

## Book Review: *Think Again*

Troy Okum<sup>1</sup> and Lawrence M. Eppard<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, USA, [troyokum@ufl.edu](mailto:troyokum@ufl.edu)

<sup>2</sup>Shippensburg University, Shippensburg, PA, USA, [leppard@ship.edu](mailto:leppard@ship.edu)

Published April 15, 2021

Publication Type: Book Review

Preferred Citation: Okum, Troy and Eppard, Lawrence M., 2021. "Book Review: *Think Again*." *Sociation* 20(1), 42-



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 2.0 Generic License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/)

*Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know*. By Adam Grant. New York: Viking Press, 2021. Pp. 320. \$16.80.

A number of books in recent years, including *The Death of Expertise* by Tom Nichols and *Post-Truth* by Lee McIntyre, have provided excellent analyses of how Americans' once-shared reality became so fractured. The next logical volume in this literature might answer the question: where do we go from here? Enter psychologist Adam Grant with his latest book, *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know*. This 2021 release from Viking provides readers with useful and empirically-grounded suggestions for how we might open our own minds and the minds of others—and perhaps restore some of what has been lost in this country.

In *Think Again*, Grant argues that in our rapidly changing world, true intelligence is about more than just thinking and learning—it also requires developing the abilities to rethink and unlearn. He notes that Americans today are consuming five times as much information as they were just 25 years ago. Collective knowledge is growing much faster than in the past—in 1950, for instance, it took 50 years for knowledge in medicine to double, but today it takes just four. In light of this new reality, we need to spend as much time rethinking as we do thinking. To do this, we not only have to acquire the skills of rethinking, but the mindset as well.

Regardless of how adept somebody may be at thinking and learning, without the abilities to rethink and unlearn they will not identify the blind spots in their knowledge. Grant argues that being wrong is damaging if we ignore it, but extremely useful if we learn from it—and therefore we should relish being wrong and the learning opportunity that it provides us. In fact, there are multiple occasions in *Think Again* where Grant admits where his previous ideas and writings were flawed, and how his thinking has improved by being able to identify, admit, and learn from those past shortcomings.

Grant encourages readers to avoid thinking like preachers defending sacred beliefs, prosecutors proving others wrong, or politicians campaigning to win over an audience. Instead, we should think more like scientists—search for truth, systematically investigate, rely on multiple credible sources, know the limits of our understanding, doubt what we know, argue vehemently against our own ideas, seek out information that might contradict our opinions, view all of our ideas as only a latest draft, refuse to let ideas become ideologies, listen to people and opinions that challenge us, constantly rethink our ideas, and update our views when new data is available. Grant encourages readers to value humility over pride, doubt over certainty, curiosity over closure, flexibility over consistency, and being right over feeling right.

Everybody has an ego that attempts to keep out threatening information in order to protect their identity and core beliefs. We should therefore detach our ideas from our identities and our present from our past. The less invested and emotionally-attached we are to ideas, and the less we tie our ideas to our identities, the less we will resist changing them and the lower the probability that we will be embarrassed when we are wrong. Grant encourages readers to be passionately dispassionate, go through regular rethinking cycles, and always ask: what would be necessary for me to declare a particular belief false? He notes that, "Psychologists find that many of our beliefs are cultural truisms: widely shared, but rarely questioned. If we take a closer look at them, we often discover that they rest on shaky foundations."

If knowledge is power, Grant argues, then knowing what we don't know is wisdom. He outlines a useful strategy for testing our ideas: attempt to explain them to an imagined expert. After all, one of the best ways to learn is to

teach. If our argument breaks down even when we are trying our very best to explain it, we know we only had the illusion of explanatory depth. Realizing where our argument falls apart will help us identify gaps in our knowledge and flaws in our logic, helping us to rethink and move on with a better understanding.

Grant details how conflict is productive if structured properly, and how a lack of conflict in a variety of settings can actually lead to worse outcomes. As long as we are careful to frame discussions of differences as debates of ideas rather than disagreements or personal conflicts, we might be able to avoid becoming angry. Constructive conflict can foster diversity of thought, surface doubts, force us to identify what we are missing, and help us to rethink. Engaging with criticisms makes us stronger. It is good for all of us to have a network of people who challenge us and point out our blind spots—we learn more from those who challenge our beliefs than from those who affirm them.

Grant argues for the construction of cultures of learning in the workplace. He explains that an organization's culture has a tremendous influence on whether rethinking occurs, and a healthy culture of learning can prevent (sometimes catastrophic) mistakes. Cultures of learning require debate, encourage workers to identify what is unknown, and embolden their people to doubt established practices and be curious about new ones. These cultures thrive when there is both accountability and psychological safety. In chapter ten, Grant details an index card that NASA's Ellen Ochoa carries with her on the job. On this card are the following questions: What leads you to this assumption? Why do you think it is correct? What might happen if it is wrong? What are the uncertainties in your analysis? I understand the advantages of your recommendations—what are the disadvantages? Ochoa says she always asks these questions whenever people are making important decisions about launches and operational procedures. Simply asking how we know something can be quite powerful.

Grant argues that productive disagreement is a critical life skill and outlines a variety of useful strategies to handle charged conversations and have productive debates. He explains that using force only activates people's defense mechanisms, regardless of whether our argument is sound—so we should treat debates like a dance rather than a tug of war. Identify the other person's perspective and show that you respect it. Admit as much common ground as possible and concede others' good points. Admit where there is uncertainty. Avoid oversimplifying or collapsing issues into binary categories. Admit uncomfortable complexities. Avoid piling on facts—a single strong argument, however compelling, is diluted when paired with multiple weak ones. Ask questions instead of making assertions. Do not advance an agenda or attempt to persuade. Debate your opponents' strongest arguments, not weak straw men. Ask what evidence might change their minds. Remember that you do not necessarily need to convince people you are right, but only that their logic may be flawed.

Grant encourages people to employ rethinking when it comes to their own goals in life. He argues that we should avoid escalation of commitment—that is, setting out towards a goal, getting trapped in tunnel vision, settling prematurely on a sense of self, and sinking valuable time and resources into a particular goal or identity long after we suspect we should have changed course. He says there is a fine line between heroic persistence and foolish stubbornness. Many failures and periods of unhappiness could be prevented if we allowed ourselves cycles of rethinking on a regular basis. He suggests scheduling career checkups even when things are going well, just like we schedule regular medical checkups in times of good health. Twice a year we might ask ourselves why we set out on our current path, if anything has changed about us or our path to suggest recalibration, and whether it might be a good time to pivot.

In each chapter, Grant includes both explanations of the empirical work underpinning his recommendations, as well as real world demonstrations of his arguments—including how an African American musician persuades white supremacists to rethink their prejudices, an international debate champion wins arguments, and a vaccine whisperer reaches skeptical parents. In the first chapter, for instance, we meet Mike Lazaridis, the founder of BlackBerry, a company that went from a \$70 billion valuation to obscurity due in part to his inability to rethink how the most important features of his product fit into the changing technological landscape.

The result is that *Think Again* is both highly informative and a joy to read. It is a well-written, thought-provoking, and empirically-grounded guide that may just help Americans navigate through this difficult period in our history.