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BOOK REVIEW

The Power of Impossible Thinking Transform the Business of Your Life and the Life of Your Business

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Based on an understanding of the mind and mental processes, individuals can take charge of their personal and professional lives. They can use, innovative yet simple methods to challenge their thinking and refresh their mental models. Through a continuous process of change and revival, we can overcome even the most insurmountable problems, thereby we can strive to achieve even the impossible. The book challenges the readers' current ways of thinking and offers fresh insights.

In today's complicated and uncertain environment, the greatest dangers are not from beasts prowling around outside. More often than not they are in our own minds, our inability to see our own limits and to see things differently. It is these internal beasts that we seek to better understand – and learn to live with, if not to tame.

– Book Excerpt.

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The world of business is constantly on the lookout for freshness in approach, new perspectives, creative ideas, and new ways of conducting business. This book is in line with this approach as it offers a completely new way of thinking by challenging current ways of thinking.

The human mind does what it thinks it can do. At the same time, if the mind considers something to be impossible, it will hinder the person from taking any step in that direction. In this sense, our mental models¹ can either limit our worldview, or they can enlighten us by giving us new insights into the reality. Here lies the paradox, i.e., our mind can be our greatest strength as well as our greatest limitation.

Mental models represent a key point of reference when referring to how the brain processes information and influences decision-making. They represent a fundamental and powerful function of the brain. By changing our mental models, we can improve our ability to make sense of the large and complex information that we are bombarded with on a daily basis.

The insights provided by the authors are based on the latest research results in the field of neuroscience², which has helped in advancing the existing level of knowledge. These latest research findings point to some key aspects of our thinking, which most of us do not realize. The findings in this field suggest that:

1. Human beings do not really see or know the world as it is, though most of them like to think that they do.
2. The way we make sense of external things is based in small parts on the patterns located in our minds.
3. We live together in separate worlds.
4. We use only a part of what we see.
5. Reality is a story that the brain and the world work out together.

¹ Mental models are brain processes we use to make sense of our world. Mental models are broader than technological innovations or business models. They represent the way we look at the world. These models or mindsets can sometimes be reflected in technology or business innovations, but not every minor innovation represents a truly new mental model.

² Neuroscience pertains to a branch of science concerned with growth, development, and function of the nervous system.

Portfolio of Mental Models

The best way to ensure preparation in a world characterized by constant change is to equip ourselves with a portfolio of mental models which can guide decision-making in different situations. Such an approach can help us avoid obsolescence, make better use of opportunities, and act fast. To ensure that we are prepared to handle complex business and non-business situations as well as unforeseen circumstances, we can take certain measures to refresh our thought processes.

First, it is essential to examine our old mental models and test their suitability in the current environment in order to avoid living in an illusory world and make a connection with the real world.

Second, we need to continuously develop new models to ensure freshness in perspective. However, new models must be tried out to check for their appropriateness and whether they can be converted into concrete action. Further, the introduction of a new model among individuals needs careful handling to minimize psychological discomfort and ensure a smoother transition.

It is also beneficial to categorize models based on their scope and whether they are models, which guide action in specific situations (narrow models) or can be used as a resource to guide decision-making in a number of different circumstances (broad models). Narrow models (also referred to as models for the moment) include situation-specific models such as a fire drill or airplane evaluation routine. Irrespective of our backgrounds, when faced with a life-threatening situation, such as fire, we instinctively make an effort to save our lives. A fire drill is like a common model or a best practice, which trains the mind to think of the right actions to take in such a situation. Broad models are those, which are structured around a broad concept and which provide guidelines to govern our general thinking and behavior. Examples of such models include a belief in democracy, a political ideology, a philosophical belief, a religious belief, etc.

Another way to look at mental models is to consider paradigms³. Adopting a new mental model is like undergoing a paradigm shift. Paradigms can be thought of as a two-way street, allowing us to move back and forth between the old and

³ Paradigm: A set of assumptions, concepts, values, and practices that constitutes a way of viewing reality for the community that shares them, especially in an intellectual discipline.

the new. For instance, the advent of the internet raised the possibility of electronic business replacing traditional ways of conducting business in which money is transacted physically. However, e-business is a paradigm, which is actually treated as a two-way street since customers have the option to either transact directly in cash or cheque or through the electronic medium. Hence, old paradigms should not be discarded completely as they can serve us well under new circumstances too. New paradigms can sometimes be used to portray possibilities in the future although we may not have arrived at the means to convert these ideas into reality. For instance, travel into space, use of hydrogen as a fuel, etc.

Apart from being equipped with a number of different approaches to handle different situations, we also need to apply these approaches in different ways and enrich ourselves based on the experiences gained from each situation.

Keeping our Models Relevant

In a world characterized by constant change, recognition of where one stands in relation to one's reality is the first step towards making efforts at changing one's mental models. We have to learn to recognize when our models need to be changed or dropped. It is very important for key decision-makers of organizations to operate based on appropriate mental models to derive the maximum benefits. There are several creative ways in which we can keep our models relevant. How does one know when one's models are no longer appropriate or they beg change? We have to learn to make sense from cues in our environment:

- **Paying Attention to Outliers and “Just-noticeable Differences”:** Small changes in our environment tend to be ignored on the assumption that they will not make any major difference. But small differences can get compounded into a larger problem. Proactive companies are good at noticing these differences and taking timely action to address these deviations.
- **Look at the World Through the Eyes of Customers:** Adopting this approach allows us to come up with better quality products with a greater chance of surviving the vagaries of the marketplace.
- **When the Old Model Dies, You have No Choice:** If we fail to anticipate trouble with existing ways of doing things, then in all likelihood, we will

encounter a crisis. It can be in the form of a job loss, health problems, or business failures. If an existing model lets you down, the best options are either to discard the model or to revamp it. Developing systems and models to signal changes or potentially difficult situations can serve as a timely warning to develop ways of overcoming the difficult situation.

- **Use Experimentation to Develop and Test New Models:** Experiments can lead to unexpected results or to the discovery of new knowledge, which transforms our thinking process. They can also lead to breakthroughs. But experiments should also be tested in the real world to check on the viability of the product. Taking important decisions based only on laboratory results can be disastrous.

Refreshing your Models and Preparing for Unforeseen Circumstances

Most of us go through life without noticing what is happening around us. We miss out on those sights, smells, noises, deviations from normal life, which present new and creative ways of thinking through things. Therefore, we lose out on several hidden opportunities. Therefore, we have to tune our minds to widen our thinking, become more open to things which are new, be curious about them, and draw lessons from them. What can we do to equip ourselves with new ways to solve old problems or respond to unprecedented circumstances? How can we ensure freshness in perspective which is in tune with the current circumstances?

- **Radical Ideas:** Contrarian perspectives and wild ideas bring new dimensions to the existing equations. For instance, a devil's advocate position can be deliberately adopted to ensure that decision-makers and team members do not fall into the trap of groupthinking.
- **Embarking on Journeys of Discovery:** At the age of 22, Charles Darwin embarked aboard the *HMS Beagle* on a five-year circumnavigation of the globe....

Beginning his Beagle voyage as a doubting creationist, Darwin subsequently became a firm evolutionist... The Beagle voyage and its associated expeditions and scientific activities gave him an immense amount of stimulation and intellectual material...A combination of keen observations and novel experiences

provided Darwin with raw material for his subsequent grappling to make sense of what he observed. This whole process yielded one of humanity's greatest intellectual achievements—evolutionary theory.

Interestingly enough, Darwin never left Great Britain again after returning from the Beagle voyage, but because he was open to the experience, his mind was stretched in ways that not only transformed his own thinking but also transformed scientific theories more broadly.

– Book Excerpts.

- **Looking Across Disciplines:** Professionals belonging to the same field share a common language which allows them to understand each other better. This leads to a sense of comfort, which may not lead to the best outcome. Successful companies use cross-functional viewpoints and interdisciplinary processes to develop better products and services.
- **Questioning the Routine:** Routine can lull a corporation to sleep, leaving it less prepared to handle changes. Some companies deliberately create crisis situations to keep the employees alert. Kao maintains a culture that qualifies it as a “dissatisfied-with-the-*status quo* company”. Kao was one of the first Japanese companies to have adopted Economic Value Added (EVA) index in Japan in 1999. The company is constantly on the lookout for small problems and converting them into numerical figures to encourage timely corrective action. His practice ensures that all employees will pay attention to little deviations that tend to get ignored in the course of business. The use of EVA instills a sense of vigor among its employees and keeps them alert.
- **Destroying the Old Model:** This approach involves looking at things afresh and starting the work all over again. It is amazing what one can come up with through this approach. It helps to free the mind of existing frameworks and drawing a new diagram. The example from Bell Labs is worth mentioning here. It is said that one morning, in 1951, the head of Bell Labs gathered all his senior managers and informed them that the entire telephone system in the USA has been destroyed overnight. He told them to design a new system right away. The managers were shocked. They did not know whether

to believe him or not. Later, they realized that the head was neither telling the truth nor was he joking about it. It was a challenge thrown at them. As a result of this challenge, Bell Labs was able to come up with new innovations such as Touch-Tone and cordless phones.

- **Envisioning Multiple Futures:** This practice is akin to scenario planning. Scenario planning is a concept that was originally popularized by Royal Dutch Shell. Since more than 30 years, companies are practicing scenario planning to prepare themselves for the unforeseen future. Certain situations force organizations and individuals to think of all kinds of possibilities. One such example, described by Seery (2002), pertains to the Cold War. The US was forced to think of every conceivable scenario.

The possible future scenarios that the US Military came out with included: Gradual arms buildup; new weapons technologies; broken arms agreements; and even nuclear war. However, the actual outcome was peace, something that the US Military had not envisioned. Peace as a possible future scenario was considered as a ridiculous idea. Therefore, in order to be effective, the process of scenario planning should involve a certain degree of rigor and consider multiple perspectives and ideas, even if they appear ridiculous.

Converting New Models into Action

Discovering new ways of doing things have to be followed with some concrete steps to turn new mental models into action. However, convincing a new model may appear, old models are like habits and they are difficult to let go. Hence, the transition from old models to new models has to be managed well:

1. The first step is to have a clear understanding of the relevance of either model to your situation.
2. Communicate in a language which helps to build bridges rather than to widen the divide. This bridge pertains to the connection between the old model and the new model.
3. New thoughts and ideas usually face a lot of resistance. This resistance can be overcome, to some extent, by stressing on the utility of a new worldview. Interlocutors (also termed as “boundary spanners”) can play an important role in bridging adaptive disconnects.

4. Indirect methods of gaining acceptance include finding an audience, which is more receptive, and which can then serve as ambassador of the new idea. Radical approaches are another way out.
5. The change has to be brought out by implementing small changes and making its effects visible to all those who are involved. Incentives can be introduced to strengthen people's acceptance of the new model.
6. Build an environment of trust so that people will take the risk of change.
7. Let people know if they can revert back to the old model if required. Often, the knowledge that one can revert back to the old ways of working allows people to take greater risks since they will not burn the bridges that connect them with the past. Conversely, they will need a very strong motive to work for the new model.

Conclusion

Human beings are bundles of emotions. When faced with a difficult or unforeseen situation, our reactions are usually emotional. We are not instinctively logical. Often, there is not much time to think through different options and take the most appropriate action. Therefore, we have to constantly refresh our mind and prepare ourselves to face different situations through a conscious and deliberate process of experimentation, adopting new thought processes, drawing lessons from multiple sources, analyzing new information, and engaging in a process of introspection. Moreover, we need to do all this when we are living in a seemingly secure present since the conditions prevailing in the present situation may not remain the same tomorrow. We have to constantly prepare ourselves for changes in the future.

While we can never know what the future has in store for us, we can reduce the intensity of future shocks by envisioning multiple possibilities and developing strategies to handle the probable future scenario.

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