Lifelong Learning

It's Not What you Know, It's What you Can Learn

Introdution

Several years ago, I had an epiphany about learning, despite having long understood the importance of "lifelong learning" thanks to Peter Senge and others. In today's world it no longer matters how **MUCH** you know at a given point in time because, due to the rate of change, it's now more important to be able to **ACCESS** what you need to know, when you need it.

Think about it for a minute.

There are two important things happening at the same time.

1) There is so much information freely available, that anyone, anywhere, can tap into a deeper knowledge base than has ever existed in the world and they can do so in real time, for free, thanks to the Internet

2) Because things are changing so quickly, and new information is being created in such volume and can be shared so readily, the process of accumulating knowledge is actually becoming a waste of time, effort and money.

Radical thinking for sure, so we are going to try to make the case in this publication.

Stocks vs. Flows of Knowledge

In the old world, where knowledge was power, the bias of leaders was to secure the sources of knowledge, control its dissemination and spin the knowledge to suit their own needs and beliefs. Since size mattered, they built large and impressive "stocks" of knowledge, which they then locked in a vault to which only they had the key. Then, in 1440, along came Johannes Gutenberg and the printing press, and the "stocks" of current knowledge were slowly shared with anyone who could read. It was a game changer!

Since history does not stop to take a breath, and it just keeps relentlessly rolling forward, once knowledge was unleashed and made available to the masses, it was only natural that the appetite for knowledge would grow.

So, slowly through the church, the press, and institutions of higher learning, we began to find ways to deepen the stocks of knowledge. We could then trickle out the knowledge in a controlled and formal manner using "wise men and women" as the intermediary – the priest, the editor and the professor.

Then, along came Tim Berners-Lee, Steve Jobs and Jimmy Wales. Together, but yet on their own, they created a new platform that magnified, amplified and accelerated what Gutenberg had done once before.

Today, through the Internet, our 24/7/365 addiction to our mobile devices and the fact every bit of knowledge we could ever want is available, at anytime, through the magic of our fingertips, we don't need an intermediary and we don't need to accumulate stocks of fixed knowledge. Today, it's all about whether you can access what you want when you want it. It's about the "flow" of knowledge and your ability to tap into the right flow to get what you need.

The Half-Life of Knowledge

The other factor that makes the "flow" of knowledge more important today than the "stocks" of knowledge ever were in the past is the fact that, with so much new knowledge being created and coming at us so fast, the actual value of knowledge is falling. The length of time any new knowledge has unique value is getting shorter and the half-life of what we know is speeding up. The things which we know to be true, at any one moment in time, will be replaced very quickly by new things and new knowledge. Only the foolhardy will rely on the "stocks".

In the modern organization, this phenomenon presents an interesting dilemma since hanging on to what we know at any point in time effectively puts the brakes on progress. Even worse, when it comes to driving significant change, the unwillingness to let go of what is not working is very often the thing that causes organizational transformation efforts to fail.

In fact, we could say that "abandonment" is one of two central factors in the willingness to learn. If we are not willing to let go of what we have known, we will never create room for what it is we need to know. It is the not letting go part of the equation that restricts our ability to absorb the important new stuff. New ideas, new solutions, new possibilities, etc.

What do we really want?

- **Graveyards of old knowledge, or networks of new information?**

- **More knowledge by volume, or more, varied and better insight?**

The Learning Organization

Peter Senge is the father of the theory of lifelong learning, and the champion of creating a learning organization. He defines the learning organization as "one where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together".

What makes Senge so relevant today is his belief that in situations of rapid change, only those organizations that are flexible, adaptive and productive will excel and, for this to happen, organizations need to "discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels".

He believes "Survival learning", or what is more often termed "adaptive learning", is important, but it is not enough to survive. To be a learning organization, it must be joined by "generative learning", which is learning that enhances our capacity to create. There are five basic disciplines that must converge to become a learning organization, and the one Senge puts the most accent on is Systems Thinking – a shift of mind from seeing parts to seeing wholes, from seeing people as helpless reactors to seeing them as active participants in shaping their reality, from reacting to the present to creating the future.

In his view, Systems Thinking is the cornerstone of the learning organization and the conceptual cornerstone of his approach. To quote Senge "We learn best from our experience, but we never directly experience the consequences of many of our most important decisions". We tend to think that cause and effect will be relatively near to one another. Thus, when faced with a problem, it is the "solutions" that are close by that we focus upon. Classically, we look to actions that produce improvements in a relatively short time span. However, when viewed in systems terms, short-term improvements often involve very significant long-term costs.

Curiosity Inspires, Discovery Reveals

Curiosity lies at the very heart of our world and at the center of what makes business tick. It fires the imagination to create the new and different and, in the process, it moves us forward. Curious people are excited by life and learning. They are eager to explore something new. They are intrigued by how things work. Curious people aren't quick to judge. Instead, they are open, they are playful, they expect something interesting to reveal itself over time. They expect not to know all of the answers and are stimulated by the chance to discover.

Curious people actively listen to others.

In the organizational context, there is a solid business case for improving the level of curiosity in your culture as an essential input to creating the learning organization.

The benefits of greater levels of curiosity include:

- **Fewer decision-making errors**
- **More innovation**
- **Reduced group conflict**
- **More open communication**
- **Better performance**

There are also several barriers to curiosity.

People have the wrong mindset about the discovery or exploration process
- They see it as a threat to the status-quo – which it is, but that is not a bad thing. People who seek to make things better understand that testing the edges of what they know is the way we get to the new, and the new can be better, faster and cheaper.

Leaders put the importance of efficiency over the benefits of exploration
- They see the process as a messy one – which it is, but that is not a bad thing. Leaders must shift their thinking and decide whether they want innovation and breakthroughs in thinking, or do they want incrementalism. Like so many things – it's about the trade-offs.

Leading the Learning Organization

Peter Senge argues that learning organizations require a new view of leadership. He sees the traditional view of leaders (as special people who set the direction, make key decisions and energize the troops) as being outdated and narrowly defined. In his world, in a learning organization, leaders are designers, stewards and teachers. They are responsible for building organizations where people continually expand their capabilities to understand complexity, clarify vision, and improve shared mental models – they are responsible for learning.

Leader as Designer

The first task entails designing the governing ideas – the purpose, vision and core values by which people should live. Building a shared vision is crucial to fostering a long-term orientation and an imperative for learning.

Leader as Steward

While the notion of leader as steward has been promoted by others, including Peter Block, Senge's view of stewardship begins with "purpose stories" that explain why organizations do what they do, how they need to evolve, and how that evolution is part of something larger.

Leader as Teacher

Senge believes the first responsibility of a leader is to define reality, and great leaders help people achieve more accurate, more insightful and more empowering views of reality. Leader as teacher is not about "teaching" people how to achieve their vision. It is about fostering learning, for everyone. Such leaders help people throughout the organization develop systemic understandings. Accepting this responsibility is the antidote to one of the most common downfalls of otherwise gifted teachers – losing their commitment to the truth.

The eLearning Opportunity

This brings us to the current moment. The past few months have presented us with crisis after crisis, upending many of our daily routines and norms, and causing an impromptu restructuring of our lives and workplaces. However, as the old adage goes, we should "never let a good crisis go to waste". Along with so many other things, we have now been presented with an unprecedented opportunity. An opportunity to implement new systems of learning that embrace change and embrace the digital solutions. Burying our heads in the sand of the status quo will not provide us with the growth and development our organizations are in desperate need of.

If we are to pair the needs of our current moment with the ideals of lifelong learning outlined by Peter Senge, we need to find or develop learning systems that prioritize:

- **Ease of access to knowledge**
- **Flexibility in delivery and distribution**
- **Streamlining the flow of information**
- **Building networks of new information**
- **Empowering workers to embrace curiosity**
- **Reimagining leadership**

Embracing a digital learning model, or eLearning model, where employees have access to self-directed, concise and flexible courses, will allow us to truly realize our workplaces as "learning organizations". Organizations where we put a premium on employees having access to new concepts, ideas and information, and encourage them to explore. Much like the Gutenberg Press allowed for the beginnings of the democratization of information, implementing eLearning models will allow organizations to democratize access to knowledge and learning.

The days of pulling everyone away from their desk for full-day workshops and retreats is not currently viable for health reasons, but also no longer the most cost-effective or efficient way for organizations to stay flexible and adaptive. It is a time for leaders to be bold, to embrace eLearning and aggressively take steps to develop organizations that are built for the long-term.

Final Thoughts

In a world full of uncertainty, where we all face a future we can neither predict nor control, there is a need for people and organizations to develop their capacity to cope, rather than be consumed by the external environment. This is where the ability to learn is so important.

The ability and willingness to keep learning throughout your life, including your professional life, is something that can be a game changer. Too many people and organizations are trapped in a dark box of fear because they are not willing to embrace new knowledge and fresh perspectives.

- **To learn is to grow**
- **To learn is to open your eyes**
- **To learn is to adapt to changing circumstances**

As we outlined earlier, we have moved from an era where the stockpiling and hoarding of information was the norm, in part because some people and leaders feared sharing that knowledge with others who may not be "smart" enough to absorb it and understand it. Today, we see this happening on a much more worrying scale, as knowledge that has been proven is not being believed.

In our view:

- It's time for organizational leaders to step up and become visible advocates for learning in a way, and on a scale, they have never done before.

- It's time for CEOs and CHROs to make the link between learning and organizational performance, and to do so is a full-throated manner with a level of personal commitment greater than they have ever shown before.

- It's time to treat learning as an essential investment, not a discretionary cost, and to put in place policies, processes and programs that ensure people are learning at a rate that outpaces the past and get's us to the future faster.

We have an opportunity to embrace what Peter Senge tried to teach us 30 years ago.
Let's not waste any more time.

APPENDIX

Select Quotes from Some Learned People

A *Whole New Mind (Daniel Pink)*

The last few decades have belonged to a certain kind of person with a certain kind of mind - computer programmers who could crank code, lawyers who could craft contracts, MBAs who could crunch numbers.

But the keys to the kingdom are changing hands. The future belongs to a very different kind of person with a very different kind of mind - creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers, and meaning makers.

We are moving from an economy and a society built on the logical, linear, computerlike capabilities of the Information Age to an economy and a society built on the inventive, empathic, big-picture capabilities of what's rising in its place, the Conceptual Age.

It is an age animated by a different form of thinking:

High Concept - involves the capacity to detect patterns and opportunities, to create artistic and emotional beauty, to craft a satisfying narrative, and to combine seemingly unrelated ideas into something new.

High Touch - involves the ability to empathize with others, to understand the subtleties of human interaction, to find joy in one's self and to elicit it in others, and to stretch beyond the quotidian in pursuit of purpose and meaning.
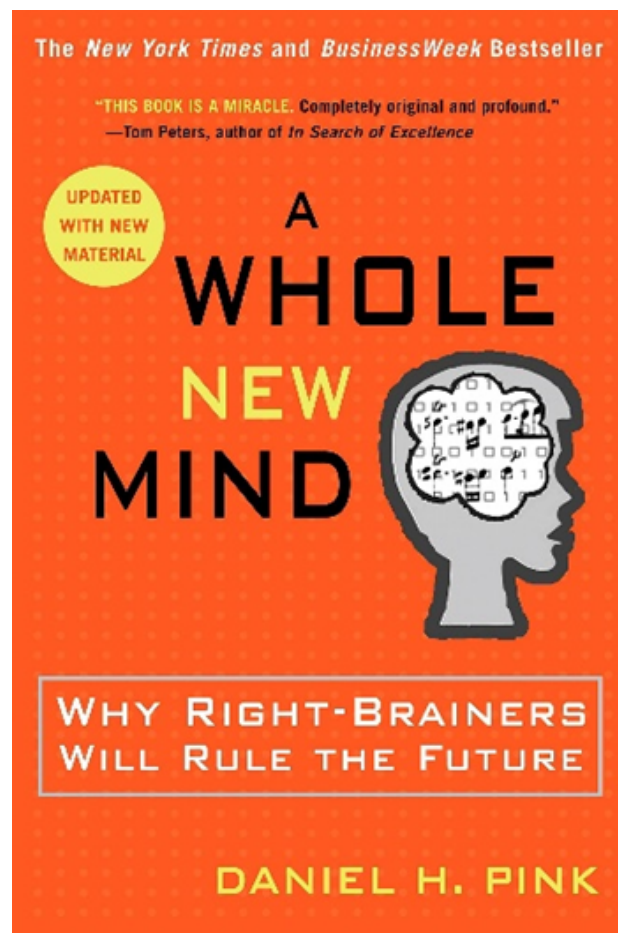
Our brains are divided into two hemispheres. The left hemisphere [is] particularly good at recognizing serial events - events whose elements occur one after the other—and controlling sequences of behavior.

- The left hemisphere is sequential, logical, and analytical.
- The right hemisphere is nonlinear, intuitive, and holistic.
- The left hemisphere is sequential
- The right hemisphere is simultaneous.
- The left hemisphere specializes in text
- The right hemisphere specializes in context.
- The left hemisphere analyzes the details
- The right hemisphere synthesizes the big picture.

Analysis and synthesis are perhaps the two most fundamental ways of interpreting information.

The Power of Unreasonable People (Elkington, Hartigan & Schwab)

George Bernard Shaw once said, "The reasonable man (or woman) adapts himself (or herself) to the world," whereas "the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself (or herself). Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man (or woman)."

By this definition, not only are most entrepreneurs dubbed "crazy," even by family and friends - but a large slice of the future may hinge on their success in spreading their apparently unhinged ideas and business models.

Being unreasonable is not just a state of mind. It is also a process by which older, outdated forms of reasoning are jettisoned and new ones conceived and evolved.
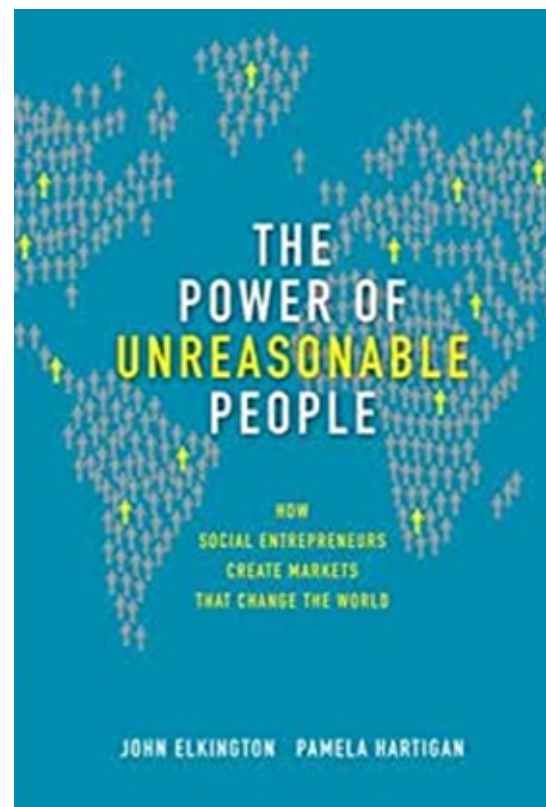
As the process unfolds, those mired in the older, obsolete paradigms can become threatened by and aggressive toward the innovators, particularly if those innovators move into the mainstream worlds of business, finance, and politics.

Entrepreneurs lead by example.

They attack intractable problems, take huge risks, and force the rest of us to look beyond the edge of what seems possible.

Ten Characteristics of Entrepreneurs

- Shrug off the constraints of ideology or discipline
- Identify solutions to problems, combining innovation, resourcefulness, opportunity
- Innovate by finding a new product, a new service, or a new approach to a problem
- Willing to share their innovations and insights for others to replicate
- Jump in before ensuring they are fully resourced
- Have an unwavering belief in everyone's innate capacity to contribute meaningfully
- Show a dogged determination that pushes them to take risks that others wouldn't dare
- Balance their passion for change with a zeal to measure and monitor their impact
- Have a great deal to teach change makers in other sectors
- Display a healthy impatience (e.g., they don't do well in bureaucracies)

They are crazy like the proverbial fox. They look for and often find solutions to insoluble problems in the unlikeliest places. They are driven by a passion to expand thinking.
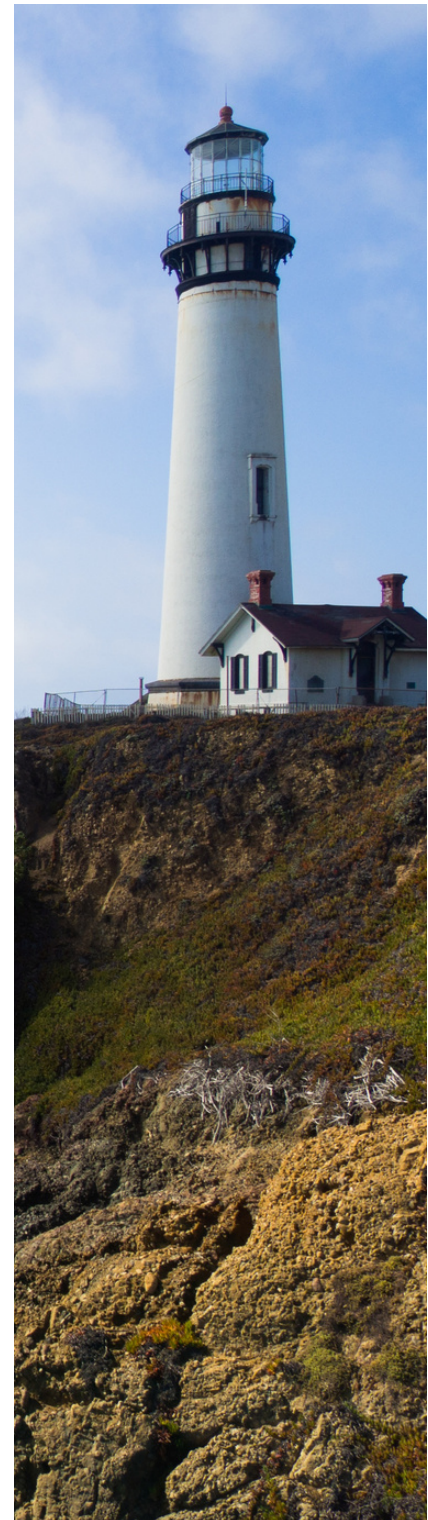
## *Originals: How Non-Conformists Move the World (Adam Grant)*

Years ago, psychologists discovered there are two routes to achievement, Conformity or Originality.

Conformity - means following the crowd down conventional paths and maintaining the status quo.

Originality - is taking the road less traveled, championing a set of novel ideas that go against the grain.

"People who suffer the most from a given state of affairs are paradoxically the least likely to question, challenge, reject, or change it."

The hallmark of originality is rejecting the default and exploring whether a better option exists. The starting point is curiosity: pondering why the default exists in the first place.
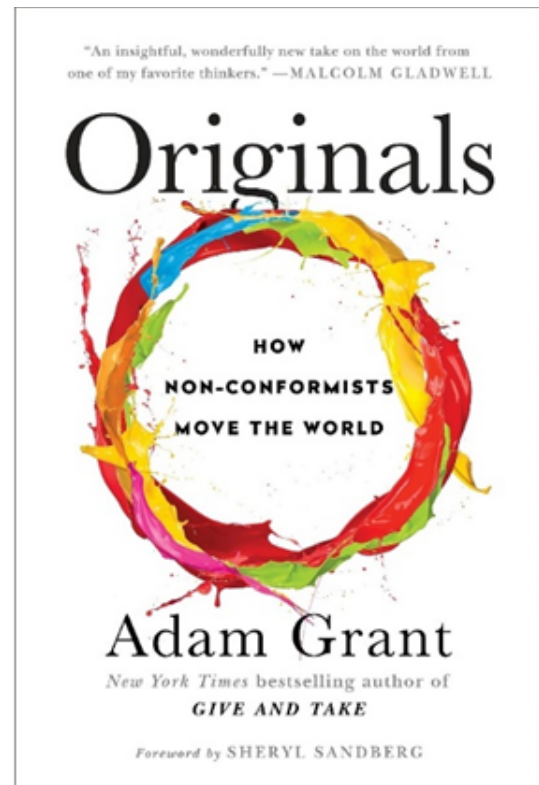
Practice makes perfect, but it doesn't make new. The gifted learn to play magnificent Mozart melodies and beautiful Beethoven symphonies, but never compose their own original scores. They focus their energy on consuming existing scientific knowledge, not producing new insights. They conform to the codified rules of established games, rather than inventing their own rules or their own games.

The non-conformists make up their own rules. As economist Joseph Schumpeter famously observed, originality is an act of creative destruction. Advocating for new systems often requires demolishing the old way of doing things, and we hold back for fear of rocking the boat.

To become original, you have to try something new, which means accepting some risk.

The Beacon Group