# LIMINAL THINKING

**Create the Change You Want by Changing the Way You Think**

by

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Foreword by Richard Saul Wurman

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# Triangulate and Validate

Here's a story I heard from a friend of mine named Adrian Howard. His team was working on a software project, and they were working so hard that they were burning themselves out. They were working late nights, and they agreed as a team to slow down their pace. "We're going to work 9 to 5, and we're going to get as much done as we can, but we're not going to stay late. We're not going to work late at night. We're going to pace ourselves. Slow and steady wins the race."

Well, there was one guy on the team who just didn't do that. He was staying late at night, and Adrian was getting quite frustrated by that. Adrian had a theory about what was going on. What seemed obvious to him was that this guy was being macho, trying to prove himself, trying to outdo all the other coders, and showing them that he was a tough guy. Everything that Adrian could observe about this guy confirmed that belief.

Late one night, Adrian was so frustrated that he went over and confronted the guy about the issue. He expected a confrontation, but to his surprise, the guy broke down in tears. Adrian discovered that this guy was not working late because he was trying to prove something, but because home wasn't a safe place for him. They were able to achieve a breakthrough, but it was only possible because Adrian went up and talked to him. Without that conversation, there wouldn't have been a breakthrough.

It's easy to make up theories about why people do what they do, but those theories are often wrong, even when they can consistently and reliably predict what someone will do.

For example, think about your horoscope. Horoscopes make predictions all the time:

> "Prepare yourself for a learning experience about leaping to conclusions."

> "You may find the atmosphere today a bit oppressive."

> "Today, what seems like an innocent conversation will hold an entirely different connotation for one of the other people involved."

> "Stand up to the people who usually intimidate you. Today, they will be no match for you."

These predictions are so vague that you can read anything you want into them. They are practically self-fulfilling prophecies: if you believe them, they are almost guaranteed to come true, because you will set

your expectations and act in ways that make them come true. And in any case, they can never be disproven.

So what makes a good theory, anyway?

A scientist and philosopher named Karl Popper spent a lot of time thinking about this. Here's the test he came up with, and I think it's a good one: Does the theory make a prediction that might not come true? That is, can it be proven false?

What makes this a good test? Popper noted that it's relatively easy to develop a theory that offers predictions—like a horoscope—that can never be disproven.

The test of a good theory, he said, is not that it *can't* be disproven, but that it *can* be disproven.

For example, if I have a theory that you are now surrounded by invisible, undetectable, flying elephants, well, there's no way you can prove me wrong. But if my theory can be subjected to some kind of test—if it is possible that it could be disproved, then the theory can be tested.

He called this trait *falsifiability*: the possibility that a theory could be proven false.

Many theories people have about other people are like horoscopes. They are not falsifiable theories, but self-fulfilling prophecies that can never be disproven.

Just because you can predict someone's behavior does not validate your theories about them, any more than a horoscope prediction "coming true" means it was a valid prediction. If you want to understand what's going on inside someone else's head, sometimes you need to have a conversation with them.

Many years after the Vietnam War, former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara met with Nguyen Co Thach, former Foreign Minister of Vietnam, who had fought for the Viet Cong in the war. McNamara had formed the hypothesis that the war could have been

avoided, that Vietnam and the United States could have both achieved their objectives without the terrible loss of life. When he presented his thinking to Thach, Thach said, "You're totally wrong. We were fighting for our independence. You were fighting to enslave us."

"But what did you accomplish?" asked McNamara. "You didn't get any more than we were willing to give you at the beginning of the war. You could have had the whole damn thing: independence, unification."

"Mr. McNamara," answered Thach. "You must have never read a history book. If you had, you'd know that we weren't pawns of the Chinese or the Russians. Don't you understand that we have been fighting the Chinese for a thousand years? We were fighting for our independence. And we would fight to the last man. And we were determined to do so. And no amount of bombing, no amount of U.S. pressure would ever have stopped us."[1]

McNamara then realized that the entire war had been based on a complete misunderstanding. He said: "In the case of Vietnam, we didn't know them well enough to empathize. And there was total misunderstanding as a result. They believed that we had simply replaced the French as a colonial power, and we were seeking to subject South and North Vietnam to our colonial interests, which was absolutely absurd. And we saw Vietnam as an element of the Cold War. Not what they saw it as: a civil war."[2]

Sometimes people come into conflict not because they disagree, but because they fundamentally misunderstand each other. This can happen when people are viewing a situation from completely different points of view.

Have you ever had someone that you worked with, where you thought, this person is insane; they make no sense; they are crazy; they're just nuts?

1. *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert McNamara*, documentary directed by Erroll Morris (Sony Pictures, 2003).
2. Ibid.

Everyone knows someone like that, right?

Sometimes people really do have mental disorders, including problems that can create danger for themselves and others. If that's the case, it might make sense to stay away from them, or to seek help from a mental health professional.

But far more often, saying another person is crazy is just a way to create internal coherence within your belief bubble. Your "obvious" is stopping you from seeing clearly. The "crazy person" may be acting based on beliefs that are inconceivable to you because they are outside your bubble.

If you think to yourself, this person is just nuts, and nothing can be done about it, it can't be changed, then it's possible that your theory about that person is constrained by a limiting belief.

Most people don't test their theories about other people, because it's a potential bubble-buster: if you give your self-sealing logic bubble a true test, then it just might collapse on you.

People do fake tests all the time, of course.

Here's an easy way to do a fake test of your beliefs. Just search the Internet. No matter what your belief is, you'll find plenty of articles that support and reinforce your bubble. The Internet is like a grocery store for facts. It's easier than ever to find "facts" that support pretty much any belief.

Fake tests will help if your goal is to feel better about yourself and reinforce your bubble. But if you want to figure out what is really going on, a fake test will not help.

What will help is triangulation: the practice of developing multiple viewpoints and theories that you can compare, contrast, combine, and validate, to get a better understanding of what's going on.

U.S. military strategist Roy Adams told me this story about an "aha" moment he had in Iraq.

He was having a beer with a friend who was in the Special Forces. Usually, they didn't talk about work, but he happened to have a map with him. At the time, Adams and his team were designing their plans based on the political boundaries of the map, so on the map were districts, as well as the people who were in charge of the districts.

His friend said, "You know, this is really interesting." And he picked up a pen and said, "Let me draw the tribal boundaries on this map for you." The boundaries were completely different but overlapping. Suddenly, Adams had two different versions of reality on his map.

The political map was primarily a Shia map, and the tribal map had both Sunni and Shia. Only by overlaying the two maps did Adams start to understand the situation. Neither map would have made sense by itself.

By laying these maps over each other, suddenly things started to click. Now he understood why they were having success in some places and meeting resistance in others. Everything started to make more sense.

The insights in this case came not from one map or another, but through overlaying them. This is the practice of triangulation. Each map represented one theory of the world, one version of reality. It was only by viewing the situation through multiple perspectives—multiple theories— that he was able to gain insight and see the situation differently.
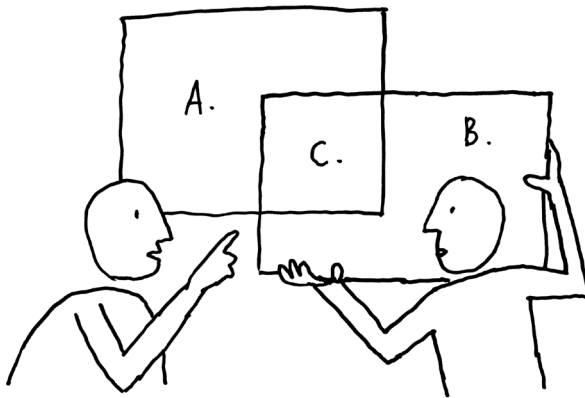


LOOK FOR ALTERNATIVES

My friend Adrian Howard told me about a similar experience he had when working at a large Telecom company that had grown by acquiring other companies over many years. His team found itself running up against resistance and pushback that seemed odd and inexplicable. Then someone on the team took some markers and color-coded the boxes on the org chart based on which companies the people in each box had originally come from—many of whom used to be fierce competitors—and suddenly the reasons for the resistance became clear and understandable.

For any one observation there may be a vast number of possible explanations. Many of them may be based on beliefs that are outside of your current belief bubble, in which case, they may seem strange, absurd, crazy, or just plain wrong.

Most of the time we are all walking around with our heads so full of "obvious" that we can't see what's really going on. If you think something is obvious, that's an idea that bears closer examination. Why do you think it's obvious? What personal experiences have you had that led to that belief? Can you imagine a different set of experiences that might lead to a different belief?

Cultivate as many theories as you can—including some that seem odd, counterintuitive, or even mutually contradictory—and hold onto them loosely. Don't get too attached to any one of them.
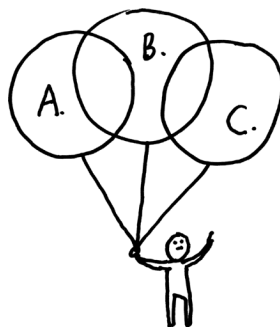


HOLD YOUR THEORIES
LOOSELY

Then you can start asking questions and seeking valid information to help you understand what's really going on. The way to seek understanding is to empty your cup, step up and give people your full attention, suspend your beliefs and judgments, and listen carefully.

The thing to remember is that people act in ways that make sense to them. If something doesn't make sense to you, then you're missing something.

What are you missing? If someone says something that seems odd or unbelievable, ask yourself, "What would I need to believe for that to be true?"

In many cases, the only way you're ever going to understand what's inside someone else's head is by talking to them. Sometimes that idea might seem scary. It may be that you will hear something that threatens your bubble of belief. But if you can get over your fear, go and talk to the dragon, or take the ogre out for coffee. You just may learn something that will change your life.

### EXERCISES

- Think about a co-worker or family member, someone you care about, or can't walk away from for whatever reason, that you have trouble getting along with. Consider their beliefs and behavior, and come up with as many theories as you can to explain why they act the way they do. Then see if you can have a conversation with that person to explore what's really going on.

- Think of a situation at home or work that you find problematic. Try to come up with as many perspectives as you can that might give you a different way to look at the situation. What is your current theory? What is its opposite? How many perspectives or points of view can you think of that might help you see that situation through different eyes?

# Triangulate and validate.

Look at situations from as many points of view as possible. Consider the possibility that seemingly different or contradictory beliefs may be valid. If something doesn't make sense to you, then you're missing something.

The greatest compliment that was ever paid me was when one asked me what I thought, and attended to my answer.

—Henry David Thoreau