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THE THINK BIGGER METHOD

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What do you do when you have a problem and there is no known solution?

In 2010, I released a book called *The Art of Choosing* that summarized years of research on one key question: How do we get the most from choice? There I describe the various dilemmas we face for different kinds of choices and what we can do to become better at finding and picking the best from the bunch.

But sometimes we face a bigger problem: there are no choices to pick from. We have to create new choices; not choose among those we already know.

Growing up blind, I faced this bigger problem again and again. Could I learn to cook? Would I ever be able to travel the world on my own? Could I become a scientist? Could I perform on stage? Today, I know the answers to these questions is "yes," and I know the "how" behind them. That knowledge comes from my personal struggles but also from a treasure trove of new research on problem-solving.

The result is my new book, and a method for creating new choices to solve complex problems of all kinds. I call the method, and the book, Think Bigger.

I set about this task in a formal way some ten years ago, when I became director of the Entrepreneurship Center at Columbia Business School. I noticed that our many courses on entrepreneurship taught students how to implement a new idea—but not how to get that idea in the first place. Not all new ideas are equal, just like not all choices are equal.

I found that the field of innovation offered methods to get new ideas, but these dated from more than half a century ago. They failed to take into account the recent breakthrough in neuroscience called Learning+Memory. It lets us actually see how imagination works in the human mind.

I began to teach the Think Bigger method to my business students as a formal course. Their ideas for innovation were so intriguing that I thought practitioners might want to hear them—so I invited experts from various fields such as medicine, finance, and retail to listen to the ideas my students created. Again and again, these seasoned professionals used the same word to describe how my students were thinking about problems and solutions: empowering.

That's when the lightbulb turned on. I realized that Think Bigger had value beyond the classroom. All kinds of people want new ways to think about generating solutions to the complex problems that they face. Whatever your politics or station in life, I think we can all agree that our world badly needs more innovation.

Innovation is nothing more, and nothing less, than a new combination of old ideas. Yet we know from personal experience that all ideas are not equal.

The French scientist and mathematician Henri Poincaré explained how to generate good ideas in his 1913 book, The Foundations of Science: "Invention consists in avoiding the constructing of useless combinations and in constructing the useful combinations which are in infinite minority … To invent is to discern, to choose."

We're all capable of generating an infinite number of creative combinations—let's call them "choices." Creating a new choice that's valuable calls for great discernment. You must pick apart the choices you've identified and the routes you could take to make your idea real, and that's no easy task. Of the multitudes of pieces you could combine, and the infinite ways you could combine those pieces, it's the creator's discernment that decides which of the myriad combinations to keep.

The common definition of an innovation is "something new and useful." By definition, every combination is new. That's the easy part. The hard part is to identify a high-quality combination that's useful as well. So, how do we create the most useful combinations (which, as Poincaré notes, are in the infinite minority)? That's the question my new book, Think Bigger, will answer.

For our purposes here, we can refine our definition of innovation: a novel, useful combination of old ideas that come together to solve a complex problem.

This definition echoes an older statement by the economist Joseph Schumpeter, known today as the founder of entrepreneurial studies and the source of the idea of "creative destruction." For Schumpeter, the role of innovation is "to produce means to combine the things and forces within our reach."

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In *Think Bigger*, I focus on innovations that respond to a stated problem. It might seem that some innovations come out of the blue, but the reality is that even those innovators saw how their innovation solved a particular problem. If it did not solve a problem, it wasn't a "useful combination," in Poincaré's terms. So the keen innovator would pass it by. You only take action on innovations that solve a problem.

Above all, the Think Bigger method provides a way for a single individual—you—to get a better idea. You can do each step as a group as well but always in the same sequence: first each person alone, then put together a team result.

Most other innovation methods rely on the team, rather than the individual, for the actual idea. That is, they skip over the question of how creative ideas form in the human mind and simply say that putting ideas together from many people makes the idea creative.

That's not how it works in the real world. Yes, we need other people. But the most important creative steps happen in our own minds. Many hands make light work, but they don't make the light work. That is, a team is made for work, not for thinking.

So, if a team does Think Bigger together, each person will have better ideas, and the sum total will be better too. If a team does not follow Think Bigger, each person will have fewer creative ideas, and the sum total will be less creative.

In Think Bigger, we stay conscious of each mental step because that's the only way to repeat the steps for other ideas in the future. We unlock the black box and make the problem-solving exercise accessible for all and repeatable. Think Bigger empowers anyone, anywhere, to solve a problem—whether it's personal, professional, or universal.

Being deliberative allows us to speed up the process of searching for and finding a solution rather than just waiting for an idea to spontaneously arise. By providing more people with the Think Bigger tools, I believe we will also have a better chance at helping us—individually and collectively—create the solutions for the greatest problems we face in the world today.

Think Bigger offers you a set of tools and skills to solve any kind of complex problem, and then solve the next one too.

Consider a birdhouse. If I give you a complete set of tools, instructions, and pieces to build a birdhouse, then guide you through the process, what you build might not be the greatest birdhouse ever. It will have flaws in the structure and nicks in the wood. But you won't only have that birdhouse; you will know how to build another birdhouse—one possibly better than the last.

Think Bigger teaches you how to innovate. And like any other skill, you get better the more you do it. The first time you use this method, you won't have a perfect result. A novice only becomes a master through practice.

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Step 1: Choose the Problem

The start of Think Bigger is choosing the right problem and understanding it well. This takes time and good judgment. The problem must be hard enough that no one has figured it out before but not so ambitious that the solution remains a fantasy. For example, no one has invented a pill that cures every disease on earth and costs only one dollar. Don't be the first to try.

There are multiple ways to define any problem. Your task is to choose from among them the one for which you can generate meaningful solutions. You must choose a worthwhile problem to solve, and that is no easy feat.

Some problems are too big to solve with the current state of human knowledge, some are too small to make it worth the effort, and some don't provoke in you enough desire to persist in finding a solution.

Step 1 of Think Bigger helps you solve this very first problem: how to choose the right problem to solve.

Step 2: Break It Down

Any major problem is made up of multiple, smaller problems. To crack the big problem, identify and solve the smaller problems. Make a long list of subproblems and then pare it down. You end up with five to seven key subproblems, because that's about as much complexity as the human mind can handle at one time.

Step 3: Compare Wants

You now have your problem and its breakdown. Before you start the search for the elements of a solution, you need to step back and understand the big picture.

In this step, you will identify three groups and what they want from a solution. These groups are you, the target of your solution, and third parties who matter for putting the solution into action. You list the wants from all three, compare them, and then use that analysis to help select from among the multiple solutions you create. Your "Big Picture" Score will serve as your selection criteria.

Step 4: Search In and Out of the Box

Each industry, branch of science, or area of expertise has its own ideas and methods that narrow its thinking. It's common to hear that complex problems need multidisciplinary solutions. But when they try to work together, their ideas and methods clash. Think Bigger solves the problem.

Henry Ford didn't need an expert at meat processing to join his team: he took just one element, the moving line, as part of his own solution. Think Bigger doesn't try to merge disciplines or negotiate across them. It's non-disciplinary rather than interdisciplinary.

Ask yourself if anyone, anywhere, at any time, has solved one of your subproblems. If yes, how? Make a list of these solutions. Collect what works from multiple and disparate sources and even eras.

Step 5: Choice Map

Innovators tend to highlight the one solution they put into action. But the reality is that they tried out different combinations, at least in their minds, before arriving at the best one. They tend to forget those previous permutations. Think Bigger brings them to the fore. You keep moving and turning the pieces around until—eureka!— the whole emerges.

In this step, you will lay out all the pieces of the puzzle, combine and recombine, until they click into place. I will give you techniques to create and use multiple combinations that are both useful and novel, and then use your Big Picture Score to pick out the one that best fits the multiple wants you need to balance.

Step 6: The Third Eye

You now have an idea that feels like a flash of insight. But what is it, exactly? How does it differ from what's already out there? How will others see it?

In this final step, you take what you have been working on primarily by yourself—in your own bubble—and go outside to find out what others "see."

What you'll find is they don't see it with their two eyes but with their third one. The third eye is a real phenomenon of working memory where an image forms in their mind. You're not asking for their feedback or judgment about the quality of your idea. Rather, you want to know what they see in your idea to help you see it better yourself.

In so doing, you further develop your idea and determine if it's something you truly want to pursue.

At this point you might ask yourself, "Can I do it?"

Before you read this, perhaps your answer was "no." But now I hope you see that the answer is a resounding "yes." Each step of Think Bigger is completely within your grasp. Altogether, the six steps lead you to a big idea.

There is no guarantee, of course, that Think Bigger always works. You can't solve every problem in the world. But Think Bigger shows you how to try. Once you see the process broken down—and understand how even the greatest innovators came up with their new ideas—I'm certain you will feel confident that you can do it too.

Ultimately, what makes a big idea is when others see the idea, connect with it, and make it their own. Each observer of the idea brings their understanding to it so that the idea itself goes well beyond anything the original innovator could have imagined.

As innovators, we all want to create a big idea in a similar way. We all want to Think Bigger. And while you as an individual creator can't predict the future, here's what you can do.

You can be clear about the problem you're trying to solve—and you can gain clarity about why you want to solve the problem. You can also work to understand why solving the problem is valuable to you and how the solution you have come up with works.

If you can do all of that, then you're Thinking Bigger. And someday, you might discover that as others see the intention behind your idea and internalize it in their own lives to solve their individual problem, little by little, the idea scales and scales—and iterates—to become bigger and bigger.

For all the "bigness"—which at times, I know, can be daunting—to some degree, it's comforting, if not liberating, to know that all the world's revolutionary innovations are comprised of familiar elements. What has made innovation so elusive is that we've been barking up the wrong tree all along. We can't create new elements; we can only combine and recombine old ones.

As Mark Twain put it, "There is no such thing as a new idea. It is impossible. We simply take a lot of old ideas and put them into a sort of mental kaleidoscope. We give them a turn and they make new and curious combinations. We keep on turning and making new combinations indefinitely, but they are the same old pieces of colored glass that have been in use through all the ages."

We can find refuge and inspiration in knowing that someone, somewhere, at some time, has already solved most, if not all, the pieces required to puzzle together our next big idea. After all, if Isaac Newton was able to stand on the shoulders of giants and change his world, then why can't we use what we already know and find a unique combination of solutions to change our world for the better? So go be curious—because the longer you collect puzzle pieces, the easier the puzzle is to solve.

You now know a great secret that has been hiding in plain sight: how our minds put together our best ideas. **So the next time a problem confronts you, grab your kaleidoscope, give it a few turns, and start to Think Bigger.**

Info

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