

Introduction

Re-Think will open your mind to fresh possibilities in your everyday life and help you to recapture a childlike sense of curiosity. To re-think means to see different and better solutions to any problem, whether you want to reorganize your life, become closer to your partner, or create a new business idea. All that's needed is for you to put the power of your attention on creative re-thinking and you can't help but have better ideas.

We should all be re-thinkers. Here's why.

A re-thinker has:

- openness to different and better solutions;
- techniques to see the familiar in a fresh light;
- a default setting that thinks 'why not?' 'what if?' rather than 'yes, but';
- ways of accessing deeper levels of thought;

- knowledge of how to create more eureka moments; and
- the courage and will to put new ideas into practice.

A re-thinker is a dreamer who does!

Of course, thinking differently doesn't always produce a better or more useful solution. I live in Oxford, a city of thinkers. During the Second World War a philosopher don from one of the colleges convinced the government that he couldn't be called up for military service because he was, in fact, a duck. He used the full weight of his formidable intelligence to construct an invincible argument on this point. Presumably the intellectual resources of the nation were deployed on more vital issues than out-philosophizing this man.

This is an instance of being able to think differently without thinking better, especially as his cleverness rebounded on him. When he applied for a driving licence after the war, even a bureaucrat could point out the simple truth that ducks don't drive. To re-think means not just to think differently for the sake of it – stimulating though that can be – but to also come up with better solutions.

I've spent much of the last 25 years helping people – individuals, teams and organizations – to see their situation in fresh and creative ways: their lives, careers, personal development, relationships, and businesses. This has taken me to six continents, working with groups as varied as Korean engineers, BBC programme makers, Swedish bankers, and American beer retailers.

I have to tell you it's not all been a picnic: there are some very fixed mindsets out there. And that's just the experts on creativity. Many of them have been using the same examples for the last 25 years. Which is why I prefer the word re-think to creativity.

Re-thinking does encompass the idea of creativity, and at times I will interchange the concepts. But unfortunately words have limiting associations. Creativity is too often stereotyped as something that happens in the arts, in research science, the minds of inventors, in the media, or perhaps in advertising where people are even given the label 'creatives'.

I want to engage you in thinking of creativity in a way that seeps into and infuses every area of your life, not just an approach you roll out for a formal brainstorming session. Inventor Buckminster Fuller decided he wanted to make his life like a trim tab for the planet. A trim tab is a small part of a boat's rudder, which despite its insignificant size has the power to gradually turn the direction of the whole vessel. *Re-think* is like a trim tab that can help you guide your life in different and better directions.

THINKING AS UNUSUAL: EIGHT GREAT RE-THINKS

To get us started here's a list of re-thinks to show what breakthroughs can result from thinking differently and challenging received wisdom in a variety of fields. Thinking as *unusual*. It's *not* intended as a Top 8: I'll leave that to the TV programme makers who seem increasingly unable to think in any way but lists! (Presenting *connections* between different musicians, artists, and performers would be a far more interesting approach.)

You can take any of the principles of re-thinking from these examples and start applying them to a problem right now. They are all ways of thinking afresh, of coming up with new or just better solutions. Re-thinks.

1 Reversing the obvious 1: The Fosbury Flop

Dick Fosbury is an American athlete who revolutionized the high jump by leaping backwards over the bar. In the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City he won the Gold medal and set a new Olympic record. Now almost all modern high jumpers use Fosbury's backwards 'flop'.

Re-think: Turn the problem you're facing on its head; approach it backwards.

2 Taking a big risk: The South African Truth And Reconciliation Commission (TRC)

After the end of apartheid the TRC enabled anyone who had been a victim of violence to come forward and give testimony, much of which was televised nationally and internationally. No one was exempt – this included members of the African National Congress as well as the South African police. Perpetrators of crimes could also give testimony and request amnesty. Though not perfect, it's generally regarded as a great success and a refreshing re-think on 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'.

Re-think: Who do you need to get together with to clear the past?

3 Pushing beyond the limits: Like A Rolling Stone by Bob Dylan

This 1965 release – rated in *Rolling Stone* magazine as the greatest popular song of all time – was not only semi-improvised, but also challenged the artistic and business conventions of its time by running to six minutes in length. The prevailing mindset was that you couldn't have a song more than three minutes long because people just wouldn't listen to it all the way through. Columbia came up with their own solution to the problem by putting half of the song on each side of the record.

Re-think: What are the self-limiting boundaries you need to break to come up with new solutions?

4 Thinking both/and: Most products from Apple

Combining technology with design, beauty with functionality, is one of the great contributions of Apple. Founder Steven Jobs is passionate about putting together musicians, artists, and even historians with the nerds. The difference shows in a world of grey boxes. The iPod is the first piece of technology that I think is beautiful.

Re-think: How can you combine seemingly unrelated fields and people to produce more beautiful solutions?

5 Reversing the obvious 2: Copernicus' discovery of heliocentricity

Nicolaus Copernicus developed the sun-centred theory of the solar system at the beginning of the sixteenth century in a way that was detailed enough to make it scientifically valuable. Interestingly, astronomy was just a hobby of his, and yet his findings that the earth was not in fact at the centre of the solar system opened the floodgates for the modern scientific revolution, and was a profound challenge to religious views of a geocentric universe.

Re-think: Consider what are the most fundamental assumptions you're making about a situation and challenge them one by one.

6 Re-writing the rulebook: Wikipedia online encyclopedia

Wikipedia is an encyclopedia written by its users, which anyone can add an entry to – and it's free. Founder Jimmy Wales has a mission to make much of human knowledge free and in the public domain. If you're worried about accuracy, a scientist deliberately introduced 13 errors to the encyclopedia, most of which were corrected by subscribers within hours. The world's first encyclopedia was launched in 1743; the impact of Wikipedia may be just as great.

Re-think: How can you use enthusiasts to rewrite the rulebook in your own field?

7 Beautifying the bland: Artwork on garage doors

A service yard door in a Basingstoke, UK, shopping centre has been made a work of art by silversmith Chris Knight, and nominated for a prestigious prize. Knight has become an evangelist for bringing more style to everyday and overlooked industrial objects. The way the light shines through the garage doors is reminiscent of Moorish art. He has also brought beauty to metalwork in a Gateshead multi-storey car park in the northeast of England.

Re-think: Don't assume anything has to be what its stereotype suggests.

8 Selling a story: The Body Shop

The success and the reputation of Body Shop are not based on the products (e.g. Peppermint Foot Lotion) that it sells. Instead, customers feel they are buying into the values of charismatic founder Anita Roddick. Her campaigning against animal testing and ecological plundering is a big part of why many customers buy her products. Increasingly, the story behind what you do is becoming as important as the product or service itself.

Re-think: What's your story?

These examples should give you the idea that there is nothing too big or too small to re-think, and no limit to the strategies you use. You can apply a re-think to anything.

Of course, the assumption behind re-thinking is that we *have* thought in the first place. Once I was coaching a 16-year-old girl in study skills. She put down her book, fixed me with a keen gaze and said, 'It's hard to revise something, when you haven't *vised* it in the first place.'

The poet Robert Frost observed that ‘the human brain is a wonderful thing. It starts functioning as soon as we wake in the morning – and stops the minute we enter the office.’ Unfortunately there is much truth in this. It’s possible to stay on automatic pilot and sleepwalk through life without really paying attention to the infinite possibilities that exist all around us.

Re-Think aims to make you more aware of your own thinking process, helping you to switch into another creative gear when you need it.

RE-THINK RESEARCH

Many of the examples in the book come from my experience of helping individuals and companies to creatively re-think. There’s also much from my obsessive reading about music, art, business, and the role that creativity plays in diverse fields. Also, from what I prefer to call ‘pro-search’ – exploring the imaginations of others about the future.

More analytically, I used a survey that over 100 people from around the world responded to. This uncovered some fascinating information on how people think about their own creativity, the role it plays in their lives, and the conditions needed to trigger it. A detailed summary of the survey is in the Appendix, where you might be intrigued to find out which people are most commonly thought of as creative.

What’s interesting is how similar are many people’s descriptions of creativity, even though couched in different language. A significant finding of the research is that while most see creativity as key to their success and happiness in life, very few have ever received any coaching in it. This is why *Re-Think* was written.

NAVIGATING THE BOOK

It would be great if colleges had to offer courses that combined a practical skill with book learning: Latin and metalwork, carpentry and theology, psychology and plastering might be a good start.

Similarly, *Re-Think* is about philosophy and plumbing—in other words, theory and practice. The first part of each chapter is philosophy/theory, followed by a number of re-thinks; more practical avenues for using the ideas.



There are practical re-thinks throughout the book, which are indicated by the symbol in the margin. It will usually be an action – such as ‘buy a new newspaper’ – and sometimes a fresh idea to reflect upon.

If you're standing in a bookshop skimming through *Re-Think*, you could read the whole of it by following these symbols in the text. However, sometimes understanding the why behind the idea can change your mind as much as the action. To get you used to this practical way of reading *Re-Think*, here's an example to start with.

Using words without thought can be a barrier to thinking differently. One of the ways in which you can get a shot of re-thinking in the shortest time available is to have a dictionary of word origins in your bathroom. Not only will this impress visitors, but you'll often find a prompt that will open fresh ways of thinking.

Take a word like ‘disease’ for instance. More usefully, we can think of it as dis-ease. But what if we were to take this insight further? Given that stress creates or aggravates 80 per cent of all illnesses,

don't we need a Minister For Ease? And why shouldn't he or she be responsible for reducing stress and increasing ease in all areas of life: health, education, even transport, and dealing with social services?

So buy this dictionary, find a word that's relevant to a project you're working on at home or in the office, discover its origins and, as in the example above, explore its implications.



The way to read this book is to have a specific problem or situation in your mind before you start a chapter; I'd advise one big one and one small one. Your mind will be more committed to resolving the issue if you write it down or even draw it before you start reading.

Don't navigate your way through the book passively. I encourage you to put it down – frequently – and consider, act upon, or discuss the ideas it introduces. There aren't many checklists in *Re-Think* because I'm not sure that they work. Mark the book, tear pages out, make it your own. You might find it useful to have a stack of Post-it Notes and a journal to sketch, and note the ideas that come to you while reading.

Re-Think encourages you to *experience* different ways of thinking, behaving, and being. It's a provocation, a series of insights, and a journey to inspire your creativity. I've intended the first four chapters to be the cornerstones and believe there is some value in reading them in order. But if I were you, I'd dip in anywhere that looks interesting, provided you agree to following the advice about writing down what it is you want to re-think before reading.

Re-thinking doesn't just come from intellectual analysis. Often a poem can set us thinking ...

Things To Think

*Think in ways you've never thought before.
If the phone rings, think of it as carrying a message
Larger than anything you've ever heard,
Vaster than a hundred lines of Yeats.
Think that someone may bring a bear to your door,
Maybe wounded and deranged; or think that a moose
Has risen out of the lake, and he's carrying on his antlers
A child of your own whom you've never seen.
When someone knocks on the door, think that he's about
To give you something large: tell you you're forgiven,
Or that it's not necessary to work all the time, or that it's
Been decided that if you lie down no one will die.*

*Robert Bly*¹

Should you re-think everything? No – you'd go crazy. I believe there is a joy in continuity, in keeping some things the same, and preserving what's good. But when you need to be a re-thinker, here's how.

¹ 'Things to Think' from *Morning Poems*, Robert Bly, HarperPerennial, 1997, p. 12. Copyright © 1997 by Robert Bly. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.