

Think Like a Freak Study Guide

Think Like a Freak by Steven Levitt

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Summary

“Think Like a Freak” by Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner is the third in a series of books about freakonomics, a term coined by the authors in their first collaboration.

“Think Like a Freak” delves into the mind – yours and mine – and through years of study, experimentation, analysis of valuable feedback as well as the contribution of the works of other pioneers and experts in a variety of fields, the authors have found the key to liberated thinking and now share it with the world.

The authors break down the decision-making process from the external and internal stresses that weigh the decision-maker down to the tradition and conventional wisdom that ever looms and is difficult to break from and break through. The barriers that prevent us from making a clean decision, one that is not wrought with the herd-mentality way of thinking, have all been discovered and exposed by the authors. At times their approach couldn't be more simplistic. If an individual is not happy in a job, a career, or a relationship he should quit.

Levitt and Dubner stress that “quit” is not a four-letter word. Quitting is smart and healthy when it is obvious that a project is doomed or a relationship has seen its last days. It is best for an individual to walk away from a failure and take with him the valued knowledge learned rather than stay and try to salvage the impossible or breathe new life into a dead horse. Throughout the work, the authors try to take away the guilt and shame of what is traditionally considered failure so that the walking away is made easier. They point out that just like their own experiences through many years of research much more can be gleaned from failure than from success.

Levitt and Dubner further disabuse the reader from the notion that solving problems must be approached holistically. They encourage the reader to go easy on themselves and address just one element of a problem and try to resolve it. The individual will learn more about the problem and then have the experience and insight to perhaps move onto another element of the problem.

Huge problems like starvation and crime are approached by society as a whole incorrectly; however, circumstances and urgency often preclude an in-depth analysis of the root causes of such huge societal and cultural dilemmas. Sending food to starving people does not fix poverty; it feeds starving people. There are on-going efforts to get to the heart of such enormous problems but to achieve success they ultimately must be broken down into parts in order to bring clarity to core causes. The authors apply this approach to the individual. A person's depression can be temporarily alleviated with anti-depressants; however, it is not a long term fix and much work needs to be done to discover root causes.

There is the silent promise in this book that once a person can break through the societal barriers that include conventional wisdom and cultural mores, he will achieve the ability to think freely about his life and the decisions he must make. He may upset

others who steadfastly hold onto old ideas but in the end he will find himself and learn to make decisions that are uniquely his and that will serve him well.

Chapter 1: What Does It Mean to Think Like a Freak?

Summary

After having great success with their books, “Freakonomics” and “Super-Freakonomics,” the authors were beset with a deluge of questions. They ranged from questions about what makes people happy to the pros and cons of breast-feeding to a poser about what happened to the carpal tunnel syndrome epidemic. People thought they could answer every question or solve every problem imaginable. It takes a lot of time and effort to solve problems and answer questions responsibly. If a problem is persistent, it’s because the resolution is difficult to determine. Rather than trying to solve all problems, the authors thought it best to write a book to teach everyone to think like they do – like a Freak.

The belief that there is a right way and a wrong way to solve problems leads to a lot of frustration and unsolved issues. The modern world requires people to think outside the box, to think proactively and creatively not by a standard formula. Some feel driven to end poverty, improve government effectiveness or improve personal relationships, huge challenges that require new thinking, new approaches.

The authors’ first two books were driven by fundamental ideas: understanding the incentives of solving a problem is key to understanding it. Secondly, knowing what the core issue is and making the overall problem less complicated cuts to the chase. Remembering that conventional wisdom is not always right and separating cause and effects that are not related will help provide the pathway to a true solution.

“Think Like a Freak” is not a self-help book. The authors were inspired in writing the book by the “economic approach.” There is nothing magical about this approach; it relies on common sense and oftentimes focuses on the obvious. Thinking like a freak is easy if one allows it to be. Letting go of biases – political, social and intellectual – and avoiding the “running with the herd” mentality will break down barriers that will allow this new way of thinking. A commitment to put the energy it takes into changing the way one thinks is crucial. Being willing to take some flak for blurting out new ideas that may be controversial is part of this transformative way of thinking.

David Cameron, who would soon become the Prime Minister of Great Britain, asked to meet with Levitt and Dubner when they were touring with “Think Like a Freak.” Some of their ideas had not been well-received in Great Britain so the authors were surprised by the request. His aide told the authors that Cameron was a warrior on the issues of global warming and climate change. It was his wish that Great Britain become a zero-carbon society. He felt it was a matter of morals. The word “morals” signaled to the authors that Cameron may fall victim to a reliance on his own morals and while disregarding fact. Cameron apparently felt guilty about the state of the climate because

it was Great Britain that had led the Industrial Revolution which ultimately caused the current climatic problems.

However, when they finally met with Cameron he spoke of the economic downturn and recession as the biggest problem facing the nation. Despite being a conservative who believed in austerity, he would protect the National Health Service from being cut or tampered with. But health care costs had doubled over the last decade and were estimated to keep increasing. His devotion to Great Britain's health care system was based on his personal experience with a sick child. The British health care system was virtually free to the patient no matter what the cost. When something is free, it is often used inefficiently. The overconsumption of health care experienced in Britain by many "well" patients caused health care prices to increase and made for frustrating patient wait times. Cameron was not open to this argument and quickly said his goodbyes.

Analysis

In this chapter, Levitt and Dubner describe what they mean by the book's title. Thinking like a freak simply means to think outside the box, go off the reservation, reject conventional wisdom and learn to dig down to the core issue of a problem. They also mention their first two books which were also on the topic of "freakonomics" and the reaction they got from the general public from readers of those books.

The authors are providing some background on their collaboration and their shared goal to help people to free themselves from the binds of convention and to use the powers of the brain to think more than once or twice a week.

An anecdote about the British Prime Minister-elect's request for help in dealing with the recession facing him levels the playing field for the reader. Everyone is beset with issues that they have difficulty dealing with – even leaders of great nations.

The authors are careful to stress that their book is not a self-help book. They simply want to inspire people to think rationally and clearly. Learning to do so the readers are assured that they will not only find the truth, they will find themselves. The authors provide a valuable launching pad for their message.

Vocabulary

existential, autonomous, optimizing, turbulent, deciphering, correlation, blithe, prescriptive, unadulterated, macroeconomic, algorithm, sacrosanct

Chapter 2: The Three Hardest Worlds in the English Language

Summary

The three hardest words in the English language to say are, “I don’t know.” If a person knows everything then there’s nothing he can learn. There are different levels of knowledge: scientific, belief-based; and; that which is fueled by special interest groups for power or money. The latter includes beliefs that are pushed on the general public. The NRA would have the general public believe that guns aren’t behind all the shootings! A trigger happy administration sold the people on the necessity of war because of the weapons of mass destruction that a Middle Eastern dictator had. Special interests sell their own version of the truth for their own ends.

When complex problems are addressed involving many layers of facts it is difficult at times for the general public to relate to the ultimate decision, to connect cause and effect in complicated matters. Although no one can really predict the future, the public relies on many predictions – in business, the stock market and in athletic competitions. Long-term studies indicate that predictions by “experts” aren’t much better than “dart-throwing chimps.” Those particularly bad at making predictions are those who know it all, who are narrow in their beliefs.

People aren’t really that accurate about the outside world once they drop the pretense that they know more than they know. On top of that, most people don’t know themselves well enough to assess their own abilities. A person who excels in one area does not necessarily excel in another field. Making assumptions about something one doesn’t know can lead to disaster.

It is impossible to learn without having some form of feedback. One has to see the fruits of his decisions and efforts – palpable success or failure. Without feedback, man has a tendency to repeat his mistakes. An election is an example of feedback. The more complex the matter, the more difficult it is to isolate cause and effect. Feedback could be received on aspects of your solution but receiving feedback on the entirety of your work is a challenge. In some cases, it’s necessary to create feedback through experimentation. There are natural experiments that happen organically. There are also laboratory experiments that are developed in an effort to elicit feedback or important information about the efficacy of a program or system. Laboratory experiments capture reactions and behaviors that are difficult to discern in the natural world. A field experiment allows the researcher to freely randomize and allow subjects to respond to real-world incentives that can be monitored closely by the administrator of the experiment. Experiments can also be fun and exciting not to mention revealing. Shooting down conventional wisdom about expensive wines, in a double-blind taste test wine ranging in cost from \$1.50 to \$150 a bottle found that the average rating was just above average. The most expensive wine fared no better than the cheapest wine.



Many obvious facts are only obvious after someone has put in the effort to investigate them and prove they are right. Abandoning conventional wisdom and resisting attractive incentives to turn a blind eye, one's natural impulse to seriously investigate a matter can be liberated. The first brave step toward thinking like a freak is to say the three words, "I don't know," when you don't know. By doing so, you put others at ease to follow suit.

Analysis

Barriers to thinking like a freak are the focus on this material. Most will be able to relate to the difficulty of saying what the author's term "the three hardest words to say." This barrier is an internal one that has been many years in the making and is one of the most difficult to overcome. When the ego is involved, "self" has difficulty in admitting that it doesn't know everything.

Predictions based on a knowledge that doesn't exist can only lead to disaster. Even learned men like famed economists make awful predictions. But people are incentivized to make wild predictions because the risk is worth it. Fame and fortune come to those who seem to know the future. Besides, there is no punishment for making bad predictions other than a hit on one's reputation.

This tendency to focus on self distracts from the core issue of a matter or problem that must be solved. The authors stress the importance of digging deeply into a matter to be able to isolate cause and effect – something that must be ferreted out in order to resolve an issue.

Again the authors send the message that everyone – no matter what their background or IQ level may be – are victims to their own egos. They provide an anecdote about a Nobel Prize winning economist who made the prediction that the Internet would have little impact on the economy and its importance would fade away by 2005. Examples like these are important to the reader because it demonstrates that we are all in the same boat and that thinking like a freak eludes even the most famous and talented among us.

Vocabulary

hierarchy, extrapolation, dogmatism, grandiose, ultracredpidarianism, purveyors, bravado, preponderance, heretical, sommeliers, thematic

Chapter 3: What's Your Problem?

Summary

Asking the right question is the only way to elicit the right answer. Large problems facing the country are defined largely in the press. It's a busy world. Most people don't have time to delve into the facts of such issues. If the articles that are available about the problem sound logical, then most people will buy into it. It is conventional wisdom that students fare better with good teachers. However, in-depth research indicates that children who do well in school are those children who have parents who advocate learning and guide their children in developing a good work ethic vis-à-vis their school work and studies.

In the year 2000, a young man named Takeru Kobayashi, Kobi for short, was an economics student at Yokkaichi University. He and his girlfriend lived on a shoestring budget hardly able to afford electricity. He heard about an eating contest that paid the winner \$5,000. Kobi wasn't ostensibly a candidate for an eating competition with his small stature and slight build. He entered the contest and decided to apply the game theory that he'd been studying at school. He studied winners and losers of previous eating competitions. He learned that those who lost usually ate too much early on and couldn't last in the final stages of the contest. Kobi won the competition.

Kobi went on to compete in what is considered the Super Bowl of eating competitions – the Fourth of July Nathan's Hot Dog Eating contest. After understanding the rules of the contest, Kobi practiced for months leading up to the contest that was held in New York City. He was a surprise winner of the contest. He ate 50 hot dogs and buns doubling the prior record. He won again the next year and for the next four years after that. He became a celebrity at home in Japan and earned international fame for his unusual talent.

The authors visited Kobi to find out the secret to his success. During his months of practice leading up to the first hot dog contest was a series of experimentation and feedback. Based on this research, he devised different methods of eating efficiency. He was tireless in his research and practice runs and considered his training as important as that of an Olympic athlete.

Kobi's winning streak wasn't due to an unusual physique or physical tolerance. He was beaten by another competitor in his seventh year proving that it was his training and preparation that led him to success. His methodology can be applied to more than just eating competitions. Initially Kobi fundamentally engaged in a problem-solving exercise. Instead of asking himself how he could eat more hot dogs, he asked how he could eat hot dogs more easily. That was the question that led him on the path of experimentation and feedback. Kobi also refused to be intimidated by past records. He wiped them out of his mind. Research shows that by lying to themselves, athletes can be "tricked" into better performances.

The best reaction to negativity is to ignore it because it serves as a barrier to success. Sometimes these artificial barriers to achieving goals are created by the individuals themselves. Kobi ignored the prior records and created his own goal which far surpassed them.

Analysis

This material demonstrates that even the most unusual undertaking can benefit from free thinking and ignoring conventional wisdom. Most of us will never enter an eating contest but a young student named Kobi did. He was broke and needed to win the prize and, therefore, was incentivized by a personal financial need. He had months to practice and used that time not to just stuff hot dogs down his throat, he ignored the old ways that he learned about and approached the challenge with an open mind.

Kobi was short in stature and slight in built. He wasn't distracted by others who told him he couldn't do it. He focused on his own experiments and the feedback he learned from them. He ignored the fact that 25 hotdogs was the records and he didn't go for 26 to beat it. Kobi did not put any limitations on himself. He won the contest and ate over 50 hotdogs. He became a celebrity and was the world's eating champion for several years.

The authors include Kobi's story to inspire others and to ignore insurmountable odds with new thinking. This anecdote also underscores the author's contention that no goal or ambition is unimportant and is worthy of learning to think it through in a new way. The authors are non judgmental and provide support and encouragement to the reader throughout this work.

Vocabulary

resonate, gluttonous, counterintuitive, unquestionably, epileptic

Chapter 4: Like a Bad Dye Job, the Truth Is in the Roots

Summary

Most people used established methods in their problem-solving. There are different views about how and why this came about. The cavemen had to rely on learned knowledge which told them which berries were poison and which were not. Another view is that the urgency of a matter causes focus on a narrow aspect of the problem. Some huge societal problems like drugs and crime are addressed by treating the symptoms rather than trying to find root causes. But it's not an easy proposition. When people are starving the tendency is to send food not to delve into the why the people are starving. Fixing poverty is more difficult than airlifting food.

Crime in the U.S. peaked in the 1980s. By the 1990s, there was a noticeable decline. Research shows that tighter gun laws, an improving economy and more capital punishment sentences had no real impact on the crime rate. More cops on the street, the imprisonment of more people and the decline of the crack cocaine market did contribute to a drop in crime but only in the near time. In their book, "Freakonomics," the authors noted that the legalization of abortion did have a long-lasting impact on a reduced crime rate. Less children who were not wanted and were destined for a life of crime were being born. It is sometimes difficult to look at the root cause of a problem.

Some Italian communities are more likely than others to participate in civic programs because during the Middle Ages they were free city-states and not ruled by the Normans. The colonization of African and South American nations resulted in violence and chaos after they were liberated because their nations had been sliced up by foreign interests that gave no consideration to the ethnic groups that they were pulling apart. The long tentacles of slavery still impact the United States. The gaps that exist between black and white Americans in education, income and health can all be traced back to the enslavement of Africans centuries before.

Most would think that medicine would be a field in which root causes were undisputed. However, it is a field in which conventional wisdom and dogma far overshadow gut feelings and intuition. By the 1980s ulcers were thought to be caused by stress and over-indulgence in spicy food and treatment was naturally geared to alleviate them. The treatments helped to alleviate the pain but did not cure the lesion although the medical and pharmacological communities made billions. Research that indicated that there may be a bacterial cause behind ulcers was ignored. In 1981, a young Australian medical resident and a veteran physician, Robin Warren, explored the possibility and isolated the bacteria, *H. pylori*, that was at the root cause of ulcers.

H. pylori, as it turned out, is just one of thousands of different species of microbes that exist in the human stomach. The human body contains ten times more microbial cells

as human cells. Research is being conducted all over the world in an effort to learn what other diseases and conditions these microbes might be responsible for. This research has led to breakthroughs in the development of new treatments for common diseases including the infusion of “healthy” stomach bacteria through fecal enemas. There has been a slow interest and some acceptance of some of these new therapies.

Analysis

While the last chapter focused on a very personal and unique issue that can benefit from a new approach, the authors focus on applying their theories on larger problems. They use the example of the starvation that plagues third world countries. Everyone can relate to the pleas for help poor and starving children that they see on TV or receive in their mail. The authors stress that a topic like starvation must be approached on two pathways. First emergency food supplies should not stop to those who are starving. However, the food only treats the symptom not the cause of starvation. The poverty that causes starvation is the cause and the only way starvation can ever be solved is to solve the root cause.

This material stresses that new thinking can open doors and can have a lasting impact that can change society and culture.

The authors use the example of Martin Luther who centuries ago broke with the Roman Catholic Church because he began to question the church’s policy and basic beliefs. He led the Reformation and created Protestantism and obviously his Reformation has had lasting impact all those years. Had he not turned away from tradition, there would not have been Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran or Presbyterian religions, to name just a few. Although he would not have use the same words, Martin Luther thought like a freak.

By using examples of famous people, the near famous and ordinary people the authors create a narrative that is dynamic and one that most readers will find relatable.

Vocabulary

proximate, dysfunction, palatable, empirical, daunting, odious, cronyism, juggernaut, ostracized

Chapter 5: Think Like a Child

Summary

Thinking like a kid is a sure way to approach problems or events in an open and refreshing manner. Children are free of biases and conventional wisdom. Everything is new to them and so is their way of thinking about and approaching a problem. Children are uninhibited and have no shame spewing forth the wildest ideas that may run through their minds. When a person arrives at one of these “child-like” ideas it is best to give it some breathing room. Allowing time to evaluate the efficacy of the idea is where the adult way of thinking comes in to play.

Although thinking “big” sounds impressive, thinking like a freak is thinking small. Every problem that has faced man has been endlessly discussed and debated. It’s best to take on a small piece of a problem than try to solve it with one broad brushstroke. Trillions have been spent on education reforms worldwide on big ticket items. Little focus has been placed on the students’ eyesight or learning problems.

Another tip to master the art of thinking like a child is to lose the fear of being obvious. Asking an obvious question is avoided by many for fear of being too simplistic. But the obvious question often leads to the best solution. Barry Marshall saw the body as a complicated machine but viewed it as something that could be taken apart, worked on and put back together. He learned this lesson when he was young and had hands-on experience with old machinery and military devices.

The fundamental reason to think like a child is because it’s fun. Children do not pretend to have fun or enjoy themselves; rather, they are in constant pursuit of having fun. As we mature, that sense of fun is lost, usually in the early twenties. Most institutions frown on too much fun – political and religious organizations, corporations, academia. It is possible to be serious about a problem or responsibility and still have fun. Loving one’s job can only be seen as a positive and it can trump raw talent.

Americans notoriously don’t save money for retirement or emergencies mainly because it’s more fun to spend money. Many low-income earners consider that playing the lottery is their best chance of making it big. Playing the lottery is a dreadful way to invest; however, the fun element involved could be used in a positive way in other investment opportunities. The PLS or prize-linked savings account takes a small portion of an individual’s earned interest on investment and places it in a prize pool. Periodically, lump sums will be paid out to individuals on a random basis. Charitable organizations could take advantage of people who love on-line gambling and create sites that would offer a fun way to contribute.

Children are hard to trick. Magicians find it more difficult to fool children than adults. While the magician directs the audience to focus on something specific, he is doing his sleight of hand while the audience is distracted. Adults will obey his order to look at the

“hat” while kids will look at what they want to look at. Kids are also curious about the magician’s trick while the adult may be focused on exposing the trickery behind the trick. Children also approach a problem with simplistic thinking and not blurring the issue with over-thinking.

Children’s short stature also allows them to look at a problem or even from a different angle which could be used as a metaphor for looking at things in a new way.

Analysis

While subjects like overhauling education and ending poverty are huge problems that need to be solved, one’s personal problems are important to the individual and also need the benefit of innovative ways of thinking. Just like the issue of starvation has to be split open to expose poverty as its root cause, a person must tackle his own problems in small segments and build from there.

The authors encourage the readers to think like a child. Children have no baggage and have not yet learned to hold back with their opinions and to see the truth without the veil of conventional wisdom and societal demands. Levitt and Dubner point out that magicians find that kids can figure out how their tricks work faster than adults. By thinking freely without restrictions and limitations like a child is able to, we can more quickly find the truth and the cause and effect that we need to resolve any problem – big or small.

The authors continue their positive narrative while stressing the importance of thinking in a simplistic matter without being distracted by old ways or negativity and not being overwhelmed by the complexity of a problem. A Noble Prize winning doctor refused to believe that stress caused ulcers. He had little support among his peers when he theorized that bacteria caused ulcers. He ignore the negativity and isolated the bacteria that cause ulcers. The benefactors of this doctor thinking like a freak? The millions of people who suffered from ulcers were finally able to get the right treatment because the doctor had found the root cause of the condition.

Vocabulary

scourge, deign, ramifications, shamanism, ethereal, audacity, mesmerized, profound

Chapter 6: Like Giving Candy to a Baby

Summary

People are responsive to incentives. It is obvious on its face but too often it is forgotten. Having a grasp of the inherent incentives for people who are participating in a group effort are revealing. There are good and bad incentives. Money is one of the most obvious incentives. People in the U.S. have gained an average of 25 pounds over the last few decades. One reason for this increase is that food has gotten progressively cheaper over the years. Healthy food is more expensive so the incentive is for people to use their money to buy fast food and those high in calories.

There are incentives other than money that can be effective. By digging down, getting in another person's mind, it is possible to find out what they really want – what would incentivize him or her. By probing, experimenting and gaining feedback, incentives can be revealed. Some incentives are financial but many others have a moralistic or societal reason behind them. Still others, in fact the large majority, fall into the herd-mentality – we are strongly incentivized by what others are doing. Therefore, to learn what incentives fit the person, the researcher must understand the psychology of behind incentives and look beyond his own moral compass which tells him what people should be incentivized by.

Brian Mullaney raised billions in charity by appealing to what he had concluded on what drives people to donate to charities. Rather than try to demagogue and exploit children who needed surgery by including a picture of sad-eyed children, he developed what was called “once and done.” Under this program, he asked for large donations with the promise that he would never ask again – once and done. In so doing, the donors would feel good about helping children and the guilt that they formerly experienced once a month when they received the photos of the children and a request for another donation would vanish. They would “pay” to stop receiving the annoying requests. After launching once and done, Mullaney raised more money than through the traditional method he had used in the past. He didn't know initially if he was sacrificing long-term commitment for short-term success. After several years, most people who could opt out of future commitments with his once and done offer, most continued to give repeatedly.

There are established frameworks in relationships. Cop to citizen is an authority-figure framework. Mother to child represents a love-one framework. Sometimes conventional frameworks can be shifted in a positive way. By thinking like a freak and not accepting conventions, new pathways can be opened up and new dynamics can be sparked that improve a relationship. An entrepreneurial Internet company called Zappos changed the framework between customer and client by extending return time by 365 years, being available 24/7 by phone and sending flowers for the funeral of a client's loved one. Zappos couldn't afford to pay their customer service reps for the stellar performance they expected so they did other things that were fun and exciting for their reps which

was yet another framework change. The company had great success and was eventually bought out by Amazon for a reported \$1.2 billion.

Finding incentives don't always result in success. Some incentives fail and other fade over time. Mexico tried incentives to curb traffic congestion that wound up making matters worse. An incentive program in the U.S. to curb pollution actually encourage developing countries to increase production of pollution so they could collect and then sell carbon credits issued by the government.

Analysis

This chapter covers the importance of incentives in thinking like a freak and in finding the root cause of a problem. Incentives are part of life. Many incentives are financial in nature and compel us to finish our tasks and do a good job. Young kids do their chores because they'll get an allowance. Workers feel like their employer appreciates their efforts when they receive raises or bonuses.

To convince an individual to think differently, it is important to understand what incentivizes a person. Learning one's true incentives is not always an easy task because a person has learned to hide his true feelings and desires about an issue and how they hope to see it resolved. Just like digging deeply to find the truth, the real cause and effect of an issue, an individual must learn to look deep within himself to define true motivations and true incentives.

True incentives sometime get lost in the herd mentality that teaches us what we "should" think about just about everything we might face. The "shoulds" use to tell us that women can't do certain kinds of work and years before shouldn't even get to vote. Being raised in a society with such restrictions and limitations and draconian dogma makes it a real challenge to ignore them and think in a new way as if they never existed. This touches upon changing paradigms that the authors refer to as relationship frameworks that can change through new thinking.

Vocabulary

tranche, mantra, compensatory, prevalent, incentivize, felonious, nuanced, philanthropy, ostracized, altruistic, unmitigated, détente, remunerative

Chapter 7: What Do King Solomon and David Lee Roth Have in Common?

Summary

Both King Solomon and David Lee Roth wrote poetry/lyrics, had many women/wives, both were Jewish and both were drawn to game theory. When two women both claimed to be the mother of the same infant, King Solomon threatened to slice the baby in half. He knew only the true mother would not allow the baby to be sliced in half and would rather give the baby up than see it slaughtered.

David Lee Roth's rock band, Van Halen, had it in their contracts that M&M candies must always be in abundance backstage with the caveat that there be no brown M&Ms. The band members had nothing against brown M&Ms. The instructions about no "brown" M&Ms was on the last line of the contract rider. There were complicated instructions in the contract about electricity needs, safety precautions and many other needs and demands that the band wanted the promoters to read carefully. If there were brown M&Ms in the candy bowl it meant that the promoter had not read through the entire contract. Both King Solomon and David Lee Roth had engaged in game theory which is defeating an opponent or getting the better of him by anticipating his behavior.

In the Middle Ages, a Catholic priest would administer an "ordeal" on a subject who was thought to be lying. These ordeals would involve some form of torture with boiling water or hot iron bars. The belief was that God would protect those who told the truth. Records that exist from those times indicate a large number of these sinner apparently survived the ordeal with no harm. Were they saved by God or did the priests rig the "ordeals" to spare the people? The priests could have spared the people on a humane basis or they could have been bribed. There could be another explanation according to research Peter Leeson. Perhaps only those who were innocent were willing to undergo the ordeal which accounts for the relatively low number that was actually hurt in the ordeals and ironically they were probably innocent.

Many companies have job applications on line. It is easy and fast for applicants to fill them out. Companies get more applications than they would if applicants had to come into the office to fill them out. However, they also get a lot of applicants who aren't really that interested in the job. Zappos offered all their new employees \$2,000 after just a few weeks of work if they didn't like their job and wanted to quit. They wanted to weed out the people who didn't like the job and obviously wouldn't last long. Metaphorically, it was akin to allowing the garden to weed itself.

The emails received from Nigeria about generous monetary awards being made to the recipients keep on coming despite the fact that everyone knows it's a scam. But they play the odds because there is a slim slice of people who receive these messages who engage with the sender. And that is who the senders focus on. These con artists make



money or they wouldn't keep up the effort. Perhaps 100 out of 10,000 people respond. Out of that 100, perhaps only one is eventually scammed. In economics the 99 who don't succumb to the scam are referred to as false positives. The lengthy absurd Nigerian emails served to weed out everyone except the most gullible. There are false positives in medical diagnoses, burglar and fire alarms and system networks.

The authors developed an algorithm that analyzed millions of bank customers isolating those that had repeat patterns that indicated possible terrorist behavior. Although the program did not identify actual terrorists, those singled out were referred to law enforcement for further scrutiny.

Analysis

In this section, the authors describe how a new way of thinking can sometime lead to the necessity to "trick" people into revealing their truth and their incentives. Again, the authors call upon the stories of two famous people to illustrate this. They make an interesting and compelling parallel between two unlikely people. King Solomon used fright tactics to pull the truth from two women who both claimed to be the mother of an infant. He knew that the true mother would not allow any harm to come to her baby. When he announced he would cut the baby into two, the real mother relinquished her claim to the baby. He knew she was the real mother because she would rather lose him than see him die.

David Lee Roth is at the other end of this comparison. Rock stars are known to have crazy demands. One of the demands of his band, Van Halen, was that there be bowls of M&M candies backstage for the musicians with the caveat that there be no brown M&Ms. The reference to the brown M&Ms was the last line of their multi-page contract. Roth and the band members therefore knew who read to whole contract and who didn't. When brown M&Ms were in the candy bowl, that promoter did not read the entire contract.

Zappos was an on-line shoe seller whose innovative approach to customers skyrocketed them to great success. Their performance impressed Amazon to purchase Zappos for more than a \$1 billion.

With these anecdotes, the authors demonstrate some of the many ways that fresh thinking that ignores convention can reap fantastic results, and in other cases practical results that elicit underlying truths.

Vocabulary

confirmatory, boisterous, saturnalia, disparate, communal, acrimony, exonerated, onerous, dilettante, convoluted

Chapter 8: How to Persuade People Who Don't Want to Be Persuaded

Summary

Thinking like a freak can result in blurting out some unpopular comments. It is difficult to persuade people about a new way of thinking or viewing a matter. There are some tips to work with those who resist this new way of thinking. The persuader has to first realize how difficult it is to persuade those who do not want to be persuaded. The American public is disinterested in the climate change crises despite the fact that the vast majority of scientists are quite concerned.

An organization of scholars and psychologists called the Cultural Cognition Project sought to determine why the public finds certain subjects particularly touchy and are resistant to changing their views about them. This issues include gun control, nanotechnology, date rape and global warming. Relative to the latter, polls indicate that the general public recognizes scientists as honest and dedicated. The CCP wondered if the resistance to climate control issues centered on the lack of scientific knowledge or thinking on the part of the general public – basically scientific ignorance. The group conducted research and test studies and found that those with advanced math and science skills were more likely to have radical views about climate change one way or the other. On the average, there were signs that people are just too busy to worry about climate change – they are satisfied letting the scientists worry for them.

It's very difficult to change conceptions that a person has held onto for years. The vast majority of the time the individual's opinion is probably not based on fact. People in this category are entrenched in bias and world view. The researcher has to remind himself that he doesn't have a vote in the matter. His argument will never be perfect because nothing is perfect – even the bill of sale you're trying to sell the other guy. Therefore, it's a good idea although a little risky to tell the other person upfront about some of the flaws. Driverless car technology is in its infant stages and it has much promise but there are scores of things that could be wrong with the car or what it may bring to bear.

Acknowledging that the opponent makes some salient points will soften him and his resistance to new ideas. Everyone likes to think that he can contribute. Following up this recognition with a counter argument can be very effective. There are 1,100 kids killed each year in traffic accidents. If driverless cars could reduce that number the opponent would have to acquiesce that the driverless car would have appreciable benefits.

While trying to persuade an opponent, all sarcasm and name-calling should be suspended. Humans are fragile and don't like criticism. It's positive to try to find out the basis of an opponent's belief. Sometimes stories are told, repeated, altered and morphed without any facts from the very beginning. But the story is so often told that it sounds true. For example eating "fat" doesn't cause obesity. Using facts that can be

proven is persuasive. Stories are powerful tools in convincing someone of “new” facts. People love stories and begin to fantasize about how they would have reacted versus the characters in the story. However, to be persuasive the story must be factual not just entertaining. Most people recall the “stories” in the Bible more than being able to recite the Ten Commandments in the right order or with perfection.

Analysis

The authors have relied on many anecdotal stories in making their case about thinking freely. In this chapter, they focus on the importance of stories. People like stories and relate to them. The authors obviously took advantage of that fact as witnessed by the many stories that they told throughout this work.

This material also covers the difficulty in dealing with others who are trapped in their own ego and pride and ideology and don’t want to be persuaded about thinking differently. Their lives and careers are fine. These people are not moved by words and theory. They must experience the benefit of thinking freely. Getting them to take the plunge is often quite a challenge. As the authors wrote, “logic and fact are no match for ideology.”

In approaching this kind of person with the idea of a new way of thinking, the authors caution the reader not to ridicule the person or be sarcastic. Telling stories will have more appeal than going through the dry mechanisms of a new approach.

The authors provide specific ways to reach out to someone who needs to think differently. The first step, they point out, is that those who seek to help others have become truth seekers and free thinkers themselves.

Vocabulary

orthodoxy, consorting, nanotechnology, misanthropes, anomalous

Chapter 9: The Upside of Quitting

Summary

There are three forces that preclude us from quitting even when prospects for success seem out of reach. The first is the advice we've heard all our lives – don't be a quitter. Secondly, it is difficult to justify abandoning a project given the resources and efforts that have been used in trying to achieve success – referred to as “sunk costs” in economics. The third factor is the lack of focus on lost opportunities while trying to salvage a losing proposition. The losses from a project can be seen in black and white. The value of the untapped opportunities is unknown.

Quitting a failing project and freeing one's time up for other opportunities is not being a quitter; it's being a realist. Many projects that begin with high hope that fail should do so without blame and guilt. The old adage says that you can learn more from failure than from success. The feedback is valuable. Intellectual Ventures is a technology firm that deals in acquiring and licensing high-tech patents. They also run an “invention shop” in which they test the viability of the endless number of ideas they receive. Most ideas are found to have no promise for success. The company has gained the sensibility it takes to know when to walk away from an idea or project.

It has been documented that those who give up impossible goals benefit both physically and psychologically. Deciding to quit is not an easy proposition. The authors have set up the website Freakonomics Experiments to help people make that decision. They literally flip the coin for those seeking help especially in difficult aspects of their decision-making process. They ask their clients to check back after a few months to see how the quitting or not-quitting is going. Over 40,000 coins have been flipped for those unable to make their own decision. Sixty-percent follow the coin toss results. The authors were astonished that people followed their coin toss results for ending romantic relationships. People were generally satisfied with the decisions and most were happier.

After Steven Levitt, one of the authors of “Think Like a Freak,” enrolled in an economics Ph.D. program with an emphasis on political econ, he was disappointed. It was no fun at all. He had three options: continue on, quit and move into parents' basement or find another area in economics that he would be more comfortable with. None seemed to be right for him. After watching the reality show “Cops” he became interested in social issues like crime and drunkenness and gun control. He pursued research on the core causes of these and other crimes and behavioral issues for the next decade. He found the new area of economics he was looking for: the economics of crime.

Steven's writing partner, Stephen J. Dubner dreamed of being a musician from a young boy on. He was in a rock band in college. The band, The Right Profile, was signed by Arista Records. Just as the band was on the rise, Stephen realized that while he loved music the life of a rock star was not appealing to him. He finished a graduate program and became a writer eventually hired by the New York Times. He quit journalism a few

years later to write books. Both Levitt and Dubner found where they belonged but they are open to quit their current writing partnership and move on to something else.

Quitting, or more euphemistically put, letting go, is at the core of thinking like a freak. Recognizing and letting go of the barriers that hold us back.

Analysis

This material covers the “sunk-cost” fallacy, an economic term, and the hesitancy that people have over quitting. Oftentimes people refuse to end a project that has no hope for failure or end a relationship that has outlived its time because of the time and effort that has been expended in trying to achieve success. There are no failures. When a project does not have success, valuable information is learned and can be applied to the next project.

When a relationship goes sour and repeated attempts to salvage it, it is more logical to end it rather than waste more time and energy. Society has taught us that failure is bad and that we must have a character flaw when a project or relationship is not successful. That’s the kind of conventional wisdom that keeps us walking in place and stops us from advancing.

In this final chapter, the authors tell the reader a little more about themselves and their own stops and starts as they learned to be free thinkers. The authors’ candor dispels any notion that they have all the answers and that they were met with the same challenges that everyone else has in trying to make their lives better through a new way to think.

Vocabulary

resonate, formidable, chronicler, maniacal, triage, quantitatively, empirically, abdicate, intrinsic, impresario

Important People

Brian Mullaney

When Brian Mullaney was thirty years old he was a huge success. He was living the high life and was a self-described Madison Avenue ad man “in an Armani suit and Gucci loafers.” He had it all – from his Rolex watch to his Porsche and Manhattan penthouse. He was wanting for nothing... or was he? One of his biggest clients was a plastic surgery practice that catered mainly to aging women with lots of cash or younger women who wanted more curves.

Rather than take his Porsche into New York City’s gridlock, he often took the subway when he needed to meet with the staff at the plastic surgery concern. He began to notice that many of the school kids that rushed onto the subway had flaws – scars, moles even deformed features. He tried to shrug it off but the images of the young faces lingered in his thoughts. He became obsessed with the children who obviously couldn’t afford to seek help with his number one client. An idea came to him seemingly out of the blue.

Mullaney decided to set up a charity that would fund corrective surgery and other procedures to help the children of New York whose families had no way of helping them. He called it Operation Smile. He later learned that there was another Operation Smile already established in Virginia. He joined forces with that organization which helped needy children around the globe. Mullaney became an Operation Smile board member and traveled on missions to China, Gaza and Vietnam.

Martin Luther

In some cases a root cause may be linked to events that occurred centuries before. In 1517, Martin Luther led the Protestant Reformation against the Roman Catholic Church because of his dissatisfaction with some of the church’s policies and practices. The schism Luther started resulted in bloodshed, spread throughout Europe and endured for decades.

Nearly 500 years later, a young German economist named Jorg Spenkuch found that the patchwork of religions created by the Reformation led by Luther was still intact in Germany. He also found that the people in the Protestant areas made on the average slightly more money than those living in the Catholic areas. He dug down to the root cause and it had nothing to do with education or geographic location.

Scholars and researchers concluded that the root cause of this economic difference was religion and the Protestant work ethic. The impact of Martin Luther’s original thinking and approach to religion has enduring over the years. Its effect can be found around the world. In America, the wealthy tycoons of the Industrial age had their religious roots in Protestantism in Europe. Calvinism which was an offshoot of the



Lutheran religion actually held the belief that God wanted Protestants were entitled to make more money than others, especially Catholics. German sociologist Max Weber theorized that capitalism took off in Europe and flourished because Protestants felt that hard work and success was the mission that God had divined. Although Luther would probably not want his methodology connected with “thinking like freak” it was exactly what he had done.

Kobi

In 2000, a young Japanese student named Takeru (Kobi) Kobayashi was broke. He didn't have enough money to keep his electricity on. He saw an ad for an eating contest. Whoever consumed the most during the contest would win \$5,000. He entered the contest and had several months for practice. Instead of just stuffing his mouth and gobbling, he tried various methods of eating fast. After selecting the best method, he practiced religiously and won the contest. His story emphasizes that thinking like a freak, taking a new approach to something even as mundane as eating, can be helpful in every aspect of life. He went on to become a eating champ and a worldwide celebrity.

George Bernard Shaw

The famed British writer, George Bernard Shaw, was ahead of his time. He had noticed that people generally didn't give much time to thinking. He believed that most people only thought once or twice a year. He supposedly said, “I have made an international reputation for myself by thinking once or twice a week.”

David Cameron

Prime Minister-elect David Cameron invited the authors to visit him when he was about to take office. The writers were impressed with Cameron's confidence and bearing. He wanted their advice on a few matters. The biggest problem facing him was Great Britain's sinking economy. When Cameron stated he would not tamper with the nation's cradle-to-grave health care system that covered all British citizens, the authors knew that helping him would be difficult. When they learned that his devotion to the health system was personal – his son had been very ill and he attributed the boy's recovery to the health care system. Cameron was dug in about the costliest element of the British economy. The authors knew that Cameron's personal tie to the system would preclude him from thinking differently about it.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan

Daniel Patrick Moynihan was a U.S. senator. He famously said that everyone was entitled to their own opinion but not their own facts. Moynihan had to deal with a body of elected individuals who were known to stretch the truth and sometimes even ignore it.

Niels Bohr

Niels Bohr was a famed physicist who made important advancements in the field of quantum theory. He noted that “prediction is very difficult, especially if it’s about the future.”

Philip Tetlock

Philip Tetlock, a professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. He focuses on politics and gathered predictions of 300 government officials, political science scholars, economists and other experts and monitored their accuracy over the course of two decades. One of the conclusions he arrived at from all this data was that all these experts thought they knew more than they actually did.

Paul Krugman

Economist Paul Krugman wrote an article claiming that economists were wrong to give high tech too much credit for the impact it would have on the economy. In the article the Nobel Prize winning Krugman made his own prediction about high tech and the economy. Ironically, he forecast that the impact of the Internet would fade and that by 2005 it would prove to have absolutely no impact on the economy.

Harold Camping

Harold Camping was an elderly Christian leader and radio personality when in 2011, he made the prediction that the Rapture would occur on Saturday, May 21, 2011. He warned that seven billion people would die; only true-believers would be spared. The ten-year-old son of one of this book’s authors heard about the prediction and naturally became frightened. He would actually cry himself to sleep at night. After May 21st came and went without the forecasted devastation, the boy was asked if Camping should be punished. The boy said they should take him out and shoot him. Although the suggested punishment did not exactly fit the crime, it proved the point that there is a human need to hold people accountable for bad behavior.

David Lester

David Lester is a psychology professor at Richard Stockton College in New Jersey. Throughout his long career he has focused on the root causes of suicide. He has published over 2,500 academic papers on the subject. He has conducted in-depth research on the relationship between suicide and such human travails as alcoholism, anger, depression, drug abuse as well as such diverse considerations as body type, the Internet, the moon and song lyrics among many other unexpected topics. Unfortunately,

his dedication and hard work has failed to arrive at a definitive root cause or someone taking his life.

Amartya Sen

In his book, “Poverty and Famines,” famed economist Amartya Sen noted that starvation was the result of people not having enough food to eat and was not due to there not being enough food to eat. He made the point that in corrupt societies food is kept from starving people as a form of control and repression. Well-intentioned charity organizations and governments can send food in to feed the people but it does not fix the root cause of their dilemma.

Barry Marshall

In 1981, a young resident physician in Australia named Barry Marshall became curious about what caused ulcers. It had long been accepted by medical professionals that stress was the chief cause of stomach ulcers. But Barry had never been completely satisfied with that conclusion. It was his observation that people treated for ulcers were better after the diagnosis had been made but that they still suffered. He believed that research had not uncovered what really caused ulcers.

Marshall found one medical professional, Dr. Robin Warren, who agreed with him. Marshall and Warren conducted extensive research on finding the source cause of ulcers. Ultimately they focused on the possibility that bacteria were the cause of the lesions. The two doctors were initially scoffed at and ridiculed by their peers and were not taken seriously. But facts, if you stick with them, don't lie. Marshall and Warren isolated the bacteria, *H. pylori*, that causes stomach ulcers. For their work and determination and for thinking like a freak they made great advancements in the treatment of stomach ulcers, earned worldwide acclaim and won the Nobel Prize in Medicine.

Paul Glewwe, Albert Park and Meng Zhao

The subject of education is such a huge topic that it's difficult for anyone to get their arms around it even those in the field. The authors believed that improving education on a piecemeal basis, approaching small segments of the problem could be more successful than dumping billions on the problem with few positive results.

Paul Glewwe, Albert Park and Meng Zhao, three economists agreed. They conducted studies on young Chinese children who were doing poorly in school. They suspected that their problems might be related to vision issues. They offered eyeglasses to half the students. After a year their grades were 25 percent higher than their peers who did not receive the glasses. The glasses cost \$15 each – way more reasonable than billions!

Objects/Places

The First Two Books

Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner are the co-authors of two best sellers, “Freakonomics” and “Super Freakonomics.” “Think Like a Freak” is the third in this series of freakonomic books. The authors urge people to quit their jobs or their relationships if they are not happy. After collaborating on three books they are willing to take their own advice once their co-writing partnership is no longer satisfying.

The Economic Approach

The brainchild behind thinking like a freak is based on what is known as the economic approach. Freakonomics has nothing to do with economics per se. Applying the theory behind the economic approach to this new way of thinking. The economic approach is dependent on data, not beliefs or ideology, in the pursuit of an understanding of how the world works. It delves into the role that incentives play in success or failure and the barriers that stop a person from getting to the resources he needs in order to attain his goal.

The National Health Service

David Cameron, the British Prime Minister-elect, called on Levitt and Dubner to help him develop a strategy to deal with the economic recession that he would be faced with once taking office. As soon as Cameron indicated that everything was on the table except Britain’s National Health Service, the authors knew that they couldn’t help him and that Cameron wasn’t ready for new thinking.

Great Britain’s National Health Service is a cradle-to-grave health care system. It is the first and longest lasting system of socialized medicine in the world. Levitt and Dubner knew, without seeing any facts or figures, that the biggest drag on the UK’s economy was the health care system. Rising and untenable costs are the nature of health care everywhere in the world. By Cameron taking the NHS off the cutting block, there would be no way to make substantial improvements to the nation’s financial woes. Their thoughts were confirmed even more strongly when he told them that he attributed the NHS with saving the life of his young son who had been very ill. Cameron had a personal stake in keeping the NHS; he had an emotional attachment to it and was, at that point, not ready to break from it.

CXO Advisory Group

The CXO Advisory Group conducted a study of more than 6,000 predictions by supposed experts in the field. The research covered several years. The overall accuracy



of predictions was found to be on an average 47 percent. This percentage could also be achieved by “dart-throwing” chimps who randomly launch darts at predictions pinned on a bulletin board. It raises doubt about the wisdom of relying on “experts.”

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"Why Most Economists' Predictions Are Wrong"

The Nobel Prize winning economist Paul Krugman wrote an article entitled, “Why Most Economists' Predictions Are Wrong,” which appeared in the Red Herring magazine. It was Krugman’s argument that economists tend to overestimate the role of future technologies on the economy. In a bit of irony, the famed economist proved his point – that economists are often wrong in their predictions. Krugman predicted in the article that the Internet would slow drastically over the years and that by 2005 it would become obvious that the Internet had no more impact on the economy than did the fax machine.

Iraq War

There can be serious dangers consequences when an authority figure cannot say the three magic words, “I don’t know.” The Bush administration, driven by Vice President Cheney and his team of neo-conservative war hawks, used the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, as a reason to invade an old adversary, Saddam Hussein, President of Iraq. There were claims that Iraq was harboring weapons of mass destruction and that Saddam was involved in the terrorist attacks perpetrated by Osama bin Laden leader of the terrorist group, Al Qaeda, which had claimed responsibility for the attacks. The administration and its advisors were positive that attacking Iraq was justified and in fact a crucial part of the retaliation for 9/11. They were all wrong. What they knew to be true wasn’t true. Saddam was a bad actor to be sure but Iraq was not developing a nuclear weapon and Saddam was a bitter enemy of Osama bin Laden. Only years later, did it come clear that these military and Middle East experts didn’t know what they were talking about. Too bad it had to come after more than 4,000 American troops died and more than 100,000 innocent Iraqis lost their lives.

The Witches of Romania

There are few if any punishments for bad predictions. Authorities in Romania decided to rectify that inequity even if it was only to a small degree. There is a large group of women in that country who tell fortunes and make predictions. The government decided to regulate these women, monitor their activities and make them pay fees for bad predictions. If deemed egregious enough these “witches” could even wind up doing jail time. The witches were upset; one even threatened to cast a spell on the politicians who proposed the legislation.

The Scramble for Africa

After African nations gained their freedom from their colonial overlords, many became corrupt and wrought with violence. Political observers wondered why these nations would virtually fall apart after getting the freedom that they had sought for such a long time. Scholars who looked into the matter concluded that the root cause could be traced back many years. The European countries began divvying up the Dark Continent in what became known as the “Scramble for Africa” in the nineteenth century. When the colonial powers created borders between the new countries, they paid no heed to the fact that they were splitting up many ethnic groups. In many cases people from one tribe were thrown into the newly created country of life-long enemies. When the Europeans granted the African nations their freedom, the resentment that festered for years broke out into multiple civil wars.

Ping Pong Diplomacy

In April 6, 1971, the Chinese ping-pong team traveled to Japan to compete in an international tournament. Not only were these athletes going to compete, they had another mission. They were charged with delivering a message from Chairman Mao Tse Tung of Red China to the American team inviting them to visit China. The American ping-pong team accepted the invitation and met with Zhou Enlai, the Chinese premier. When President Nixon heard about the incident, he immediately dispatched his secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, on a diplomatic out-reach mission to Red China. The ping-pong team had opened the door to diplomatic relations between the two global powers. This is an example of the shifting of the framework of a relationship – the ping-pong players from both countries became diplomats.

Self-Sterilizing Surface

There are a variety of reasons that a new idea or invention has no legs. The causes can be political, social, economical or technological. In one case, a self-sterilizing surface to be used in hospitals where viruses and bacteria are notorious for infecting patients was invented. Early on it had promise and aced all the tests and experiments. But the process was too costly to commercialize. The idea was a good one, it was developed successfully but it was too expensive to be viable. A great invention that collects dust on the shelf is not a story of success. However, the technology can be tucked away and revisited when the costs to produce it come down.

Themes

Making “Simple” Decisions

The authors discuss the many factors that are involved in making a decision. Although it seems that it should be a fairly simple process, they provide all the pressures and considerations that the decision-making is wrought with. The authors use the example of a soccer player under great pressure that to exemplify this theory. The anecdote about a stressed-out athlete illustrates how difficult it is to abandon conventional wisdom and make the right decision for the moment and circumstances. Finally, the tale of the soccer player gets to the heart of “Thinking Like a Freak” – letting go of barriers and thinking freely.

A soccer player who is selected to kick a penalty goal has a myriad of thoughts running through his head. The odds are better to make the goal if it is hit into the corner. But more accuracy is required for a corner kick. The goalie knows the kicker’s strong side and will be ready to lunge that way. There are a number of other facts that the soccer player has to consider. However, there is a non-traditional option that the kicker has that could totally outfox the goalie and lead to a more certain success. He should think like a freak and kick right at the goalie who is standing in the center. The goalie will lunge left 57 percent and right 41 percent of the time during a penalty kick. The goalie is so prepped to lunge to one side or the other and will do so as soon as the player kicks the ball. He will not have enough time to recover once he realizes the ball is being kicked right down the middle of the goal.

The reasons why most penalty kickers don’t kick down the middle is because conventional wisdom tells them that it’s not wise to do so and because they don’t want to be shamed by messing up the chance to score a free goal. Kicking the goal into the corner is the more expected move and one that will not bring about shame should the kicker fail to make the score. Even knowing the odds, the player doesn’t want to risk looking foolish and losing the game for the team by making the “poor choice” of kicking down the middle despite research indicates that the rate of failure when making a down the middle kick is only 17 percent.

The kicker, like all people, is human and people are generally most concerned with their own interests – their image and reputation – over whether there is a win or loss for the team. But there are those occasions when people have interests beyond their own and seek more than personal victories. It is at those times that people think like freaks.

Suicide

A huge problem that faces all societies and cultures is suicide. It’s an issue that no one likes to talk about. It is a frightening and somewhat mysterious matter that most feel is someone else’s problem. Like many issues that face society, there are accepted

conclusions about suicide, conventional wisdom that tells the herd how they should view suicide, even if they don't want to talk about it.

There are nearly 40,000 suicides every year in the United States which doubles the number of homicides for the same period. It is among the top ten causes of death among all ages. Crime rates are down; murders have been on the decline over the last several decades. Due to safety measures demanded by the federal government and general public awareness, traffic fatalities are down. The suicide rate has not enjoyed a similar decline. In fact the suicide rate in the 15 to 24 year-old age group has tripled over the past twenty years.

Research and studies have failed to result in a definitive theory despite years of dedicated effort and the best intentions. At first blush most might presume that the highest rate of suicide would fall upon that segment of the community that is beset with hard times, financial woes and personal problems that seem insurmountable. However, that is conventional wisdom and suicide is a dramatic example of how wrong it can be.

Research has shown over and over again that suicide is more prevalent among people with a higher quality of life. Why this is true is not as clear. Experts believe that the reason could be attributed to the notion that there is "no one left to blame." A person who has money problems and other personal problems has a myriad of people and institutions to blame. They don't have to kill themselves; they can blame others for their problems. Conversely, the person who ostensibly has it all, has no one to blame. The emotional and mental problems that people who live the "good" life experience can be blamed only on the person himself. This self-hate and self-blame could very well be the root cause behind the high rate of suicides within this elite group. Breaking down barriers and ignoring conventional wisdom will help find the answers.

Feedback/Experimentation

The authors plainly and directly state that the key to all learning is feedback. And feedback is gained only through experimentation. The two go hand in hand. The authors make the dramatic claim that it is next to impossible to learn anything without feedback. However, the recipient of feedback must be aware that there is good and bad feedback. The authors use the example of baked bread. Without the consumer's reaction or feedback to a new recipe, the baker will never know if the bread was good or bad. Specific feedback will tell the baker that the recipe has too much salt or that the crust is too hard. With this honest, unadulterated reaction the baker can then make the proper adjustments. Obviously without the opinions of his customers, the baker will not know that he has salty bread that is too crispy.

Even being fortunate enough to receive the right kind of feedback, the learning curve is a long one. In some cases feedback can be instantaneous. A new driver taking a curve at 80mph will hear it from his passengers or perhaps the police when he runs off the road. His feedback will tell him to slow down! In many cases, there is no organic way to capture feedback. In those cases, feedback can be created through experimentation.

Through several test projects, a corporation was able to determine which ad program worked for the company and was the most effective in reaching their target audience.

Those who seek feedback must bolster themselves up in advance of its receipt because it may not be what was expected or desired. But that's not the purpose of experimentation and the resulting feedback. A credible experiment run properly will provide honest feedback. It may be disappointing but it's essential to a person's or organization's success.

The Challenger

Sometimes the boss or the powers that be are so enthused to begin a project that they become blind to potential problems that may arise. Staff members can sense that the boss has "go fever" so they keep their concerns to themselves. There are others who speak out but are largely ignored because the boss is looking ahead to the future glories that the project will bring him. This "go fever" can have disastrous results.

NASA was told by the contract engineers that the Challenger launch scheduled for January 28, 1986, should be delayed. The engineers didn't feel comfortable with a launch because the O-rings that kept hot gasses from escaping had not been tested in temperatures below 53 degrees. It was far below that temperature on January 27th and was predicted to be just as cold the next day on the launch.

But because the launch had been delayed several times before, NASA for the first time in its history made the decision to ignore a safety warning. The lead engineer, Allan McDonald of Morton Thiokol, feared a catastrophe in the making and refused to sign the release for the launching. His boss signed it instead. Everyone knows what happened the next morning. As McDonald predicted the O-rings didn't hold and everyone was blown to bits. To call the aftermath negative feedback does not do justice to the tragedy. However, as the authors stress throughout the book, more can be learned from failure than from success. Oftentimes a pre-mortem is as valuable as or more valuable than a post-mortem. Had NASA listened to the warnings of the engineers prior to the launch, there would have been no need for a post-mortem.

Elements of Thinking Like a Freak

Incentives are part of modern life. They are presented to us day and night. Often these incentives are financial in nature. Everyone is looking for a deal or a discount. Children behave and do their chores because they're getting an allowance or they'll be rewarded in some other way. Everyone feels the corporate spirit after getting a nice raise. Incentives work and they are here to stay.

There are incentives that are not financial in nature. Some have to do with personal image and pride. People are incentivized to make predictions; this is a form of self-incentivizing. The possible praise and even fame that one can earn for making an accurate prediction or knowing things that no one else is considered by many to be

worth the risk. There is little risk in making bad predictions. No one is really ever punished for being wrong. Radio preacher Harold Camping predicted that the world would end in May 2011 for all non-believers. He terrified a lot of people but nothing happened to him.

Pride and ego play a huge role when we pretend to know more than we know which falls into the same category as making predictions. The personal cost of saying, "I don't know" to many is much higher than lying about what they know. People have personal stakes to pretend to know something because they'll look smarter or it will bolster their own image. Being able to break through the restrictions that are caused by the incentives that pride and ego present, will go a long way in learning to think freely.

The payoff of taking a risks and predicting the outcome of a baseball game or an election is great the outcome is as foretold. The possibility of a payoff – whether fame or fortune – is an incentive to make a prediction. Since there isn't much in the way of repercussions or punishment when a prediction is wrong, there is no disincentive in making a prediction.

Styles

Structure

“Think Like a Freak” by Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner is the third in a series of books by the authors. The book focuses on the topic of free thinking, thinking outside the box and taking a new approach to old problems. They coined the term, “freakonomics” to cover the various elements of the topic. The book consists of nine chapters in which the authors present their theories and conclusions in an orderly manner and support them with research data and anecdotal evidence.

In the first chapter, the premise for the books is laid out. The authors tell the readers what it means to think like a freak. In the second chapter, the authors discuss barriers encountered when learning to think like a freak. They describe the three little words that are hardest to say as, “I don’t know.” They provide anecdotes that demonstrate how the ego gets in the way of free thinking as does conventional wisdom and societal guilt and shame.

The third chapter deals with learning how to ask the right questions to get the right answers. In chapter four the authors emphasize to stay focused on the truth and not be distracted by negativity. In chapter five the authors describe the wonders of having total abandon and thinking like a child. The rest of the chapters deal with incentives, tricking people into providing feedback, persuading the un-persuadable and working up the nerve to quit (a job or a romance) and not feel guilty about it.

The authors provide a bit of their own background and the journeys they took in learning how to think like a freak.

Perspective

“Think Like a Freak” by Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner is a non-fiction book that provides the methodology for thinking differently, outside the box – thinking like a freak. The book is written in the first person in a voice that speaks directly to the reader in an instructional manner.

This book is the third in a series on freakonomics. The two authors gained a following after their collaboration on “Super Freakonomics” and “Freakonomics” which became best sellers. The two men are obviously experts on the subject of independent thinking which is roughly the translation for the term they coined, “freakonomics.”

The two men have varied backgrounds and educations and bring different perspectives to this book about letting go of old ways of thinking. The authors provide great detail on their theories about why people hold onto conventional wisdom and avoid challenging it.

Levitt is an economics professor at the University of Chicago. He is a recipient of the John Bates Clark medal which is awarded to the nation's most influential economist under the age of forty. Throughout the book there are many comparisons drawn between the way people think and some basic laws of economics. Levitt has applied the theory of Freakonomics the TGG Group which he founded and which focuses on business and philanthropy.

Dubner is a writer and has authored several non-Freakonomics books. He was a New York Times columnist. Dubner was a budding rock star in his college years but decided that the life of a rock star wasn't for him. While most young men would not abandon a rock star career, Dubner thought outside the box pre-Freakonomics and abandoned a music career.

Tone

"Think Like a Freak" by authors Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner is written in a straightforward manner with an overarching amiable tone that brings a light touch to a serious subject. The authors put the reader at ease by their self-deprecating humor and their descriptions of the many failures they've experienced through the years. They make the point that failure is not bad; in fact, feedback from failed projects has proven to be most instructive to them.

The underlying tone of "Think Like a Freak" is one of encouragement and openness. The authors provide dozens of examples of how their new way of thinking and innovative approach to decision-making results in people who feel free to think for themselves. The only antagonists in this work are conventional wisdom, herd think and the guilt and shame that culture has placed upon us to keep our thinking in line.

It is obvious that the goal of the authors is to be informative and to provide tips that will lead the readers to greater happiness, freedom and self-understanding. By sharing their own personal journeys in finding their niche in life, Levitt and Dubner present themselves as approachable and just as human as their readers. By eliminating any notion of superiority, the authors have broken one of the barriers they write about, elevated their credibility and presented a work with an honest and genuine tone.

Quotes

Kicking the ball straight at the goalkeeper? That just seems unnatural; an obvious violation of common sense – but then so did the idea of preventing a disease by injecting people with the very microbes that cause it.”

-- Authors (chapter 1 paragraph 22)

Importance: The authors are explaining why the unexpected resolution, the solution that seems most remote, is sometimes the best solution.

When people don't pay the true cost of something, they tend to consume it inefficiently.”

-- Authors (chapter 2 paragraph 70)

Importance: In trying to advise David Cameron, British Prime Minister-elect, on ways to fix the economy, they focused on Great Britain's free health care system. The prices had doubled over a decade due in part to “well” people going to the doctor because it was free.

It is the brain, not the heart or lungs, that is the critical organ.”

-- Dr. Roger Bannister (chapter 3 paragraph 47)

Importance: Dr. Bannister is a famed neurologist and the first human to run the mile in less than four minutes. Even as a physician, he recognized how the state of mind and one's confidence is more important in being a success in any pursuit – including running.

It takes a truly original thinker to look at a problem that everyone else has already looked at and find a new avenue of attack.”

-- Authors (chapter 4 paragraph 78)

Importance: This quote captures the essence of the authors' ideology that they refer to as “thinking like a freak.” What the authors encourage is to think beyond the box and to attack issues and problems in a whole new and unique manner that is not weighted down with conventional wisdom and established standards.

... when it comes to generating ideas and asking questions, it can be really fruitful to have the mentality of an eight-year old.”

-- Authors (chapter 5 paragraph 2)

Importance: The authors make the point that children are largely without bias and preconceived notions and that their thinking is pure and honest.

To explain all nature is too difficult for any one man or even for any one age. 'Tis much better to do a little with certainty and leave the rest for others that come after than to explain all things by conjecture without making sure of anything.”

-- Sir Isaac Newton (chapter 5 paragraph 9)

Importance: The legendary physicist makes the point that an issue is best attacked in small pieces resulting in solutions that can be built upon by others.

As grateful as we are for the complex processes that have produced so much technology and progress, we are also dizzied by their sprawl. It is easy to get seduced by complexity; but there is virtue in simplicity.”

-- Authors (chapter 5 paragraph 28)

Importance: The authors were paraphrasing Albert Einstein’s belief that “everything should be made as simple as possible but not simpler.” To solve a problem it is best to cut through the complexity of an issue and focus on a small segment of the issue.

Different types of incentives – financial, social, moral, and legal, and others – push people’s buttons in different directions, in different magnitudes. An incentive that works beautifully in one setting may backfire in another. But if you want to think like a Freak, you must learn to be a master of incentives – the good, the bad and the ugly.”

-- Authors (chapter 6 paragraph 12)

Importance: The authors make the point that the incentives of an individual cannot be assumed. Most would think money was the most effective incentive but there are many other factors and dynamics involved in what engages someone.

Let’s face it: human beings aren’t the most candid animals on the planet. We’ll often say one thing and do another – or, more precisely, we’ll say what we think other people want to hear and then, in private, do what we want.”

-- Authors (chapter 6 paragraph 32)

Importance: The authors are making the point that just by asking what a person wants to be incentivized on a project or task will usually not be successful. It takes a little more digging and some nuanced language to learn what incentives will work for a person.

The best way to increase wolves in America, rabbits in Australia, and snakes in India is to pay a bounty on their scalps. Then every patriot goes to raising them.”

-- Mark Twain (chapter 6 paragraph 130)

Importance: The authors use this quote from the famous writer and wit to illustrate that incentives can have negative and unexpected outcomes. That’s why it’s important to determine an incentive that will work and often it is not money.

Perhaps you’ll raise an uncomfortable question, challenge an orthodoxy, or simply touch upon a subject that should have been left untouched. As a result, people may call you names. They may accuse you of consorting with witches or communists or even economists. You may be heading toward a bruising fight.”

-- Authors (chapter 8 paragraph 2)

Importance: The authors warn the reader that once they achieve the freedom of

thinking like a freak that his resultant honesty may upset others who want to hold onto the status quo or conventional wisdom.

Never give in, never give in, never, never, never – in nothing, great or small, large or petty.”

-- Winston Churchill (chapter 9 paragraph 1)

Importance: The authors quote the British prime minister who gave this speech to a group of school boys in the midst of World War II. At this time, Germany had gained the upper hand and was bombing London on a regular basis killing thousands of Brits. Reading between the lines, Churchill was saying that even in the face of defeat no one should ever quit.

Topics for Discussion

1

Why is it difficult for people to say, “I don’t know?” What is one’s moral compass and how can it get in the way of free thinking?

2

Explain why thinking small is thinking like a freak and is advantageous over thinking big.

3

In economics what are declared preferences and what are revealed preferences? How can these economic terms be applied to thinking like a freak?

4

What conclusions did Brian Mullaney reach about what incentivizes people to give to charity? Why was his “once and done” option successful?

6

What are relationship frameworks? Describe some specific instances in which they can be violated. What is ping-pong diplomacy and how was it a positive shift in a traditional framework?

6

What are the three main reasons incentives fail? What are the guidelines for successfully determining the way to find the right incentives that will appeal to the individual and will also get the job done?

7

What is game theory? How did both David Lee Roth, lead singer for Van Halen, and King Solomon both engage in it? What are the benefits and what are the risks?

8

What is the Spanish Prisoner? Why do Nigerians continue to send out emails promising the recipients millions if they help a Nigerian prince when everyone knows that they are scams?

9

What is the mission of the Cultural Cognition Project? What were their findings about climate change deniers?

10

What is the Concorde fallacy? What are the three forces that keep people from abandoning a project?