Think Again

The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know

By Adam Grant

13-minute read

Synopsis

Think Again (2021) examines the science behind changing your mind – and persuading others to change theirs. It explores the biases and assumptions that we bring to our decision-making, and outlines how individuals and organizations can build a mindset of lifelong curiosity.

Who is it for?

- Psychology buffs looking for fresh insights
- Sales professionals seeking a new angle
- People managers hoping to improve team performance

About the author

Adam Grant is an organizational psychologist and consultant, and the author of four *New York Times* best-selling books. His clients include Google, the NBA, and the Gates Foundation.

What's in it for me? Learn why it's alright to be wrong.

If you've ever lost an argument to an annoying colleague, or failed to convince a stubborn uncle of why your opinion on a topic is the only sensible one over a family dinner, you might have thought to yourself: "If only I were smarter, I could have won this argument." Maybe you even promised yourself to sharpen your mind and hone your arguments until next time.

It seems like a reasonable goal, but what if it's the wrong one? What if, rather than improving your mind, what you should really be working on is getting better at changing it?

That's where these blinks come in. You'll discover that the key to better judgment, greater competence, and winning more arguments, lies not in your powers of thinking, but in your ability to think *again*. From eliminating racism in society, to persuading anti-vaxxers, to better teamwork, you'll learn that humanity takes a step forward when certainty takes a step back.

In these blinks, you'll learn

- why the least funny people think they're hilarious;
- what a NASA space disaster can teach us about workplace culture; and
- how to win the argument every single time.

In a constantly changing world, it pays to change your mind.

In 2009, Blackberry smartphones were riding high. The company controlled almost 50 percent of the smartphone market, and everyone from Bill Gates, to President Obama, to Oprah, declared that they couldn't live without their Blackberries. But just five years later, the company's market share had nosedived to just 1 percent.

Why? Because Blackberry's inventor, Mike Lazaridis, wouldn't change his mind.

As Apple's iPhone was released in 2007 and began to gain market share, Lazaridis continued to believe that most consumers would only want a device that could make calls and send and receive emails. He simply couldn't imagine a world in which people wanted more than what a Blackberry could do.

The key message here is: In a constantly changing world, it pays to change your mind.

But before you rush to judge Mike Lazaridis, consider that you might have made exactly the same mistake.

Whether you're a business leader or an entrepreneur, you probably pride yourself on sticking to your guns and staying true to what you believe in.

But the problem with sticking to your guns is that the world is now changing faster than ever before, and access to information is increasing faster, too. Just consider this: in 2011, the average person consumed five times the amount of information, each day, as the average person did in 1986.

This frenetic pace of change means that knowing how to think isn't enough anymore. You also need to know how to *rethink*, so that you can integrate new information into your belief systems and strategies.

Ok, but how do you do that? A great place to start is to train yourself to think like a scientist.

Scientists are *always* curious about what they don't know, and they're constantly adapting their views to fit with incoming data. Scientists don't begin with answers but with questions. They carefully test their theories and rely on evidence, not intuition.

If you're a business leader, you can think more like a scientist by viewing your business strategy as a theory that you need to test. A study on Italian startups found that founders who thought about their businesses scientifically gained more revenue and more customers than founders who didn't. The researchers concluded that the scientifically-minded leaders had more success because they were more likely to pivot and adjust their business models when things started going wrong.

You might not know what you don't know.

For most of us, our biggest blind spots are the things we're not good at. This might seem counter-intuitive, but numerous studies have shown that the people who score the lowest on tests of logical reasoning and sense of humor, for example, also have the most overinflated view of their abilities in these areas.

The key message here is: You might not know what you don't know.

Worse still, when you falsely believe you're good at something that you're actually bad at, you're less likely to want to improve your skills. Take one study on emotional intelligence. It found that people who had the lowest emotional intelligence not only thought they were much more emotionally intelligent than they were, they were also the least likely to want coaching to improve in this area.

So what's the cure for our incompetence blindness? Humility.

When you adopt a humble attitude and admit that there's a lot you don't know, you open yourself up to learning new things and becoming more competent. You might be afraid that adopting a humble mindset will undermine your self-confidence. But actually, humility and confidence aren't mutually exclusive.

Confidence is about self-belief, whereas humility is about questioning whether you have the right methods. The most successful people are confident about achieving their goal eventually – but they also have the humility to wonder whether they're currently using the best methods to get there.

Another way to illuminate your blind spots is to enjoy a good old argument. When we argue over who's right, we have the opportunity to change our minds and do things differently – and better.

That being said, it has to be the right kind of conflict. *Relationship conflict* involves not only disagreement but also emotions and personal dislike, whereas *task-based conflict* concerns arguments over the strategy and methods you should use to get something done.

During his research on Silicon Valley tech teams, the author – Adam Grant – found that the highest performing teams experienced moderately high amounts of task-conflict, especially early on in their projects. This conflict was usually about how to best move forward. But importantly, the highest-performing teams never had much relationship-conflict; they all got along with each other, even when they clashed over how to get things done. In contrast, the lowest-performing teams had low levels of task conflict, but high levels of relationship conflict, throughout their projects. The problem was they disliked each other so much, that they never felt comfortable enough to challenge each other's ideas.

The best negotiators do three key things to change people's minds.

How do you persuade someone that you're right? Grant used to believe that the art of persuasion consisted of reeling off evidence that the other person was wrong. But he's come to realize that there's a lot more to negotiations and debate than beating someone over the head with logic.

The key message here is: The best negotiators do three key things to change people's minds.

First, they find common ground with the other person.

Most of us enter debates and negotiations like a tug of war. We think that if we can hit our opponent with enough reasons why we're right, then we can drag them over to our side. But the most skilled negotiators approach the debate more like a dance. They know that by stepping back occasionally, it gives the other person room to step forward. So whereas mediocre negotiators only arm themselves with reasons why they're right and the other person is wrong, the best negotiators also mention things on which they might actually agree.

So the next time you enter a negotiation, remember that you don't have to win every battle. Agreeing with some of your partner's arguments and finding common ground will actually encourage them over to your side.

Second, great negotiators also achieve more with fewer arguments.

We often imagine debates to be like standing on opposing ends of a pair of weigh scales – if you can weigh your side with enough arguments, you tip the scales and win. But the best negotiators don't just pile on arguments. Instead, they present fewer, stronger arguments in favor of their case. That's because they know that weaker arguments dilute stronger ones. If you pile on lots of reasons to support your arguments, then your opponent will simply discredit the weakest ones. And once they've rejected *some* of your arguments, it's much easier for them to disregard your whole case. For instance, when a group of researchers set out to persuade alumni to donate money to their old college, they found that only half as many people donated when they were given *two* reasons to donate as they did when they were given just one.

Third, whereas mediocre negotiators act like preachers and prosecutors, the best negotiators behave more like – you guessed it – scientists.

Instead of just preaching their own viewpoints, or mercilessly prosecuting their opponents' positions, great negotiators show a scientist-like curiosity toward their opponents. They ask questions such as, Are you really saying you can't see any truth in my proposal? In fact, research shows that the best negotiators end 20 percent of their comments with a question. That's twice the number of the average negotiators.

Even the most ignorant beliefs can be changed.

In 1983, Black musician Daryl Davis began talking to members of the Ku Klux Klan. His mission? To convince the most racist people in America to change their minds. Since that day, Davis has persuaded many Klan members to rethink their racism and leave the KKK; one former klansman even asked Davis to be his daughter's godfather. His success tells us a lot about one method to stamp out bigotry.

The key message here is: Even the most ignorant beliefs can be changed.

So, how *do* you change people's prejudiced ideas and beliefs? As Davis has found in his work with Ku Klux Klan members, one of the most effective ways is to show them just how *arbitrary* those beliefs are.

During his conversations with Klan members, Davis explored the idea that their racist beliefs were often simply an accident of birth. What, he asked the Klansmen, would their beliefs be like if they had been born into other families; families that didn't have a tradition of actively upholding white supremacy? By encouraging the Klansmen to reflect on the roots of

their racism, Davis enabled them to see that their beliefs were grounded in flawed foundations. This opened the door to the Klansmen questioning their racism and ultimately changing their minds.

In a wildly different context, Grant observed a similar phenomenon when studying the animosity and prejudice between the fans of two rival baseball teams, the Yankees and the Red Sox. The Yankees fans typically thought of the Red Sox fans as obnoxious, aggressive, and arrogant. And the Red Sox fans said exactly the same thing about the Yankees fans.

In an attempt to bridge the gap between the two groups, Grant asked the baseball fans to write an essay about how random some of their dislike for the other side was. He asked Yankee fans to consider the fact that, if they had been born into a Red Sox–supporting family, *they* probably would have grown up supporting the Red Sox too. After writing these personal essays, many of the baseball fans on both sides changed their minds on their own; they began saying that they realized that their prejudicial attitudes were silly and incorrect.

To sum up, if you want someone to rethink their prejudices, it's not enough to show them why their beliefs are wrong. Instead, it might be better to show them that it's only pure chance that they believe these things at all.

You can persuade someone by asking them the right questions.

As strange as it may sound, sometimes the best way to get people to rethink is to interview them. In 2018, in a hospital in Quebec, Canada, a young mother named Marie-Hélène was refusing to change her mind. Marie-Hélène was an anti-vaxxer, and she didn't want her premature baby, Tobie, to be vaccinated against measles.

The staff on the maternity ward knew there was only one person who might be able to help. Enter Dr. Arnaud Gagneur, the vaccine whisperer, whose work holds powerful insights into rethinking.

In his work with Marie-Hélène, Gagneur used a technique known as *motivational interviewing*.

The key message here is: You can persuade someone by asking them the right questions.

Motivational interviewing is effective at getting people to change their minds on everything from vaccinations, to quitting smoking, to getting more exercise, to stopping gambling.

So how does it work? It all starts with the idea that it's much more effective to help people discover their *own* reasons to rethink rather than simply giving them *your* reasons for a rethink.

The interviewer begins from a position of humility and honest curiosity about why the person thinks the way they do and explores what might motivate them to change their mind. So Gagneur began his interview with Marie-Hélène by asking her open-ended questions about her feelings surrounding the measles vaccine. Then Gagneur moved on to ask her how she felt about the potential consequences of *not* getting Tobie vaccinated.

Usually, when we're trying to persuade someone, we do a lot of the talking, but motivational interviews emphasize *listening* instead. When he was talking to Marie-Hélène, instead of jumping in to disagree with her, Gagneur acknowledged that he understood her fears about the vaccine. This simple acknowledgment of another person's view and feelings is known as *reflective listening*.

At the end of the interview, Gagneur emphasized that Marie-Hélène had complete freedom to choose whether or not to vaccinate Tobie. When people refuse to rethink, it may not be because they disagree with your arguments. Instead, it's often because they want to hold on to their own freedom to choose. So it's important that you let the person know that they're capable of change, but that they're also free to decide for themselves. After the interview, Marie-Hélène decided to vaccinate Tobie, and her other children, too. No persuasion required.

People rethink less when an issue is presented as black and white.

In 2006 Al Gore released his award-winning documentary on climate change: *An Inconvenient Truth*. It had a seismic effect; persuading governments, businesses, and ordinary people to start protecting the planet. But 15 years on, how successful has the environmental movement been in changing America's mind on climate change? Perhaps not as successful as it could have been.

By 2018, only 59 percent of Americans viewed climate change as a severe problem, and 16 percent said they didn't think it was a problem at all. So what can the mixed success of climate activists teach us about getting people to think again?

The key message here is: People rethink less when an issue is presented as black and white.

Activists like Gore often frame the climate change debate as if people must agree with one of just two sides.

On one side you have scientists and 'the truth,' and on the other side, you have 'climate deniers' and their wild claims. But if you want people to think again, then this black and white approach doesn't work. By framing issues like this, we fall into the trap of *binary bias*. This is when, in our quest for clarity, we simplify a complex range of viewpoints into just two categories.

In fact, most Americans aren't firmly on one side of the climate debate. Many people's views range from mildly concerned, to disengaged, to skeptical. But by making out as if it's simply 'truth-tellers' versus 'deniers', activists force people to pick a side.

It turns out that people are more likely to change their minds when an issue is presented as *complex*; as having *many* different perspectives.

In other words, if you want someone to rethink, it's no good telling them that they're either wrong or right. Instead, you're better off showing them that there are lots of opinions to choose from. This approach encourages people to focus less on the emotional, irrational business of picking sides, and more on the actual issues. If environmentalists had managed to do this, then more Americans might have focused on the science, rather than the sides.

Of course, you might be worried that you'll appear weak or unsure of your position if you admit that there are multiple perspectives on an issue. But research shows that this isn't something you need to worry about. In fact, multiple studies have found that, when experts show doubt, we actually find them *more* persuasive, not less.

Your organizational culture impacts your team's ability to rethink.

Rethinking isn't just about individuals changing their minds, it's also a collective necessity for organizations. In 2003, NASA's Columbia Space Shuttle took off. As it did, some foam broke off the shuttle. The NASA ground team's reaction? They quickly decided it wasn't a big issue. Foam had broken off spaceships before and nothing bad had happened.

If the ground team had thought again about the importance of the foam though, they would have realized that it *was* a big issue; the foam loss ultimately caused the ship to break up when it reentered the earth's atmosphere. And all seven astronauts died.

The key message here is: Your organizational culture impacts your team's ability to rethink.

In 2003, NASA's culture was heavily centered around *performance*. The top priority was getting things done – and to an excellent standard, every single time. With so much emphasis on results, there wasn't a lot of room for rethinking.

If you want your team to have the ability to rethink and reassess their decisions, then your workplace needs to adopt a *learning culture* instead.

In learning cultures, the highest priority is *growth*, and rethinking is routine. Employees maintain an element of doubt about their methods, and they're always aware of just how much they don't know. This mindset means they stay humble rather than suffering from the overconfidence that the NASA scientists fell victim to. You might assume that organizations with a performance culture get better results, but research shows that companies with learning cultures are the most innovative, and make the least mistakes.

You can instill a learning culture in your organization by providing psychological safety to your employees.

When team members feel psychologically safe, they feel comfortable taking risks, knowing that they won't be punished for doing so. They trust their coworkers and managers enough to be able to admit when they've made errors. This means that mistakes and problems can be identified and ironed out.

But in performance cultures, employees are routinely punished for failing, so people scramble to cover up their errors. Sadly, these errors then never get eliminated, and you have tragedies like the Columbia disaster.

So if you want your team to rethink when it counts, then don't tell them that failure isn't an option. Not only is it okay for teams to make mistakes and rethink their approach, it's also the only way your organization will learn, grow, and succeed over the long haul.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks:

Harboring doubt doesn't make you weak or incompetent, and neither does making a mistake. True progress and personal growth are born from constantly reassessing your ideas and opinions, and by adopting a humble attitude toward knowledge. So the next time someone tells you they're 100 percent sure that they're right and you're wrong, you can be almost certain that it's them who needs to think again.

Actionable advice:

You are your values, not your beliefs.

How do you define yourself? If you get your sense of identity from your beliefs, then you might want to think again. When your sense of self comes from the opinions you hold, it makes it far more difficult to change them. Because your whole identity is based on them, you end up getting defensive and clinging on to opinions, even when evidence suggests they're no longer valid. So instead of identifying with your beliefs, define yourself through your *values* instead. After all, your core values, such as fairness, integrity, or excellence, won't need to change throughout your life, but your beliefs about how to advance them probably will.

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