a tidal wave of others follows who can do it, too.

Our role as citizens of the human race may be to discover what we can do that seems to be a personal superpower and then share it with others.

## Testing Knowledge

As a university student, I wasn't expecting to be taught. For one, there were over one hundred people in my class. Further, they are transparent with their intentions. Weeding. There weren't textbooks in later years – you had to take notes.

You were lucky when you could understand the professor's English well enough to do so. It was hilarious when our class graduated, saying, "See ta sigh," when it was actually "Theta Phi."

In college, I learned the onus is on the teacher. The perfect score should be achievable by every student. A lack of that is your fault.

What gets lost in college is why I wanted to create my courses in the first place: the sheer limitless possibility of it all, including you.

In university, the classes finally revealed the boundary between what science has proven, what it suspects, and what answers remain to be discovered. In engineering, it gets even better.

Engineering was the practical application of science. That means you take what's proven, accept what seems to work, and then hand that back to science to figure out why it does. That's my kind of fun.

In university, research is primary. You are lucky you got a seat near history unfolding. Perhaps you'll have the opportunity to participate. Some people choose rock stars instead and pretend that what they learned in high school was stable.

My learning style is a teacher's nightmare. A silent one, usually, but a nightmare nonetheless. These days, teachers have far more of these nightmarish students. In my day, I had a library card. Now, I have five.

Teachers are no longer guardians of knowledge; they must provide a different service.

## Perfection-Free Learning

If you recall what you did yesterday or this morning and can't remember, it's because you weren't paying attention when it happened. Your mind was somewhere else when your body lived through those moments; you will never return to them. On the other hand, lessons are unforgettable every time if the instruction is effective.

Perfect is not achievable. Pretending that it is feasible only creates a world of false limits.

Universities are the homes of the researchers who are building and testing the limits of what is collectively known to the human race. Or at least, that's the safe house for these folks.

However, you will not find these campuses' bold and brave ones.

Colleges are for working in the system. Universities are for working on the system. Changing the system happens outside the system – regardless of the circumstances.

You are the only one who knows how hard you are working, what you hope to accomplish, and if you are getting the results as intended. As such, outsourcing the marking is not a good idea.

Frankly, I learned that a mark has nothing to do with someone's capability or skill level. They are just ways to compare. Comparison isn't something I am willing to facilitate. Another comparison word is judgment.

A good idea is to engage your attention, ask questions, and take notes by hand. That's what worked for me in university, and now we know the science behind why that works.

Write those questions down, and don't just raise your hand. Patience, my dear learner, pays off. While you ponder and sit with your unknowing, you gain an appreciation for ambiguity and become more comfortable with the learning process.

### *A Priceless Waste*

I'm told all the time that we have no attention anymore. Someone told me recently that they can only get to the 12- or 13-minute mark in a TED talk before doing something else. I wanted to say to him, "Pick one and get to the point." Then I remembered that some of those talks discuss uncomfortable truths, and clicking away is much easier.

If you want everything to stay the same, you can block it out, but stuff changes anyway.

I'd rather surf than get swept away. I am going to fight every step of the way. I refuse to contribute to the slippery slope of the collective loss of human attention. Not when it is so powerful. People worry that technology will take over, and it has already begun to do so.

I think power is something to hone and control, not give away for someone else to use.

However, I did learn the hard way that I am abnormal in that regard. I had one student in a class of 20 tell me that he'd like to hand it back.

He'd raised his hand to tell me. I stood there, shocked. How many others were in silent agreement? Finally, I read about the Milgram experiments and was, ironically, quite astonished. Likely 13.

To each their own, I say. You want to give me your power; I am happy to use it well on your behalf and keep you safe and sound. Instead, I'd show you how to use it because attention is a gift of consciousness that shouldn't be treated disrespectfully.

### *Stuck in the Classroom*

Once, I had a whole week to teach managers anything I wanted. The catch was that I didn't get to pick them or prepare them. By Tuesday afternoon, one student finally broke down, tuned in and asked why they were there and what they were supposed to be learning. "What were you told?" I asked. Such is how the truths pour out.

I told them that no one asked what I would do with you once I had you here, and as far as anyone knew, I could be asking you to do yoga all week. I told the gatekeepers I would change the curriculum, but not how much or in what direction. About five seconds later, I got a text from the gatekeepers.

When my energy runs out, words that are supposed to remain unsaid come out of my mouth. Just like everyone else has done at some point, I rattled on myself. The trick? Stop with the rats.

A week's worth of yoga might have been much better for everyone. One week of getting people to tune back into themselves would have done them better than anything I could have ever told them.

When people are willing to show up in body but not in mind, when they are willing to give away their time without asking, "What for?" There is a long road ahead of engagement and action, regardless of what they know, think, or believe. If I learned anything that week, it was that students who are forced to learn don't. Anyone forced to do something will generally find a way to assert themselves, if only because it's a biological instinct.

## Updating Models

Over the last week, I participated in the Reuniting Science and Spirituality Summit. The host, Dr. Shamini Jain, has studied psychoneuroimmunology, the field that examines the impact of the mind on health and resistance to disease.

Dr. Jain shared an experience where another doctor asked her, "What's a biophoton?" In her perception, she thought he was reacting as if she had made up the term. Science has proven that it can measure the release of light from the body. There was a time when this field was referred to as parapsychology, and the term 'aura' was a concept associated with woo-woo ideas. Now, there's equipment, data, and proof.

Of course, there will still be a population of doctors who are unfamiliar with the properties of light in their biology. Before accepting a diagnosis or prognosis from your doctor, determine if it is up to date. These days, with so much to learn and unlearn, how can doctors do that and still attend to their patients? They can't, but you won't find the answers in all your Googling because you aren't asking the same old questions.

Irrationality is a product of the limbic brain. We are in stress mode, operating in survival mode, acting instinctually because that's all we have time or energy for. We don't know what we are doing or why we are doing it, and when you press these people for explanations, which I don't recommend, the answer is based on the past. This is how we have always done it because someone said so at some point in the past, and it has become automatic and ingrained.

If beliefs are so powerful that change occurs when we alter our beliefs, then it is worth examining the collective beliefs we hold as a society – and replacing them with Truth.

## *The Old Standard Model*

To overcome irrationality, you must release certain outdated concepts from the past that are no longer beneficial for you or society. How we did things in the past doesn't work in a very different future. The old ways are becoming increasingly irrelevant, and I believe they contribute to stress, keeping people in a state of survival stress.

You might be under the assumption that what was taught in school was an ultimate truth, not a temporary model that has been proven to be inadequate for about thirty to forty years.

Science starts with observation. Technology has continually increased our ability to see. Bigger and smaller, we were fixated on matter, particles and the concrete world.

We used Newton and gravity to explain it. Like billiard balls, there are causes and effects. According to the old standard model, everything can be calculated and determined because everything is like a machine.

Rupert Sheldrake talks of his entry into bioscience. Biology is based on the mechanistic theory of life, which posits that living organisms are machines, inanimate mechanisms devoid of feelings, intelligence, and consciousness. All of this seemed utterly implausible to me.

Like Sheldrake, you also have feelings, thoughts, and awareness.

When you understand that your behavior begins with your emotions, you may not have much use for the traditional model, as it completely overlooks the starting point.

### *The Rise of Materialism*

The old standard model is based on matter. If you connect matter and materialism, you start to understand the problem.

Thinking it's all about machines makes life far less than miraculous. It makes people disposable. Material things become far more critical than they are. It fosters a society that accumulates, wastes, and disrespects one another.

It makes them hard. They want to be complicated. They are more carbon than diamonds, full of credit instead of potential. If there's one thing for sure about credit, it's that we've made ourselves slaves to our possessions. We've signed away our future time, the potential for things, and possibly the planet.

A materialistic world wastes our human resources and our earthly resources.

According to the standard model, the human body's activity —millions of interactions every second—is explained by a swimming pool analogy.

Two tennis balls in a swimming pool are supposed to find each other instantaneously. These tennis balls are enzymes and hormones.

Consider the statistics of the improbability of such an occurrence.

It doesn't work to explain disease, chronic illness, or human behaviour. It doesn't explain how cells communicate with each other and how they process information. We know cells organize, but no one has pointed out that we cannot describe how they do it.

### *Intelligent Energy Fields*

Scientists now know that it does not matter whether it is primary or intelligent energy fields. They know that when matter disappears, what is left in its place isn't nothingness; it's pure potential. Limitless possibility. We live in a sea of intelligent energy fields, and we are part of it.

Scientists know that your heart reacts to the world before it materializes. It sends signals to your brain and from your brain to your body.

You thought exercise and keeping your heart healthy were just for pumping blood. You are so much more than the mechanical model you were taught to be.

When we are taught that we come pre-built with DNA with our parents deciding everything, some people hand over control to their parents and never take it back.

Why would they want to? It's a harsh world, and Mommy's fridge and Daddy's wallet are always full.

You can't live by a model that doesn't make sense any more than you can live with your parents' answers to all the questions in your life. Trying to align two things that don't make sense is a form of cognitive dissonance. It is also dis-ease, as in stressful. Trying to survive is not a good place to call your comfort zone.

## Aligning Culture

Simon Sinek tells of Noah, a barista in Las Vegas. So enamoured is Sinek with his service that he leaves him a huge tip and asks Noah if he likes his job. If you think Noah said yes, you'd be correct, but then Noah gave Sinek the shattering insight.

Noah has two jobs. He loves this job, which is where Sinek met him. But at his second job, he tries to stay under the radar, as Sinek points out, the same person, different environment, and completely different behaviour. The people around you influence your behaviour more than you might realize.

Have you ever seen a massive, full-grown elephant restrained by a mere rope? When elephants are small, trainers use heavy chains. The elephant tries to escape and learns that he is not strong enough. When the belief takes hold, the elephant stops trying to escape. By then, the chain is no longer needed.

Like elephants, we start learning before we know how to reject bad lessons. Girls taking standardized tests who are reminded of their gender merely by marking the appropriate box on the form do much worse than when that gender box isn't there. Psychologists can tell stories of the importance of the first five years of a child's life that can scare potential parents into becoming helicopters and undermining that child's growth with all the good intentions in the world.

As humans, we are all like those elephants. Sometimes, we weren't tall enough, didn't know how to express ourselves, or didn't know how to do various things. Over time, we grew, built our vocabulary, and took courses from experts. However, we all have inventories of so-called stuff we cannot do. Things that we are not. Things that we know for sure.

## Cheerleading Employees

Encouragement is the cheerleader of behaviour management. When an effort is not acknowledged, it sends the message that it doesn't matter. When a secretary misses an occurrence of a report, and no one says a word, she waits before resuming it. When no word is heard, she has received the message that the report no longer matters. Perhaps it did at one time. This test is frequently performed in large



organizations where procedures and practices are outdated and outgrown. Sometimes, we know, it might be better to beg forgiveness than to ask permission, and for that, there are influencing skills.

One is reciprocity. According to Cialdini, people tend to give back when you give to them first. If you can offer something of value, say a free download of helpful information, they are more likely to take the time to answer your survey. On websites, people are more likely to give you their email address if you offer them something of value. All business is an exchange of value or reciprocity at work.

The second is scarcity. When people know the download will be coming down and the survey expires, they are more likely to act. Busy people are more likely to get to it if you tell them that you need it within a few days rather than a few weeks. Give them too much time, and they will put it off until they forget about it.

That said, you may have to send a reminder email. Forward the original and state, “Just bringing this to the top of your inbox in case you missed it.” “

The third is to ensure that you’ve established yourself as a knowledgeable and credible expert. You walk your talk, look at your brand, and, of course, have a proven track record of past successes.

### *Balancing Authority*

When you are trying to learn how to help people with their specific goals, they see you as a cooperative influence. Always remember to thank them and show appreciation for their time. Above all, you are seeking their opinion because you value their perspective, so give them the compliment they deserve. Ensure you mean it and that it’s not something overly extravagant. We appreciate individuals who offer us compliments and who work with us towards mutual goals.

Always point out the similarities between you and your ideal client. Instead of stating how brilliant you are, you want to say things like “People like you have said...” and get specific with what you mean by “like you.”

The more we identify with others, the more we are influenced by them. Those who are similar to us sway us more easily. They become avatars for our behaviour. We can observe them and try to understand what it might be like to do what they are doing or read what they are reading.

You aren’t giving them your word for it; you are letting them think I’m like those people. For instance, if you target HR executives, you say, “Other HR executives have said...” What other people say is more powerful than what you say about yourself. Other people are more likely to uncover the truth and are less likely to be biased.

### *Consistency and Consensus*

Try to identify common ground. You might be members of the same organizations, alums from the same school, or active in the same online forums. Pointing out the shared ground helps people see you are on the same side. After you establish your credibility in this way, you can share the results you’ve provided for people like them and see if it sounds like something that would interest them.

People look to the actions of others and their past to determine their own. Creating a pattern agreement makes it more difficult for them to change course and start saying no. Consistency is a powerful influencer. People like to continue with things they have previously said or done.

When hotels want to reduce the costs associated with linen laundry, they inform guests that almost everyone else has already done so. Reuse goes up by 26 percent. From comments to reviews, social weight works.

There's a reason why infomercials ask if you think the price tag should be high and then repeatedly lower it. When they do that, they create a no-brainer comparison in your brain. Studies have shown that our brains are unadventurous when it comes to numbers. We anchor to a specific price, even if that price is ridiculous. When we hear the actual price, it sounds like a steal.

In **PRE-SUASION**, Robert Cialdini shares the story of one service provider who struggled with price discussions. When he changed his pitch to say, "Obviously, I can't charge you \$100,000 for this," the price discussion went smoothly. Compared to this six-figure amount, they were getting a deal.

### *Telling Stories*

When pain doesn't compel us fast enough, painting future pain can do the trick. Describe their life, whether that is one week from now or 10 years from now. Then, show what would happen if they don't buy. The comparison should make the decision a no-brainer if you are honest and transparent.

Stories are the oldest form of information transfer. Knowledge was passed down through stories. They were based on truth, but they were remembered and shared because they conveyed emotion, colour, and depth, allowing people to connect with the message more meaningfully.

We tend to prioritize narrative over accuracy. Regarding altruism, we aren't motivated to help the masses but to help the individual. Millions are dying of poverty, but give us a face, a name, a story and hearts and donations double.

The value of any gift is the material value plus the sentimental value it holds. It's not just the object but what we can tell ourselves and others about it.

Add a story, and the price skyrockets. Someone paid exorbitant amounts for a sweater worn by George Clooney, gum chewed by Britney Spears, and breakfast leftovers from Obama's.

The kind of stuff that matters isn't tangible but experiential. Sometimes, you win a comparison based on possessions; sometimes, you lose. Experience, however, can't be easily compared, and therefore, holds value and brings satisfaction<sup>3</sup>. We have a story to tell, not just an object to show.

Use Pixar's formula to tell a great one: *Once upon a time, there was an (identity). Everyday (action). One day, (conflict). Because of that (escalation). Because of that (consequence). Until finally, (success). Ever since then, I've been following a new routine.*

## Accomplishing Your Goal

I joined a mastermind group once. The leader wanted everyone to post their goals on a webpage, and many people were concerned that they didn't want the world to know their goals. Deep, deep laughter here because, as anyone on the internet knows, it takes work, intention, and effort to be found.

Then they have to bother to read. Who does that anymore?

First, they'd have to care. I've found that they only care when it's about them. It's a world of people who were taught that others should care more about what's in it for them before they should agree to listen to their points.

When people appropriate others' words, ideas, or similar concepts, it's often for their gain. It's significantly more efficient than writing the entire post yourself. It's a world where indignation passes for higher moral values, and if that's your game, there is more fodder than ever.

When I finished my first book, the reader asked, "Who did you write this for?"

I wrote that first book as a condensed primer on how people genuinely behave while we like to think of ourselves as moral, rational, and wise. Mistakenly, I thought that if I shared that knowledge readily, we could all get up to speed quickly and take action to rectify the situation.

It was about why, not who. A graceful exit occurs when we fulfill our needs, allowing us to move on.

## *Beginning with the End in Mind*

With that question, I realized that there are people who want to change the game and others who wish to exploit it. I wrote it for the game-changers. However, to change the game, you first have to win. So how do you do that?

Do you become Prime Minister and re-write the laws? No. We know that once you become a PM, you must please the people who hired you to be there. I mean, satisfy your donors. You don't get to change the game because you will be booted out if you bait and switch like that.

Get your donation from the game changers. You'll never win because the game-changers don't have those resources. You'd have to rally the masses who never vote because why?

Like Obama, you'd have to find and inspire an audience that most politicians are unaware of. Then, when you leave, you have to watch your legacy get dismantled by the resurgence of the old front, which is angry at having been knocked off its pedestal for the past eight years.

## *Living by Principles*

How do you change the world? I wish I knew. I have ideas and opinions, but if asked, the only correct answer is "I don't know." When was the last time you heard that honest answer from anyone?

At the very least, you don't contribute to the things you don't want. I don't want plastic bottles everywhere. Some people don't want to lose their jobs. This is a very real situation in my area, as Nestlé

takes the groundwater here, puts it in plastic, and surrounds it with more plastic, all to ship it on the backs of everything that burns oil.

How do waste, plastic, and destruction continue? Because they are creating jobs, and you heard how much Justin Trudeau cares about jobs. Far more than the environment, fairness, or equality. To such an extent that we lost the valuable contributions of JWR as our attorney general on issues related to jobs and the environment; he consistently prioritized jobs over environmental concerns.

I'm going to go back to choosing dandelions. On the soccer field, like in life, I realized that to get heard, I have to fight, fight, fight. I don't think the ends justify the means.

To help the people I want to help, I have to figure out how to get in their faces. Somehow, it all starts to unravel the idea of "help." Like being a Black Belt. First, they yell at you and ask who you think you are. Four months later, when they are all smiles, no one apologizes for the unwelcome introduction, yet none of the success has offset it for me. I'm glad we were able to save your jobs and the company's money. There is more to life than jobs, money, and force.

### *Feeling Heard and Appreciated*

Maya Angelou said they would forget what you said and did, but they would remember how you made them feel. Feelings are as hard to ignore as they are to be heard and appreciated.

To be heard and appreciated, there is a whole language. It's called marketing. You learn "search engine optimization," basically how to game Google's algorithm. Or you pollute social media with your links. There are many ways, and I've paid lots of good money to learn them. Only to let go of them.

All this time, it was all about me. I've explored my history and how I wanted to rewrite my story to reflect the wisdom of time and gain a fuller perspective on my experiences. Over the years I spent writing here, I went from being someone unsure of how to articulate my thoughts to being hired to help others become more articulate. In my shoes, that is a pretty amazing transformation.

Mission accomplished. The art of my graceful exit is that this is the last post on this blog. It's not that I have nothing left to say – it's that I have nothing left to figure out how I want to say it. I'm crystal clear about what I stand for and don't, who I want around me and who I don't, what I can control and what I can let go.

### *The Discovery of Knowledge*

Since personal experience is skewed and invested, we rely on science to help reveal the laws of life. Unlike laws written by humans, these aren't up for debate; no one cares how you feel about them, and they serve as the foundation of understanding when we come together to do anything. Gravity, for instance, is a law.

Science doesn't write the laws. Science is trying to discover the laws. It's all about trying to understand, predict, control, and influence this world and the things we call Nature.

To discover anything, you need a process. If you want to go travelling, you get a map. You divide and sift if you want to find lost items in a sandbox. There are ways to do anything, and always ways to do them better, even if the way to do it better hasn't been discovered yet, so we stick with what we have.

We do it with government, justice, education, health, and science. It's imperfect, but the work is in progress.

There is one that is written down for all processes. Then, there is a second that management believes and approves. Then, a third exists, and that is the one that happens. It's the difference between the job description, the training, and the peer pressure. Science is not immune.

Journal articles are written to imply that the process begins with understanding the foundation of black and white. The scientists then use that foundation to venture into the grayness of ambiguity. They form a hypothesis. Following the hypothesis is a test, the interpretation of the results, and then the formulation of new theories. When hypotheses pass the test, a new piece of grey is turned black or white.

### *The Funny Business*

The reality is different. The cat was let out of the bag by several prominent leaders. Some admit that they don't always bother publishing or sharing the information. One article started the anti-vaccination movement by falsely linking autism and vaccinations. Rolling back knowledge is difficult, even when we realize it never was such a thing.

Isaac Asimov said that the phrase that heralds discovery is not "Eureka," but "That's funny."

That's funny because we didn't expect it to turn out that way. The root of all jokes and humor is expecting something and experiencing the opposite. Unfortunately, some of us have funny bones that are out of tune, myopic perspectives, and expectations that we've deeply invested in.

In Dean Radin's book **REAL MAGIC**, he shares the story of historian Michael Shermer. In 2014, he wrote about experiencing an event that suggested the existence of the paranormal or the supernatural. Only two years later, he seems to retract that, writing now, "We must resist the temptation to try to measure it because such efforts can never succeed, not even in principle."

As Radin points out, "not even in principle" is reminiscent of a quote attributed to Mark Twain: "It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble." It's what you know for sure that ain't so."

What made him change his mind so drastically, and in a way that led to such an illogical error, that he would have flagged it had it come from someone else? Reputations, careers, incomes, and more are on the line, and it's remarkable what your brain will produce to make it all seem logical, if only to you.

### *A Biological Menu*

Life is made up of DNA. It contains your genetic inheritance and the instructions necessary for you to function as a human being. While questions remain and debates range about the exact way DNA works, you should know that the code you have is yours alone.

That is unless you have an identical twin. As you are aware, even identical twins are distinct from one another. This is one window into how we know DNA isn't like a program but more like a menu.

Being unique starts with your design and how you are built, a product of evolution, inheritance, and nature. Choosing to double down on it, defying it, or ignoring it are all valid options.

At an instinctual level, our consciousness serves our unconsciousness. By the time we become aware, we are already far down the path of confirming our bias to be right instead of looking to learn, understand, and discover what is right. It serves up reasons, looks for information, and performs various tasks that are in service of much more significant things, even when science is involved.

One reason is cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance is the uncomfortable experience of thinking two conflicting thoughts. One thought is that you are a good, reputable person. The other thought is that you screwed up. Your brain rejects one of them. It produces the effect whereby the team fails, yet no one claims responsibility for the mistake.

### *The New Science*

While the news that humans are not rational decision-makers upset economics in 2006, the discovery of the Higgs particle in 2012 will upset the world as you know it. This article demonstrates that, in the space that separates you and me, and the atoms that separate us, in the vast 99.9999 percent of the universe, it does not matter; it is not a vacuum, but rather connected energy fields, much like waves.

Biologically, they know your heartbeat sends a wave into this field. With your mind, you can turn off the genes for survival and turn on the genes for growth, repair and the fountain of youth. One-third of all healings are caused by thought alone. Why isn't this on the news? You might wonder. They don't want you to know because too many invested parties would lose their income.

Science proves that a channel of energy runs through your spine and out the top of your head. It can locate what Easterners have long referred to as chakras and even measure their energetic locations. Not everyone has it located where it's beneficial in that channel, but everyone can learn to move it back to where it belongs.

Today, Dr. Joe Dispenza is measuring the energy fields produced by the body. His results look like a map of the patient's chakras. Then he trains them on how to return them to their original position and remeasures them, confirming that the mind alone reorganizes energy. For patients, this shows up as cured diseases.

This is the new science at work: placebo, possibility, and self-mastery. The answer is yes, you can measure it. Perhaps Shermer meant that the ability to measure it renders it not paranormal or supernatural. Maybe it's just super skill.

## 5. The Hierarchy of Action

Real estate agents know that if they show you three houses, you will likely pick the one they want you to choose, as they deliberately select the other two. If they want you to buy the side-split, they will show you a side-split that needs a new roof, a Tudor and a side-split that is move-in ready. In essence, the

choices are A, A- and B. A- is the one in need of a new roof, and the Tudor is the B. We need options to compare things against when their value is multilayered and complex.

To the manager who uses data to make decisions, the data that matters most is the organization's culture. When it comes to what matters, as one management guru said, culture eats strategy for breakfast.

Organizationally, we talk about culture. “Culture eats strategy for breakfast,” said a wise consultant guru. Culture is the collective conditions – the people and the environment. To think of a strategy in isolation from culture is to plan what the left leg should do without considering where the body will ultimately end up.

Change in an organization requires changing the culture. However, in some organizations, one department is responsible for managing culture while another is responsible for change management. In these organizations, no one has enough responsibility to execute.

Still, in those environments, fear is the mobilizing force, and when that's the case, no one wants anyone to perform. I once heard it verbalized as, “It's a safety meeting. We all meet so no one moves, and therefore no one gets hurt.”

The ultimate in safety is a cage. When that's the case, change is to be feared because it will rattle someone.

## The Force of Culture

Corporate culture is the personality of an organization. According to Edgar Schein, culture exists at three levels. There is the observable level. These are the documented procedures, policies, and even marketing materials. It's what we say when we claim to agree and when we know it's for the sake of posterity. Underneath that is the “Yeah, but this is different”

Culture is the norms and values that are not observable but knowable because someone will care enough about you or the team's performance to inform you of them before or after. The timing is a secondary source of information that you will want to understand later.

Getting up to speed on the norms and values is why the first days are ones in which we are on high alert. Like babies, we absorb knowledge and rules based on how people behave and what they are saying, whether we are conscious of it or not.

What seems eye-raising and problematic in your first days is often overshadowed by the value of fitting in. Great organizations take advantage of the fresh perspective and grease the conversation to discover what those shocking moments and behaviours might be.

If, instead, you are given a stern speech about how things are, please note that it is conveying an important message about tolerance and the desire for improvement. It's not just insurance organizations that are risk-averse – it can strike anywhere and to anyone.

## Unspoken Expectations

Over time, what was eye-raising and problematic becomes part of the underlying assumptions about how things are. Sometimes, individuals engaging in eye-raising and challenging behaviors are unaware of alternatives, as they have never worked elsewhere and have no basis for comparison. Who would understand until a way to learn something different is possible?

The diversity in underlying cultures ranges across spectrums. There is a culture where everyone shows up late to the meeting; excuse my lateness; it means I am important. Elsewhere, people like Anna Wintour, of Vogue fame and portrayed in the movie **THE DEVIL WEARS PRADA**, arrive early.

With such actions, the message they might be sending might be that they are so powerful that they are in control of their agenda and capable of dynamically prioritizing as life demands that skill. Perhaps they understand that demonstrating respect to the people who report to you by not keeping them waiting yields returns that aren't straightforward to calculate.

Maybe those early fifteen minutes reveal everything you need to know about the people who report to you. When you are early, too, it might be your fifteen minutes of fame because its relationship-building time is far longer than the ride in the elevator.

All this data is gold when it comes to understanding why things happen and how to make the future unfold differently. You can't attempt to automate its measurement or deploy technology on your own. Both can make your load lighter, but as you look for answers, keep your eyes and ears open for what people do and say that contradicts what is documented or advertised.

## Invisible Lessons

Culture is created as we look to leaders to emulate their favour. If you don't like what your direct reports are doing, your behavior is the fastest, most effective, and most straightforward way to pull the lever.

When I was agonizing over how to tell a VP that he needed to stop telling his people what to do because they were following his orders while knowing that they should be doing other things, a culture of obedience and loyalty ensured that everyone was creating a dysfunctional feedback loop, and performance was suffering. Customers were bearing the brunt.

I was about to launch into my elevator speech as we rode the elevator. Before I could, he turned to me and asked, "Why do brilliant adults leave their brains at home when they come to work?"

I launched my speech and hid behind all kinds of words, essentially and hopefully tactfully telling him, "Because you ask them to, and then reward them for it."

Whether your culture is one of leadership or followership isn't one that is decided, but rather one that is felt in the underlying assumptions about what is expected, what is rewarded, and what is right. When you want to know what kind of manager you're getting, find out what kind of parent they are.



Data can serve as your lens through which you can discover what culture is currently being expressed by the current state of processes. Then, as any human being improves with intention, education, and feedback, the culture can evolve through deliberate intervention.

### *Forgotten Mastery*

I had a friend who was a mechanic from a family of mechanics and knew no other profession. What he took for granted regarding combustion, steel and everything required to contain, control and maintain it was longer than everything I learned as a chemical engineer hired to act like a mechanical one.

There is a chasm between theory and application and an entirely different landscape regarding practical experience. The first is the pretend science world of learning and testing. The second is a whole world of “that’s funny.”

Let me tell you, this mechanic didn't find it amusing when people didn't understand what type of oil they needed or even that it was required. Indeed, not when it happens daily.

I guess the joke gets old.

When you lose your temper and rhetorically ask, “Don’t they know?” Consider that the answer might be no; maybe they don’t. There is so much to know and so few interesting classes.

Before the joke becomes stale, consider what you know and why other people may not or need to know it, and perhaps refine your approach accordingly. Or you can always go and find another joke.

Flip your esteem; that will enable you to find the empathy and kindness required, and then the patience and path will become clear.

### *Frustrated Ability*

Accepting the truth about the way things are in reality and the way things are in your head isn’t such an easy task. The problem is like the fish asking, “How’s the water?” The fish wonders, “What water?”

What is always there is often taken for granted, even when we pause to appreciate the moment. From what I’ve seen and the people I’ve met, I think everyone is a genius, but almost everyone has forgotten or never realized it.

I listen to them rant, rave, and think, “Wow, that’s brilliant.” How can you believe that is merely common sense? Yet, they all end with, “It’s just common sense!”

The frustration of genius is expecting competency from others and being chronically disappointed. Instead of celebrating your rare ability, you are angry at the other person for their inability. That’s some self-esteem out of whack.

They say that you plan, and God laughs, and I don’t think His sense of humour is that far off the norm.

## Engineering Progress

As we transition from combustion to electricity, I think back to what Henry Ford said at the start of that era: “If I’d asked people what they wanted, they’d have said faster horses.” Was there something wrong with that?

Being denied what you ask for and accepting what people give you is the essence of our consumerist society. If there is one thing a person learns when they sell gas and car repairs from a very early age from people who have done it for generations, it is how to deal with the essence of our society.

You and I want to get there fast. What we don’t like is having to pay for it. Not with the environment and certainly not with our cash. Not when it breaks, nor when it’s empty. In my life of automating things, I’ve learned that if you want to go faster without thinking of anything else, you will produce more crap too. Maybe more crap if you watched **I LOVE LUCY** when they worked the chocolate line.

Patience is a virtue. Very virtuous.

Of course, you want to motor forward without investigating second and third-order consequences. However, it doesn’t make it less annoying when you discover them, and you will find them. Eventually, they will become undeniable. Eventually, everyone will see what someone who stopped and thought about it might have predicted.

## Resisting the Facts

Dr. Phil asks his patients, “How’s that working for you?” As dysfunctional as it may appear to the viewer, there is a deep-seated desire to avoid change and perpetuate the charade.

In business, my career serves as twenty years of proof that we often disagree on having problems until we see a solution. Something bright and shiny catches our attention, and we think, “Oh, this will help me with that!” That way, we start with the solution, find the problem, and then spend the time and money, rarely realizing that we’ve swapped one set of problems for another and haven’t come out ahead in the whole game.

Busy, entertained, and absorbed, yes, but improved overall, no. It’s challenging work to embrace the facts. We can’t tell you that you aren’t trying hard enough or notice when you are trying so hard; you deserve a pat on the back. Solving problems in business is a critical skill and also a rare and remarkable one.

We focus on opportunities – including sales figures, new accounts, new products or services, and bright, shiny objects. Problems are often found in repeated losses, chronic weaknesses, and inherent limitations – uncomfortable, shady, and dark places. We don’t discuss those things.

Even as a problem-solving Six Sigma Black Belt, not having any problems to solve was a chronic issue across industries, a topic frequently discussed at conferences. Black Belts who could find their problems and convince someone to let them in to solve them were the successful ones.

Think about how that conversation goes. “Hi there, I noticed you have a skeleton in your closet, a secret buried in your metrics, or a leak about to blow everywhere. Would you like me to take care of it?”

### *Aiming for Empowerment*

Indeed, there are several ways to make the conversation flow more smoothly. A reputation for gentle, cooperative leadership helps, but what gets people into the role of a consultant is being an assertive, confident leader who is convinced their ideas are better than everyone else's.

They approach the job with the same personality and behaviours they've always trusted. The same behaviours crush and embarrass the people who eventually react aggressively and angrily to anyone offering so-called help.

But what works for me is helping people do it for themselves. When I say, "All the power to you," that's exactly what I mean with love and support. No one needs to know about the skeletons, the mistakes, or the things you'd have done if you'd had the time and money to do them. I profess to be a vault, meaning I won't tell anyone, and your secret is safe with me.

Once, I scribbled answers so no one would know I was in the room, and to this day, no one will. Fame was never my game – for me, it was all about fair wages and the reality that words on paper don't change much. Compliance must follow, and where things are invisible, fleeting, and unique, they will always be open to interpretation, allowing you to view the data in the way that suits you best.

Being empowered is all that I would want. Since I was lucky enough to be picked, unconventional enough to see it differently, and oppressed long sufficient to know how crappy it feels, I am happy helping people through the journey I call mind mastery to be their own parent, consultant, therapist, best friend, manager, mentor and higher power.

### *Yielding to the Analysis*

The values on the wall read, "Managerial Courage," but I witnessed something different. His boss told me, "They are aspirational." His lack of action and follow-up suggested to me that the status quo remains unchanged. Aspirational, they will stay.

In one Black Belt class, we were divided into teams competing with each other on a process analysis task to determine the most optimal conditions for the available settings. As we'd been taught, we coded a program and watched the computer tick away while the clock counted down to our deadline.

Five minutes to go. A late entry resulted in instant disqualification, and marks would be awarded based on accuracy and precision. Five minutes left to get as close as possible, and the computer was the fastest guy for the job.

My team member broke down, "I can't take it anymore!" He rushed to the keyboard and started guessing answers out of thin air.

We were disqualified because, like a gambler in Las Vegas, he was sure the following combination would work one more time. You can go right ahead if you want to gamble with your business, career, or life.

I'd instead hand over control of the technology and the data if it were a rare choice. Author Gerd Gigerenzer tells the story of an economics professor who must decide between two opportunities.

Turning to a friend for advice, the friend reminded him he was skilled in pro and con analysis. The professor replied, “Come on, this is serious!”

For me, it was the process of selecting my major for university. I might have been far too serious.

Just because analysis yields a conclusion doesn’t mean you must accept it. It’s just another data point to consider.

## Targets and Behaviors

When I worked for a courier business, the most frequent complaint at the head office was the routine observation of trucks parked in Tim Hortons’ parking lots. The prevailing opinion was that if they had time to loiter, they had excess capacity in their day. In response, the targets were tightened.

There were still trucks in the parking lots! Targets were tightened again.

That year, I headed to Gaspé for a snowmobiling trip. Leaving the city of Gaspé, we crossed a snowbank to navigate a busy highway. Unprepared for the steepness of the bank, my head lurched forward, and my helmet struck the kill switch.

There I was, dead stopped, looking down the highway at the oncoming traffic. Bearing down on me was a courier from the company I worked for. We didn’t make eye contact. I could easily observe him looking down at his device, entering data. As I registered the thought that my company was going to kill me, I was saved by my companion running back, restarting the machine, and getting me safely to the other side.

Targets were set, allowing for the time required to enter data, check incoming pickup requests, and other tasks. However, when squeezed, what’s a courier to do? Reduce their downtime or combine functions that shouldn’t be mixed?

This was before a law about distracted driving, but it was already a problem. In Canada, national data from 2003-2007 show that 10.7 percent of all drivers killed or injured were distracted at the time of the crash. From where I sat, it was reasonably straightforward to determine who would survive and who would be killed.

## Inspire and Incentivize

Your people may be far more creative than you might imagine. The behaviour they will adopt might be drastically different from the one you were aiming for. Forget the data and see how people use targets effectively to drive behaviours. Regarding knowledge, workers, like that courier, can have their targets backfire.

Many performance appraisal systems use a five-point scale, where one means you are in danger of being fired, two means you are on an improvement plan, and five is considered unattainable. With only a two-point spread for most of the workforce, it’s a two-pronged killer.

First, settling for the average seems to be the system's objective. The scarcity of being a four instead of a three drives fear-driven behaviour that leads to work-shy colleagues, back-stabbing teammates, and two-faced co-workers who are sweet and shiny to the boss and bitter and biting when they leave.

Changing behaviour can happen without drama when you tell people what others are doing. Electric companies that inform you that you're consuming more energy than houses with a similar size and occupancy as yours will prompt you to remember to turn out the lights and lower the thermostat more often.

When you use this technique, you inspire people with what is possible. They want to be included with people like them, and when they know it's possible, they find a way to make it happen. There's also the fear of missing out – they don't want to be left out of a group of people like them.

However, we don't want to be compared against others regarding performance appraisals. It feels fairer when we are compared against our past behaviour and recognize more of the improvements we've made, according to a recent article in HBR.

### *Define Clearly*

Creating a common platform and shared language facilitates clear communication for all parties involved. Definitions are the foundation of rational thought. "You can't reason without them," as Robert M. Pirsig notes in **ZEN AND THE ART OF MOTORCYCLE MAINTENANCE**.

When I started snowmobiling, and my friend was telling me about the wonders of snowmobiling in "Gas Bay," I pictured a location somewhere north, around James Bay, perhaps. I should have been hearing "Gaspé" and thinking east.

One well-known CEO has said, "When I say empowerment, I mean giving power to the employee, but the employee just hears blah, blah, blah." When the meaning of empowerment is unclear, putting the concept into practice becomes complex, and we often struggle to do so as human beings.

Framing is also a potential miscommunication. Glacial melt and Formula One drivers have both been described as fast. How fast is fast? Without a clear, concise, and shared meaning behind a word, phrase, or label, miscommunication will occur. Descriptors are relative, not absolute.

Coming from a quality background and interviewing for a position, the VP described their work as "optimization." It's the final phase of improvement work, so I was startled to realize they were beginning the journey. Without realizing it, we can take a word steeped in meaning and use it merely as the dictionary defines it.

Substitution occurs when, like good politicians, we answer questions we know how to respond to rather than the ones we are asked. While this seems shady, sometimes we don't even realize we've done it. Think of words like "sick," "fat," and "gay" and how they've undergone total transformations of definitions through the generations. The dangers happen when we think we are all speaking the same language.

## Connect Personally

Science is associated with rationality, impartiality, fairness and, ultimately, the pursuit of truth. Just thinking about science triggers moral behaviour. Being primed with science-related thoughts increased adherence to ethical norms, future altruistic intentions in real life, and philanthropic behavior towards a stranger.

Science is not the affirmation of a set of beliefs but a process of inquiry that builds a testable body of knowledge, constantly open to rejection or confirmation. Imagine if we could bring more of that into business.

It starts by yielding to the analysis and letting the data lead, even if it tells a story that doesn't suit your narrative. One manager reviewed my resume, which tells a story of changing jobs every two years, and then informed the talent management team that she expected me to remain in my role for the next five to ten years. Not only was there no trends or data to support that conclusion, but it was far from anything I would have said had I been asked. I was already actively interviewing for other jobs.

When you don't want the data to lead, you don't seek it. You can be blindsided, or you can accept the truth. The sooner you do, the sooner you can make a change. I would have stayed anywhere I could have safely contributed. That information might have been influential to someone who wanted to know about my plans for the next five to ten years. Other relevant data may have included that I do not condone bullying.

## Aligning Priorities

When things are not aligned, things can go awry quickly. However, what I call awry and what you call just another business day is a matter of culture.

One specific culture defines 'awry' for me. There, I was introduced to terms such as "intrapreneurial," which refers to acting like an entrepreneur within the confines of an organization. Yearly, leaders would unite to discuss their priorities for the upcoming eighteen months.

Signs indicating a lack of alignment were visible. There were more projects named and active than managers to lead them, such that every manager was required to undertake a portion of their day merely to re-align scattered priorities.

The problems become more complex each year, so the team grows more prominent. The team members are pulled in more and more directions, leading to an increase in cancelled and postponed meetings. By the end of the year, the same projects are renamed to mask a lack of progress, and we repeat the process. It's quite a game with well-understood – if not documented – corporate rules.

Gurus advise you to set your priorities first and then establish your activities and agenda. Universally, we have difficulty doing that. We Google ways to improve our willpower and reduce our procrastination habits. We chide ourselves when we misstep.

Perhaps you're trying to force yourself in one direction when there's another that acts like a powerful magnet. It's so hard. It's testing our willpower, questioning our resolve and making us procrastinate.

What if you re-evaluated your priorities instead of trying harder and getting more determined? Instead of acting like a parental dictator to your inner child, what if you acted like Maria Montessori and let the child lead the way?

## Find Your Priorities

The fastest way to identify your highest priorities is to set an agenda that aligns with your goals and then follow through on it. When you can't listen to excuses, you must be honest with yourself and acknowledge when you are being dishonest. Implementing a logical plan and monitoring your emotions are the most effective ways to identify your top priorities. Keep trying until it's good enough for you!

When I made it my priority to become an engineer, I was operating under pretenses, blinded by ambition and fooled by assumptions. I became an engineer under the impression that it would be a well-paying and stable career. It could have been, as much as those careers exist anymore.

I was blinded by the ambition that higher-paying jobs would mean more interesting challenges. I was misled by assumptions, one of which was that I would have a largely peaceful career. After two years in the profession, my new priority directly conflicted with the one I'd had only seven years earlier – get out of this profession.

In marriage, it's known as the seven-year itch – the desire to leave a marriage that we'd proposed, planned, and paid to enter.

Direct conflicts do not necessarily imply regrettable decisions or a desire to undo past actions, such as those made seven years earlier. That's not the case. I'll never regret becoming an engineer, just as parents who produce kids they love as a by-product of the marriage would never wish to undo their past seven years.

Instead, life's direction is like the street they call King in my hometown. Sometimes, it goes south, east, north, and south but never backtracks.

## Dictating Priorities

In my life, I've observed a cycle of change that starts with wanting it. Then, there's a period of working hard to achieve it before boredom sets in, at which point the balance of challenge and mastery falls apart. Things get too easy to be interesting, too hard to bother, or, more commonly, a combination of both on many criteria.

It's a cycle of growth to depletion observable from business to biology. In the brain, novelty shifts from excitement to disgust; "This again!" is the operative phrase at both ends of the curve.

Expect that your priorities will change, and they will change in a way that reflects the lessons from the earlier experience. You weren't wrong and didn't waste your time – you just learned how to refine your priorities more effectively. Accept the power of your negative emotions, formulate a positive 'no,' and move on to a new priority that reflects the experience.

I supposedly attended Montessori and had a story about creating art that contradicted what I thought they taught until I finally learned the real lesson had nothing to do with art.

We were told to colour in a geometric shape of our choosing. I failed with the first blue square because I'd gone in different directions (along with the edges). The second green circle failed because it was a different shape than the first. The black square was a pass because I pressed so forcefully that I didn't leave telltale direction marks.

You might find that you are always getting more specific about a sure thing, or you might find you are changing your thing every time. Either way, you listen to your head, heart, and gut and hear what they say.

### *Polishing Your Purpose*

At some point, your head will tell you that you don't know what you're doing. Your gut will tell you that you can't or didn't do a good enough job, and your heart knows it's true.

It's not imposter syndrome; it's the real thing. It's not just a small step for you and a massive one for humanity – it's a monumental step for you.

When you find yourself in such situations, the way forward is through courses. You aren't the first person in humanity to want to learn that subject. Someone has already done it, figured out a good way, and will teach it to you. As you learn the lessons, you take them to another level and customize them to suit yourself and what you know to be true. No one said you had to mimic the lessons – you only need to be learning from them.

There's no escaping that it always takes a disciplined effort to learn how to do something better. Your standards will be a window into your priorities. The things you don't care about are easy to shrug off.

Perhaps you are learning something you previously overlooked. In the meantime, you've changed your mind about the topic and decided you better understand it. This happens more often as people waiting to adopt social media are starting to get on board.

The internet has helped to erode stereotypes. It's become a world of global concerns. If there's one thing the older generation could learn from the newer one, it might be the ability to change and adapt to new things.

### *Question the Driver's Seat*

You are blessed with a consciousness. With that power, you can question why you are doing what you are doing. If you said you wanted to do one thing and are having a hard time doing it, what is holding you back?

From there, watch what happens. Pay attention when things aren't quite right – when your emotions don't match what you're supposed to be feeling. Do your work and journal how you think about it – and if those feelings might be coming from something else. Are you tired because of a late-night party or because this work is tedious and unenjoyable? Record your feelings and observations while keeping an open eye and ear for opportunities.

The experience might unleash an obedience response, where you suddenly find yourself motivated, as if you were caught doing something terrible. Alternatively, as some chocolate commercials suggest, you



might lock the door and savor the moment. Your reaction to your lack of motivation will help you understand if you are pursuing the right priorities.

The clues are always there when your priorities don't align with your head, heart, and gut. Sometimes, you don't have time to make the right decision; you have to make the right now decision. That's ok. You make the best decision until it's time to correct it, but don't ignore the feedback.

## Uncomfortable Truths

Some things can't be changed, and ignoring them or pretending otherwise isn't helpful.

What you can't change is yourself. Or your brain architecture. It's pretty malleable, but some things will not change anytime soon.

Knowing that and realizing that leads to things like laws for society and business methodologies. The idea isn't that you are trying to copy what you know works, but also the trap that creates the need not to leave you to your own devices.

When it comes to how someone will react, there's only so much predicting you can do by analyzing their past behaviour and only so much preventing you can do by crafting the moment.

I once had to correct the accountant running the paint plant's math. You can't repaint parts and then count them as successful the first time through. Not only will you not realize that your paint costs are significantly higher than they need to be, but you are also paying for extra labor, capacity, and other costs that aren't supported by the industry's thin margins.

If you can imagine how an accountant whose ability to count has been called into question reacts, think of a volcano. All I can say is that I did my best to save those 300 jobs. I'm sorry about the fragility of egos, the inability to save face, and the swift surety of profits and losses.

All businesses eventually fail. When the CEO of Amazon said that he fully expected it to happen to Amazon as well, it was an uncomfortable truth.

They say that rats are the first to abandon a sinking ship. It's not the ones speaking truth to the microphone; it's the ones who aren't.

## *Interview the Disgruntled*

One of the problems with surveys is the accuracy of responses. The respondent may want to tell you something, but they must select a pre-determined reaction that doesn't match.

Allowing someone to share their thoughts can be invaluable. The key is to interview the selected portion of the population that has words for you.

When people have had a bad experience, the ability to speak with a real person is a significant benefit. No one tells the truth like the disgruntled. Remove the poison, and you've got gold. Being heard and having an outlet to express oneself can create mutual benefits for everyone.

### *Hire a Messenger*

You also cannot change anything about the person benefiting, and you will not be able to do so at this time. Cushion the blow as much as you can; these people have always known it was coming and haven't been sitting idly by waiting for this day.

You can ask yourself if you are the right messenger or if you are the right messenger for someone else. If you have a problematic or unwelcome message, consider hiring a messenger.

Otherwise known as a consultant. Hire them, even tell them what to say if you want, and then as they are getting shot, they are already heading toward the door. Leaving is what they get to do.

I realized this the hard way. Reflecting on the shocks and surprises in my life, I realized I never considered what it would be like to be a decorated, mature engineer being told by a fresh female graduate.

### *Predict Risk and Exposure*

I intended to earn my place, and we were on the same team. I fell for that illusion until I realized that pay increases and promotions aren't handed out to teams.

I've never fallen for that again, but I do have tread marks from being thrown under the bus, stab wounds from other colleagues, and times when I should have gotten it in writing.

Then there were the times when I didn't have the law on my side to say no, and I certainly wouldn't ask that of myself again. There was a time when I considered using audio recording devices, but I ultimately decided against it.

People have likened the corporate world to a zoo and the entrepreneurial world to the jungle. It fits, except that there are no gates or locks in the corporate world – only walls and nowhere to hide.

### *Customer Disservice*

Even when organizations declare that the customer matters, the customer service department is the most underfunded. When that happens, you spend too much time and money on a turnstile of customers, otherwise known as sales and marketing.

You aren't putting customers first when selling what you want, not what the customer wants to buy. You are where you want to be, not where your customers are. Your operating model is based on how you want to do it, not on how they need it. Virgin Mobile is so excited about everything; they tell me my bill is ready with an exclamation mark. Yay. Putting yourself first instead of customers shows up quickly in your lack of profitability, creating the following problem.

You're desperate. When you are overwhelmed with debt, you can't give refunds because you've spent the money before it came in. To act effectively, you need a cushion of resources. You need time, money, and energy.

In organizations, who are the customer service agents? The absolute bottom of the hierarchy, with the least tenure and the crappiest tools. They aren't set up for success, and everyone knows it. To avoid desperate businesses, you should ask about their profitability, as they may be eager to share their financial information. It's impressive to have made a million dollars last year, but not if it cost them a million. Ponzi schemes can happen anywhere, but there's no need to let them happen to you.

### *Leading Blind*

If you never check in with your customer, you are leading blind. You are marching along, never checking in with your customers to see if they are following.

As a face-to-face instructor, they look at me and take notes. Or they are not. As I transition to online, I must ensure that I make up for the lack of this feedback mechanism. I have to reach out actively and check. Analytics could also reveal where they need to rewind and repeat sections, where they bail, and other areas for improvement.

Recently, I was reading an eBook from a potential future vendor. A sentence rang out to me as something I could help with, so I scrolled back to where the author had provided an email address.

Seconds after I hit send, I received an automated reply—a long one with detailed instructions on the what's and how's. I carefully read it, but my issue didn't fall into one of the categories. Instead, I picked one for potential clients.

After receiving numerous bounces and no-reply emails, I decided that this vendor wasn't for me, and that's when I finally got through to a person – right after I had lost interest. Automation should help, not hinder.

### *Leading Rudely*

People hated Clippy with a passion. Clippy was a Microsoft invention designed to help you. It couldn't do any of the basic things people expect from a relationship, like remembering preferences. How irritating. Fairness matters to people more than money. Studies have shown that we are willing to give up small sums of money to punish people for being selfish.

Everybody lies, that's for sure. Sometimes, it happens when you promise "cutting-edge information" that turns out to be a book from two years ago. You might think that books are cutting edge, but authors and publishers take time, while the kaleidoscope of knowledge never stops turning. Of course, you aren't going to lie blatantly, but the definitions of the words you are using might be completely different in your customer's mind.

Sloppiness is a rudeness that costs our precious time, which we can't save, create, or take back. Consistency is how you eliminate sloppiness. Instead, we dilute resources across departments and spend time polishing pearls while creating new problems.

We are all familiar with the recruitment joke about the choice between heaven and hell. Hell, it looks like fun, so you choose it. That's when you realize the difference in treatment when you are being recruited and joining the team.

We expect a decrease in quality between when you were wooing me as a customer and when I became one. However, the difference can be as drastic as heaven and hell. Today, I see iPads offered to new clients but nothing for the loyal ones.

### *Leading Naively*

The CEO doesn't call customer service when his account is locked; he calls Joe in IT. Therefore, he has no idea what his customers experience when they have problems.

You know you've got to get the word out about the problems you can solve and then be findable. I had a media client who knew this axiom – marketing was his life. However, when I met him, I had to double-check the address.

What I was looking at was a house in a residential area, and from what I knew already, he had a team and an office. Did I get his home address? The house was on a corner lot, and I saw a driveway full of cars as I rounded the corner. Team, check. The next question was where to park, as street parking was illegal, and the driveway was full.

After the parking hurdle, there was the door. Should I use the side door, the employee entrance, or the front door? I chose the front door—the wrong choice. When I finally got in, the potential client excitedly told me he knew all about flow and its importance and that they'd just fixed everything. I left quickly without argument.

No one wants to be associated with crap. People want to work for companies they are proud of, purchase from businesses that share their standards and values, and invest in stocks that benefit humanity. Ok, not everyone. Some people want power, influence, and money.

When I got a job at one company in the quality department, everyone I met had a story of how they'd been screwed over by this company—every person. I stopped telling people where I worked, especially what I did there.

### *Managing Improvements*

When you go to the data, you intend to master what is before you. You may not want to become a master, but here's how to navigate the learning curve regardless of how far you want to improve.

Someone once said about me, "You can't tell her how to do anything. She has to figure it out for herself." I can't argue with this. However, I am also convinced that learning is a process of leaping from the shoulders of giants.

Here's how it worked with snowmobiling. First, as an outsider to the sport, I had assumptions about what it would be like and how much I might enjoy it. It's not a sport that enjoys good press, that's for sure.

The first hurdle to becoming a master is simply having the desire to do it. Without positive perceptions, we won't try. We stay stuck in our lives and habits. Maybe we've decided change is too complicated for us.

You might think I am referring to the little girls who avoid engineering because all the posters tell them they must wear a hard hat, a tool belt, or safety boots. That's one example, yes. If I'd been paying closer attention, I might have noticed, too.

## Pack Ambition

Starting a learning journey on your own, rather than being forced into it, requires some ambition and confidence.

You have to see that improvement is possible and that you can be the one to make it happen. You have to want it. Are you ready to commit? There's no shame in dabbling until you find your fit. However, you should do it systematically to see it before time runs out.

Your experiences have given you ideas about how much you enjoy learning. It is informing your unconscious expectations. Some people drop out of school and decide that's enough. They stop learning, which is so sad. If you equate learning with being forced against your will and bureaucracy, I can understand why and empathize with you.

I equate learning with power and possibility, which I've learned to do on its own—learning how to learn.

Here's what I learned after more than 30,000 kilometres, three sleds and twelve years. It's exactly akin to my favourite auction site. It will only make my life worse if I tell anyone about it. On my auction site, there will be more bidders, prices will increase, and the competition will kill it.

Exactly like that, and since I've hung up my helmet for the last time, I can tell you it's the most blissful, meditative experience ever, once you've navigated the learning curve and left all the traffic behind. It forces you to focus, pay attention and see reality—tough stuff for a human.

Just as with learning anything else. There's a dip and then heaven. However, most people don't start, and many more fail to make it through the dip.

## *Imagine a New Future*

Step one: Consult with a master and discover what makes it great. Do you know how **you** define 'great'?

If you are out of touch with yourself, you risk falling for their transfer of enthusiasm. Their passion will convince you. Like me, you will reach the end of engineering before you realize it wasn't quite a fit.

Maybe you will start because there's a weakness you need to overcome. Then, after your third speech at Toastmasters, you realize that the fear you thought you had for public speaking was excitement. You've learned that there's no better place in the world than in front of a rapt audience when you're prepared for it.

You must know what will perk you up when your chips are down, the weather is gloomy, and your prospects look bleak.

Don't pursue something because of a snapshot of what you think it will be like.

Arriving only to be crushed by reality might also crush the dreamer within you. Check first. Choose with open eyes. Don't do anything just because you are supposed to. Repeat after me, "Don't should all over me."

My version of excellence in snowmobiling is the meditative, silent experience of nature. You get to cover far more territory than I ever could have imagined, full of wild animals, displays of engineering feats, and nature's wonders.

Sure, that's with the assistance of earplugs, a full-face helmet, and the proper manufacturer. Either way, when a jet goes by in the sky, you don't wonder how the passengers can stand the noise. Knowing your nature and what serves it is part of the self-knowledge that all masters require.

### *Budget Your Level of Happiness*

Sometimes, your happy place requires some equipment.

Most people make the mistake of blowing their budget on the tools and passing on the instructions. That's a sure path to frustrated failure.

Everything has its price of admission. You need creative solutions if you can't afford the whole show. Don't skimp on the necessities. Masters will provide you with the list indicating the order of need and the level of quality required.

Step two is to find someone just ahead of you on the learning curve. That's right; you are done with the master for now. You need to see teachers instead who remember what it was like before everything became automatic, ingrained and easy.

The problem with too many learners is that they think their job is to swallow the wisdom they receive. Again, you may have a hangover from school, but your job as a learner is to identify the holes, gaps, and assumptions that no longer work.

Your job isn't to correct them but to find the correct version. You can even experiment on your own if you want.

Step three is to do the work and put in the time and energy. There are no shortcuts; you must practice, sweat, push past discomfort, focus when things aren't enjoyable, develop some grit, and become accustomed to various conditions. Conditions pass.

It wouldn't be worth the pursuit if it weren't for the challenge. The joy in the victory is directly related to how hard you worked to get there. Even if you are the only one who knows what was hard about it, no one claps when you cross the finish line. It just looks unfun. That's just your perception fooling you.

### *Shift with the Shifts*

Shift happens. Step four: Know when to quit. The problem with mastery is that it is fleeting. There are always younger, hungrier, crazier, more intelligent people on the rise, being born every minute.

Quit following practices you don't think are worthy and constantly monitor for feedback to see if they were valid in delivering their promise. Break rules that deserve rebellion—give a thumbs up when it's

time to change. If you catch up to them, get a new teacher, and it's time to pass. Don't let anyone hold you back.

After all, you must have a rule when your heart is acting like a Shakespearean hero and your gut behaves like a giddy child. Safety first!

When you apply these four steps, you will realize that you can master just about anything if you are willing to put in the time, apply yourself to the work, and persevere until you've reached your goal.

When you want to master something, how will you know when you've achieved your goal? Choose your finish line, and then cross it. Who do you want to be in your future?

## Beyond the Rules

Rule number one: throw the rulebook out the window, because the only rule that matters is that there are no rules and everyone is out for themselves. Whether that is for their team, their legacy, their financial security, or something they could never have imagined, everyone shows up for work for a reason.

Change managers are taught to discover “what’s in it for me.” Whatever your answer is, it is becoming less and less universal. Retiring executives might have a difficult time understanding that anyone would find a steady, secure career isn’t enough.

Early in my career, I decided that my manager would not determine my geographical location. I would not move house for a promotion or a job change. This has been a requirement of my colleagues. We all make choices and sacrifices, and the critical thing to remember is that it’s a personal matter.

I used to believe that what is universal between myself and anyone else would cover a vast majority, perhaps as much as 99 percent. Instead, I’ve discovered that it’s far more helpful to think that we share about 1 percent of the perspective as anyone else.

From motivation to preferences, it’s always beneficial to assume you are the outlier or that they are, but what you can’t see – someone’s mind – might be vastly different.

Whether they are aware of it, choose to share it, or decide to change it is entirely up to them. When we are both allowed our perspectives, much conflict disappears.

When we think that one or the other must be right or shared, anything resembling alignment is a house of cards.

## Update Your Framework

Your ego tells you that you look dumb or slow, whatever word you use to chastise yourself. Your ego wants to return to a place where you already look and feel good—a safe, familiar spot.

How boring is that? Or rather, how unacceptable is that? When the world holds an embarrassment of options.

There are so many things you can spend your time doing, so why that one? Why this?

For me, imagining and anticipating how awesome the hot tub would feel at the end of the day was enough to sign up for some insane trips. Then comes the day when you compare what you did for the promise of a little warm water, and the next challenge becomes, “Is that all?”

Learning has consistently leveraged existing knowledge into a slightly different domain. The more you learn, the easier it is to know. And why ever stop? Nothing else does.

With all learning, we organize it into a higher framework to make sense applicable.

With snowmobiling, the first analogy that came to mind was a couch with a motor. That was updated to a motorcycle, which was ultimately replaced by a snowboard with a motor. All the perceptions I had of sitting didn’t exist.

Aside from the competition, there is the reality of the foundation of your knowledge. Knowledge is constantly evolving as the collective society learns and discovers new things.

As a master, you can’t keep up with everything, and something will change. For some jobs, artificial intelligence is taking over. Knowing when to quit is all about knowing what to drop and what to leverage into the next phase of your journey.

### *Follow Your Authenticity*

When my CEO asked me what I was doing differently, I realized it had a lot to do with acting authentically as an introvert and approaching collaboration unconventionally.

For one rare time in my career, I was allowed to work with authenticity. After that experience, I had to develop a comprehensive methodology and establish my own business to repeat it.

Now, I realize that another company values authenticity. At Bridgewater, authenticity is at the core of the culture – a culture carefully crafted and thoroughly examined.

My peers formed teams and utilized every tool in their project management toolbox, including meetings, agendas, task lists, and milestones.

To me, problem-solving wasn’t a project. It was a journey without a known destination. When that was the case, I didn’t know how they knew who they would need, what they would be doing, or whether they had any hope about learning when they would arrive.

It turns out they didn’t either, despite all the posturing and planning. You can’t command and control problem-solving or plan your way through ambiguity. You can only find your way through it, one decision at a time.

When it comes to acting with authenticity, you have to find your way through it, one decision at a time. It’s making those decisions with you as the primary stakeholder, not someone else.

Some people are so lucky. They are raised by parents who value freedom and independence rather than command and control. They don’t tell their kids what to do but seek to discover who this new human being is and how to help them become more of that and better at it.



## Choosing to Thrive

Other kids are told by parents who they are and what they are supposed to be. Then they go to school, and teachers teach them what is right and wrong, and how they should strive to be well-rounded. They graduate, and society takes over, telling them what to eat, do and be. You'd be wrong if you think these kids are happy, healthy or on a path of wealth. What they are is surviving. And barely.

According to the thesaurus, survival is a good thing because the opposite is death. However, when you become an adult and make decisions for yourself, I implore you to choose to thrive by finding your authenticity.

A personality built on survival is constantly in a state of stress. In stress mode, the body functions in a coordinated manner, activating genes that provide protection. This is not healthy. Being in a constant state of fight-or-flight mode wears down proteins and contributes to disease.

A personality built on thriving is constantly in a state of growth and development. In this mode, genes responsible for repair are activated instead. Guess what happens without repair? Disease.

Choosing to thrive is an option available to everyone. Many are unaware that authenticity and thriving go hand in hand, and it's an attainable option. The problem with choosing is that it takes all accountability for your situation and circumstances and places it on you. You don't get to justify outcomes and behaviours because you were doing what you were told or what someone else wanted you to do.

That choice to embrace authenticity and thrive was life-saving for me.

## The Biggest Choices

For all of life's choices, it's an embarrassment of options that we tend not to stray too far from where we matriculate. Much of our life is shaped by decisions we made in the past but no longer remember.

The worst decisions often result from choosing the first option that comes to mind or is presented without careful consideration.

When I joined one company as a Black Belt, I did so with specific goals in mind for my non-working life. I had a different class or activity picked out every night and was both mad and excited to finally get the chance. Instead, I spent every Monday getting on a plane and Friday getting back off of it. After months of frustrated attempts to get reassigned, I quit.

I tell you this story because smart people made the project assignment with access to personality testing results, interview responses and more. Still, the project assignments were made without any discernible rationale. Additionally, it demonstrates that even when everyone acknowledges it is wrong, it can be nearly impossible to rectify and make right after a decision has been made.

Having options and trying everything should be what life is about, but lives are carried out in a bland repetition of the same thing. They take the same route to work and even park in the same spot for some of them. Yes, it's liberating to pre-make these decisions so you can focus on higher-level stuff; that's what the process is for, but instead of using the opportunity to tune in, we tune out.

If you are still dissatisfied, you must develop new and better options. That takes some creative thinking and some helpful tools.

### *Ignoring Values*

The worst time of my life was when I was working on something called “The Brighter Way.” I thought the name was ironic, and I wasn’t alone. I didn’t know there was anything bright about it. It was based on a command-and-control model of hierarchical power, the darkest and dumbest thing I’d seen. My personal beliefs center on empowering individuals and creating positive differences, where ‘positive’ is defined by the whole. My values were 100 percent in the opposite direction of that horrid Way.

Some people believe that values are discovered by considering a list and deciding which ones appeal to you. That’s letting the 1 percent of your reality make the decision. The truth is that your values show up emotionally. When you disagree or feel strongly about something, it is because there is a difference in values, and your authenticity has something to say.

Until then, I hadn’t yet crystallized my philosophy on organizational profitability. I knew one thing: command and control wasn’t how to get it. When they started lying about the savings we were creating, I hoped the smoke and mirrors would dissipate and transparency would rule. But I wasn’t working at Bridgewater.

Being clear about your values is one ingredient toward a happier, healthier, wealthier existence. Finding people who share these values is like discovering your community, which will help you succeed.

Too often, I see people suffering who believe they don’t have options or that their suffering is a service to society and their team. Anyone who wants you to suffer for their purposes isn’t part of your community. Bosses that want you to leave your opinion at home aren’t there for your growth and repair but to accelerate your disease journey. Thank goodness for the benefits – you’re going to need them.

### *Falling into Misery*

One lady I met worked a job she hated and was rather terrible at until she was finally laid off. I asked her why she had stayed in it for so many years. Until that moment, she didn’t realize that staying or going was always her choice.

The problem is that when you stay too long, you lose your confidence and fail to gather the experiences that will impress other managers and encourage them to consider you for a position. I know – I stayed in that job for far too long. I primarily wanted to demonstrate that I had more to offer. Fear and ego were greasing the slippery slope to staying and suffering more.

Fear and ego often prevent us from choosing to thrive. We stick with what we know because we fear the devil we don’t know. The ego doesn’t like to declare losses or move on; instead, it tends to entrench itself and fight losing battles.

I was lucky enough to get pulled out by a manager who knew me better than my performance in that role. Some people view being laid off as a fortunate outcome. We stare at the closed door instead of looking for the one that opened.

We forget how miserable that existence was, how we barely survived because we don't yet know what it feels like to thrive. When you thrive, fear becomes your back-seat driver, and you get control over the glass to block it out. Pain becomes your friend because you realize that all struggle is just a matter of learning, and the lesson always far outweighs the cost. Loss becomes deliberate as you list everything you want to leave behind.

### *Listening to Your Inner Wisdom*

If too many choices are creating a problem, your first step is to take a step back. You don't want to see the 31 flavours; you want to see chocolate, vanilla, and maybe even strawberry. The do-nothing option is always an option. You can say, Nah, I don't want ice cream at all.

The surefire way to make better decisions is to choose between options rather than accepting or rejecting a specific option. You need the relativity to make the best decision. You open-ended your questions to get better answers, so open-ended your choices to get better options.

If you stop and come up with at least one alternative, your third idea will likely be far better than the first one. The more decisions you make, the more confident you will feel. Don't let all those options in life look so embarrassing as they wait to be picked. Start some momentum.

When you are free and independent, and I am free and independent, and our heads come together, we become more than the sum of our parts. When it's all about command and control, it doesn't matter how many brains come together – the outcomes never become more than one.

The King of the Mountain is a game for the playground, not a solution to the problems facing the world, your organization, or your life.

Freedom and independence are about thriving; command and control are about surviving. The choice is yours. You can thrive. Your body will thank you, your wallet will appreciate it, and your relationships will improve. Don't take my word for it – find out for yourself. Start by saying no when you mean it, if only to yourself.

## References

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<sup>1</sup> (Christine Ma-Kellams, 2013)

<sup>2</sup> (Salganik, Dodds, & Watts, 2006)

<sup>3</sup> (Carter & Gilvich, 2009)