

# *The Power of Unreasonable People*





## Introduction

We have all come to understand how the health of a prosperous, sustainable and relevant business can best be gauged by determining how well it is addressing market needs, filling value gaps and providing customers with a great relationship experience. This is true now more than ever before, given the unprecedented levels of economic uncertainty, the massive changes in the competitive landscape and the advent of technological solutions in almost every aspect of our lives – both personal and otherwise.

To meet this new and much higher test of relevance, we need a “special” group of people. People who are wired just a little differently and who, by conventional standards, would maybe even be considered unusual. In these challenging times, we simply cannot depend on the tried and the true, the conventional and the careful. In this climate, opportunities, prosperity and good fortune will not be found through streamlining, downsizing, re-engineering and formulaic efficiency processes such as Six Sigma. At best, these are crude instruments of temporary efficiency and no more than basic, short-term survival techniques.

The conditions we find ourselves in demand something radically different. Put simply, we need to alter the intellectual “inputs” if we want different commercial “outputs”, and that begins with the nature and quality of the people we choose to help frame and solve the wicked problems we face.

Call them whatever you want – Change Agents, Catalysts, Provocateurs or Deviants. At the end of the day, your victory and your organization’s success will be determined by those people who have a different mindset and a different set of lenses through which to look at the world.

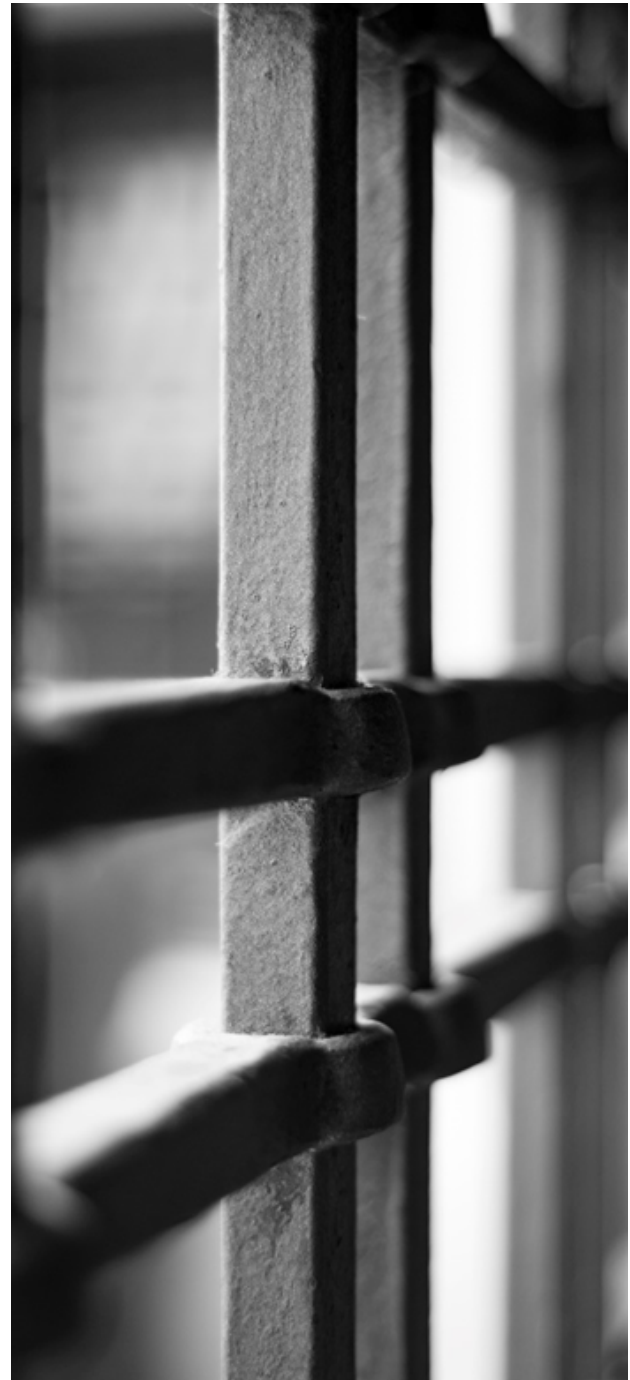
## ***Prisoners of our Mindsets***

We must give credit where credit is due, so it is only fair to acknowledge the huge contribution to this particular line of thinking made by Carol S. Dweck, Ph.D., a leading authority, and currently a Professor at Stanford University. She makes a compelling and convincing case that, more than anything else, success in life and business has to do with mindset, outlook and the views we hold.

Mindsets are beliefs, powerful beliefs to be sure, but they still represent a choice we are free to make. A choice to either be outward facing and growth oriented, or inward facing and protective. A choice to challenge and innovate, or to administer and regulate. Look around. What is the most appropriate response to the circumstances we find ourselves in? Is it an open, growth mindset or a closed, fixed and sheltered one?

In order to navigate these waters, and ensure our organizations remain relevant in a rapidly changing world, we need to pay more attention to the mindsets we ourselves have and those we foster in our leaders at all levels. Perhaps it is nothing more than dividing the population into learners and non-learners, but clearly people with a growth mindset not only seek out challenges, but they thrive on them.

There are more than enough challenges so, just maybe, we need to do a better job of identifying, liberating and deploying these “special” people. A growth mindset is a belief in change, and it frames the way we look at the world, identify problems, interpret situations and arrive at solutions. It is quite possible that mindset is more important than talent.



## Brain Science & Performance

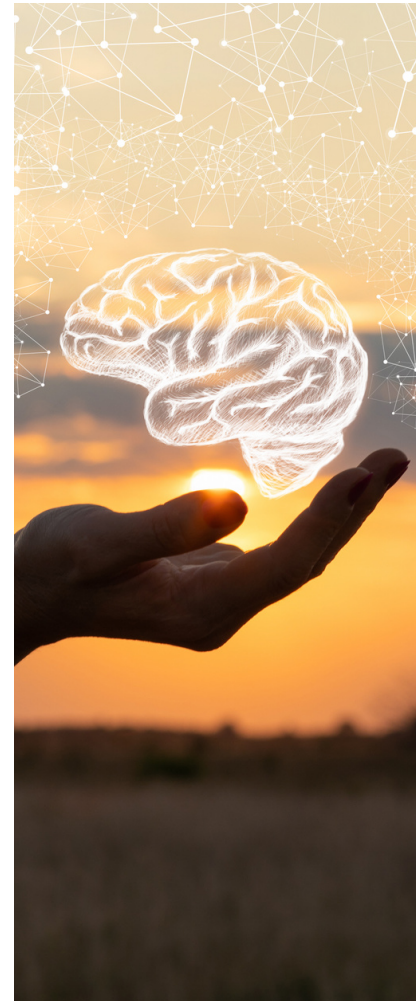
Most of us don't have a very deep or accurate understanding of how the mind is shaped and how it works. As a result, we default to the commonly held assumptions about people, personality, talent and performance. We like to believe that being smart and being talented is what matters.

Luckily, there are others who have made the study of brain science their life's work, people like Dr. Edward Hallowell, who would argue that what really matters is what you do with what you have. These people understand how the brain works, how it can be mastered and how it shapes our mindsets, beliefs and, ultimately, our behaviour. Therefore, in the business context, leaders should be judged by how well they get the best out of people's brains.

Angela Duckworth, at the University of Pennsylvania, introduces another related concept. She has shown how "grit", or determination, trumps IQ as a predictor of performance and potential, and reminds us the brain is exceptionally "plastic" with a dramatic ability to grow and change throughout our life. As a consequence, people who are learners, people who crave experiences, people with a growth mindset, have a greater ability to make the most of what they have.

These are the people we need.

Bottom line, if we do not stretch and challenge the cerebral cortex, and make sensible use of the knowledge we gain, then the brain actually gets stupid. Cultures of fear, suppression, negativity and little originality, produce low performing brains. The brain essentially becomes disabled, the neural pathways get hijacked, and we default to a fixed mindset in which the ability to cope with change and complexity is dramatically impaired. Not a good thing in times like this.





## ***Freedom From Certainty***



It is quite possible there is no such thing as certainty, and there never has been. No matter how much we might want it, and how much it would ease our worries and make life more comfortable, it just does not exist. The pursuit of certainty is a fool's game and yet, so much of what we do in business is meant to mitigate risk by removing uncertainty.

Dr. Robert Burton has done some excellent work in this regard. He has examined the strange, unreasoned feelings of knowing we can all have from time to time that cannot be explained rationally. As well, he has examined the belief in the certainty we can have that we are 100% right, even when we are not. He has discovered that the more we think we are right and/or certain, the more we limit the consideration of there being any other option or alternative. Once again, a mindset that can seduce and trap us.

In 1957, the term “Cognitive Dissonance” was coined by Professor Leon Festinger to explain the mental state in which we think one thing and do another. His observation was as follows, “The more committed we are to a belief, the harder it is to relinquish, even in the face of overwhelming contradictory advice”.

The point here is that the pursuit of certainty as a form of comfort food is fundamentally flawed and even dangerous. The more we attempt to “prove” what we know, the less likely we are to examine alternatives that may be equally valid or even superior. Taken to its logical conclusion, this means we need to begin embracing ambiguity as a necessary part of the decision-making process and growing leaders who are rewarded and recognized not for what they know to be true, but rather how they are able to suspend premature judgments.

## ***The Courage to Rebel***



We have been greatly influenced in our own thinking about the process of change, transformation and creativity by the work of two groups. First, an organization known as Volans Ventures (an international group dedicated to entrepreneurial solutions of which Tim Brown, the CEO of IDEO, is a Board member) and secondly, the book “The Power of Unreasonable People” by two great British thinkers in the field of entrepreneurship, John Elkington and Pamela Hartigan, the title of which we have used for this paper.

They have given us the factual ammunition, the empirical evidence and the emotional support to declare that we really do need more rebels in business today. We would even go one step further and suggest we need them now because the world in which we live is demanding new, novel and breakthrough solutions, and those are not likely to come from the “normal” people, but rather the “crazy” people. This is not a new thought. George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) wrote many years ago, “The reasonable man adapts himself to the world whereas the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man”.

Once again, we come back to mindsets.

To quote Elkington and Hartigan, “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”. This is exactly what we need more of today in every type of business.

The invisible traps we have set for ourselves, by the way we think and look at the world, have now become serious and debilitating constraints to our ability to imagine new, better balanced and more sustainable solutions. We need to encourage the rebels who display the characteristics that underpin the value locked in the unconventional thinking of unreasonable people.

## Repertoires of Experience



In a world where mindsets matter, and where your own personal views and outlook determine your relevance and, hence, your success (either individually or as an enterprise), we need to examine just how mindsets are shaped. In our view, as the environment has changed around us, so too has the type of mindset we need from the leader who will help guide us.

There is considerable evidence to suggest that a person's view of the world, and tolerance for the new, novel and different, is directly related to the breadth and depth of their personal experiences. The broader the experience repertoire, the easier it is to make new connections. This is what allows the brain to form the unique neural pathways that, in turn, allow a person to "connect the dots" in new combinations for new solutions.

It is important to note the definition of experiences here is somewhat different. It is not about years of experience on a job or in a role, but rather the variety and diversity of personal experiences that act as stimuli for the brain. It is the rich tapestry that helps ensure we do not become locked into narrow channels of thinking, but can instead leap across domains to collect, share and assemble new patterns of insight.

The rate of new knowledge creation, combined with the ease of access on a real time basis to information, means that our processing power (i.e. the ability to access and interpret information) is more important than our stored knowledge. In fact, stored knowledge is a rapidly depreciating asset as the half-life of anything new or novel is shortening every day. The better way to differentiate yourself as a leader is to work on your timely retrieval ability, rather than on your storage capacity. The more new and different things you experience or have an interest in, the more likely your brain will be able to fill in missing parts and make a variety of new connections.

## ***The Strategic Mindset***

There are probably six to eight key mindsets required for someone to thrive as a relevant leader today. Implicit in what we are suggesting is a belief that the mindset and experience repertoire of a person is just the baseline, or starting point, from which a leader's attitudes, traits, characteristics and competencies then flow. We need to better understand how a person develops their particular basket of intellectual capabilities, and move beyond teaching them skills to teaching them how to have a different mindset or view of the world.

Of the necessary business mindsets, perhaps the most valuable is the Strategic Mindset. This is a complex combination of insight, foresight and peripheral vision, which together allow a person to not only have a great radar system with which to detect signals, but also the ability to make rapid fire connections. It requires confidence and adaptability and is fueled by intellectual curiosity.

Strategy is not created by digging into retrospective data looking for facts and evidence that help make sense of the past. It is, instead, a more intuitive process of looking forward and anticipating the changes just over the horizon. You can think of this as the type of mindset Steve Jobs had. Instead of being a prisoner to the status quo, he had a bold imagination combined with a revolutionary zeal to make something different and to do so on his own terms.

The raw material for creative insight comes not from years of deepening your knowledge, but from your ability to access information across a broad and diverse platform of experiences. The more new and different experiences you have, the better you will be at making sense of the future.





## ***The Creative Mindset***



A necessary and related companion to the Strategic Mindset is the Creative Mindset, which we believe can best be understood by reference to what Tim Brown of IDEO calls Design Thinking, or Roger Martin calls Integrative Thinking. While those authors may argue about the subtle differences between their two approaches, in our view they are essentially saying the same thing.

When stripped down to the basics, they are suggesting the creative process begins with imagination and intuition, which fuel the idea bank, which then leads to originality and allows new value to be created. This originality comes from combining previously unrelated pieces of the puzzle into new combinations, which then allows for the creation of new products, services and even new processes. It creates value out of thin air.

In order to do this effectively, and to do so on an ongoing basis, we have to look at the essential elements of the Creative Mindset which can best be explained as the ability to withhold judgment and not rush to conclusions. In other words, to hold multiple hypotheses in your mind and avoid the temptation to jump on one over the other until just the right time.

In a Type A, results-driven world, where we tend to place the “doers” on a pedestal, this is a very uncomfortable concept. On the other hand, we need to understand that the right-brain “thinkers” are the ones who create the value platform that others then exploit. Having the right strategy, but the wrong context is a much greater sin in business today.

## ***The Transformational Mindset***



The third and final mindset we want to examine in this paper is the Transformational Mindset. It is the mindset possessed by those who make great changes through their sheer will and determination, their capacity to persevere and their willingness to take risk. These people often have to face ridicule and overcome the great obstacles of social acceptance, but it seems to us we need more of these people today. Unless, of course, you believe that doing more of the same is going to be the answer to the challenges, opportunities and dilemmas of the future.

This mindset is very much like the one employed for thousands of years by the Court Jester, the one individual who was given immunity by the King to poke fun at the status quo and who, much to the delight of others who saw it as obviously as he, revealed truths that dared not be spoken. In business terms, this is about the heretics and deviants who dare suggest something new or different is needed and who can see the limits of a current approach, product, process or service.

In our view, it is time to relax just a little and then stoke up the courage to step outside of the mental models and mindsets that trap us. It is about defining new space and occupying it quickly. It is about change and transformation or whatever headline you want to give it. However you choose to label it, it is about carving a new path. May we suggest your business needs more of this and less of some other things which, on the surface seem comfortable, safe and predictable, but are really the Trojan horse which hides the forces opposed to change.

## **Stepping Up Transformation**

The world we see evolving is an exciting and challenging one. It is a world in which the array of possibilities is endless, and the need for novelty, imagination and originality has never been higher. The world of business has an important role to play in shaping the communities in which we live and building the international bridges that will bring us even closer.

This brave new globalized world, with its rich and diverse tapestry, is also a world that is demanding new answers to haunting questions about sustainability, justice, tolerance and equality. Business leaders have a powerful platform from which to help transform the world, but that will depend on the mindsets of those in positions of influence. Equally, the ongoing business value proposition will require the same or very similar new mindsets.

In order to begin the process, we have provided a short list of possible actions.

### **Identify the Deviants**

The current and future competitive climates will require new ideas, and those are more likely to come from people who view the world just a little differently. Organizations will have to do a much better job of identifying those people and bringing them into the circle of influence. The wise leaders will not only listen to them, but will give them a voice and the opportunity to shape the future. Think about reshaping your Talent Evaluation process.

### **Unleash Conviction - Tap Into Purpose**

These individuals thrive on freedom of expression and passion, so let them loose. Tap into their core purpose and allow them to identify new areas of opportunity for your organization. Think about creating a Tomorrow Forum as a vehicle for these thinkers to cast their minds into the emerging trends of the future.



***Provide Broad Scope***

We know from the work of behavioural economists such as Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky that the key to effective problem solving and decision making is in the proper framing of the challenge. Accordingly, we need to be open to a healthy divergent phase of investigation and learn to examine multiple scenarios in tandem. Rushing to a premature conclusion within a narrow frame is exactly the wrong formula. Build a component into your Learning and Development initiatives that addresses this.

***Weave the Story***

It is part of the human condition to relate to stories and to use them as metaphors for our own challenges and dilemmas. In an era of Blogs, Facebook and other social media, there are so many ways to create virtual storytelling communities that will get people involved and engaged in the crucial conversations about tomorrow.

***Ensure Ample Air Cover***

The people you need to help carve the path to the future will be people who stand out and make others uncomfortable. You will need to ensure they are not marginalized by those who do not understand the value and purpose of creating a new mindset. Do not allow the good efforts of a few new thinkers to be drowned out by the practitioners of the status quo.





