

BOOK REVIEWS

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

Adam Grant, New York: Viking (2021)

Review by: Kimberly S. Dickman, Ed.D.

When was the last time you changed your mind? Not just about what you want for dinner or what color tie to wear, but about a fact or theory that you hold as true. In his newest book, *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know*, Dr Adam Grant, Professor at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, presents the case that such changes of mind are needed in business and leadership for success. Dr. Grant is a five-time New York Times bestselling author and organizational psychologist who uses science and data to improve the way we work and live.

Grant states that the ability to change one's mind is a leadership competency. He highlights companies like Blockbuster, Kodak, Sears, and Blackberry whose leaders did not have a problem with thinking but failed at rethinking. They could not pivot their strategies and business model which led to their demise. Yet, often we think of leaders who change their minds as wishy-washy or weak and see them as not operating on facts. If we lived in a stable world, we could stick to our guns but with a rapidly changing, dynamic world, we have to be willing to recognize that what we knew yesterday may not serve us in business, relationships, and personal goals. Grant organized this book in those main themes: individual rethinking, interpersonal rethinking, and collective rethinking.

The author uses Phil Tetlock's *theory of mindset* to describe the way we get stuck in particular modes with specific skills that get in the way of rethinking. First there is the preacher. We go into preacher mode when our sacred beliefs are in jeopardy: we deliver sermons to protect and promote our ideals. Then there is the prosecutor. We become the prosecutor when we recognize flaws in other people's reasoning: we marshal arguments to prove them wrong and win our case. Finally, there is the politician mode. We become the politician when we are seeking to win over an audience: we campaign and lobby for the approval of our constituents. We can all become wrapped up in preaching that we're right, prosecuting others who are wrong, and politicking for support that we don't bother to rethink our own views. Any of us can fall into these traps.

Grant suggests that the solution to getting unstuck is to operate like a scientist. Scientists are paid to be constantly aware of the limits of their understanding, to doubt what they know, to be curious about what they don't know,

and to update their views based on new data. Scientists search for truth: they run experiments to test hypotheses, and discover knowledge. In the scientist mode, we refuse to let our ideas become ideologies. We lead with questions and puzzles. We don't persuade from intuition; we teach from evidence. We aren't just skeptical about other's arguments; we dare to disagree with our own arguments. The mindset of a scientist is not just about having an open mind, but requires searching for reasons why we might be wrong and revise our views based on what we learn. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi created the term *cognitive flexibility* as he studied eminent scientists and artists. It means our willingness to move from one extreme to the other as the occasion requires. As scholars assess American presidents and control for factors like years in office, wars, and scandals, they found one trait consistently predicted presidential greatness: intellectual curiosity and openness. Grant writes about Abraham Lincoln's hesitance to abolish slavery due to his belief that it would forever separate the north and the south. Imagine if he was not able to rethink his belief.

With a background in psychology, the author spends much of the book describing what gets in the way of rethinking. Most of the barriers come from the way our own brains operate. He describes our minds tendency toward confirmation bias, desirability bias, blind spots, and other ways of automatic thinking. With humor he describes the armchair quarterback syndrome where confidence exceeds competence, and the Dunning-Kruger effect where those who lack competence are the ones most likely to be brimming with overconfidence. He further describes the role of our fragile egos and metacognition in our unwillingness to think again. On a more serious note, Grant gives evidence of how changing our minds can mean more than just changing our mind. It might involve questioning our identity and the groups we belong to. Belonging to a group has been key to human survival, so the author acknowledges what it might mean to ask someone to rethink something that sustains who we think we

are and where we belong. Grant also gives multiple examples of how to counter these human tendencies in helping others to rethink.

This book is an invitation to let go of the knowledge and opinions that no longer serve us well. It starts with intellectual humility—knowing what we don't know. Anchoring ourselves in flexibility rather than consistency leads us to new discoveries. As leaders, we need to recognize our shortcomings and open the door to doubt. We can stay true to our values and beliefs but remain flexible in our systems, operations, and cultures. As friends and partners, we can rethink what we thought was important when we were 16 years-old and recognize that it may have changed as we matured. What was once right may no longer be so. As a nation, we can move from seeing disagreements as a threat to our ego to being an opportunity to learn. As individuals, we can realize how much we still have to learn. We can let go of views that make us feel good and welcome those that make us think hard. Grant encourages us to embrace the joy of being wrong, bringing nuance to charged conversations, and building schools, workplaces, and communities of lifelong learners. This book is a great place to start to do so.

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