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FLIP YOUR THINKING

By: Paul Kinsinger

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FLIP YOUR THINKING

Flip your thinking, or as we also call it, "disrupt yourself," is a workshop exercise designed to get participants to break out of, and challenge, the pronounced and tacit constraints that undergird the way they believe their businesses or organizations work. It can be used to:

- kick-start the development of a disruptive mindset;
- stimulate more innovative thinking;
- help get people more comfortable with experimentation and developing new ideas to try.

It can also be combined with elements of IDEO's design thinking (DT)[1] to help shift employee mindsets more toward empathy with their customers' experience rather than on what the company sells. And, it can be useful in helping employees shift from a "what we do" or a "how we do it" mindset to the "why we do what we do" that is at the heart of Simon Sinek's "Start with why."[2]

The flip your thinking framework consists of four parts. The first three are addressable in a four-hour workshop; the fourth is the execution step, and focuses on implementing the results of the first three. It requires dedicated follow-up.

STEP ONE: CALLING OUT CORE BELIEFS

This step is about identifying the core beliefs that undergird how an organization creates value but which also serve to constrain ideas that do not conform to that. In this step, facilitators ask participants to list out, or discuss in small groups, the following questions:

- *How is value created by our company, (or our organization), and in our industry, (or in our field)?*
- *What are the underlying beliefs and assumptions about key value-creating factors, such as the role of customers, of technology, the basic economics of the business, and the organizational structure, which support our beliefs about how value is created?*

The key to a successful discussion in this step is to really challenge participants to dig deep on this; otherwise, they will quickly go to what is easiest and identify topics that are, in effect, only second- or third-order beliefs or, more likely, represent personal pet-peeves. This step takes some good reflection by participants to get to the fundamentals of the two questions above. And, it's likely that they will not get to the real long-held beliefs without experiencing some discomfort with regard to what they or their teams adamantly adhere to, or what they have long followed almost without question.

So, a facilitator, or a gifted participant, must gently but firmly push people to expand their thinking to get at the baseline beliefs ("Yes, that's a key assumption we have identified, but what really lies beneath that? And, beneath that?"), or to get people to where they are willing to show some vulnerability in revealing the "aha" moments this step can produce. If this step can get to this kind of outcome, the following step becomes that much more powerful.

The goal of Step One is to have completed a solid list of core beliefs and underlying assumptions about the business—(1) areas of the business that are experiencing vulnerability, and (2) those beliefs that are the most sacred in the organization.

STEP TWO: UPENDING OUR BELIEFS AND FRAMING NEW HYPOTHESES

Working from the list completed in Step One, participants turn to engaging in "flipping their thinking" through addressing the following provocative questions:

- *What if we were to flip these beliefs on their heads? (Essentially what if black were white?)*
- *What if we were to reverse the assumptions that lie beneath our core beliefs about how we create value?*
- *What if our core beliefs were not true; that, in fact, the truth was exactly the opposite of what we believe?*
- *How might we come up with some dramatically different hypotheses about how the company could create value? Hypotheses that no one else in our industry would want to believe?*
- *How might we re-formulate a long-held belief in a new framework?*

As an example, let's look at the book-selling business. The fundamental long held beliefs in the bookstore business were that people liked to browse through shelves of books; to touch and feel them; to be able to read the jackets and even a chapter; that they did not mind the relative inconvenience of traveling to specific locations to do so; or having to wait several weeks for out-of-stock books.

1 Tim Brown, Design Thinking, Harvard Business Review, November, 2008

2 Simon Sinek, "Start with why," at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4ZoJKF_VuA

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While this may yet be true for many consumers (and latent in many others), Amazon has now so successfully challenged all tenets of this belief system that remaining bookstores have been relegated to being well-loved niche players in local markets. There is no large footprint, scalable business left.[3]

What if the big bookstore companies had successfully challenged their key beliefs earlier in their lifecycle? What if they had flipped their thinking to consider questions like, "what if customers were willing to buy almost any kind of book sight-unseen, without touching them?" "What if convenience became the predominant motivator in shaping the customer experience, as opposed to freedom to browse?" "What if there were a way for them to browse virtually?"

As one can see, the major theme in this part of Step Two is to challenge thinking as boldly as possible. That's why the "what if" construct is so powerful, and a facilitator can use this to channel the process quickly into the flip your thinking mindset. Another method to challenge thinking is to posit opposites: "We believe the core to our ability to create value rests on_____. It does not; it rests on (the opposite.)" For example, "We believe technology is an enabler in how we create value." It is not; it is a large part of the value we create." Or "We believe our shareholders expect steady returns and will not accept volatility." "They don't. Our shareholders expect us to embrace volatility in pursuit of shaping the business for its next stage."

The central challenge in this part of Step Two is to get participants to be comfortable with what some will see as fantastical thinking, and a waste of time. Our experience is that the best way to do this is to make it fun and move it along fast. Get the process going quickly; if no one is catching fire, then the facilitator should offer some quick ideas; usually someone will get it and keep it going. Watch for participants who are sitting it out; talk to them; suggest they doodle a bit on their own first; challenge them to have fun with this—after all, it's basically a releasing exercise.

The goal of this part of Step Two is to have addressed as many aspects of the list completed in Step One with a "turn our belief upside-down" entry as well; again, especially those business areas that are vulnerable, or house the organization's most sacred beliefs and assumptions.

STEP THREE: CREATING NEW IDEAS TO EXPERIMENT WITH

Step Three is to turn the process of upending beliefs into the creation of new ideas that can be shaped into new experiments. Core questions for this part are:

- *What new ideas emerge from our upended hypotheses and frameworks?*
- *How might we use the results of our "turn your beliefs upside down" thinking to develop new ideas that virtually everyone else in the industry (or the field) would think are crazy?*

This step can be done with participants working on their own to generate a list of "crazy ideas," in pairs, or as a small group—depending on the mix of people, the coherence of the group around a part of the business or organization, etc.

3 Although ironically Amazon has now launched a few of its own bricks-and-mortars bookstores in the U.S.

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This is the part of the Flipping Your Thinking exercise where you want to encourage participants to jump the guardrails.

The key challenges in this part are threefold: first, that many participants will still naturally hold back on new ideas they themselves think are "crazy" on the grounds that others will judge them negatively; second, that they just have a personal negative belief about engaging in "daydream-like" thinking; and third, conversely, that they will use this opportunity to dress up their own pet ideas in this new guise and surface them.

To offset the first two, a facilitator should say at the outset things like, "there are no bad ideas here" and that the whole point of this part of the workshop is to generate as many crazy ideas as possible; that they will get vetted in the next step. Step Three is where you want the dialogue to diverge as much as possible—lots of ideas; no push toward convergence yet. Sometimes, utilizing a classic brainstorming framework can help provide guidance. One approach is to have participants work on their own lists for a designated time; then exchange with a partner; then go back to their own lists for a short time adding anything that might have been stimulated by sharing.

The goal for Step Three is to produce a lengthy list of new ideas that serve as the raw material for Step Four.

STEP FOUR: DEVELOPING SOME NEW EXPERIMENTS

Step Four is where the results of the first three steps get shaped so they can be acted upon. The driver questions for this step are:

- *What are best ideas that emerged from the list developed in Step three?*
- *How could we take the best of them and launch some quick experiments?*

The first question pulls participants back from ideation toward more familiar critical thinking, and as such, there is a danger that the exercise could be deflated if every idea is now deemed "too crazy." Facilitators should guide the process toward having participants pick the best ideas no matter how doable they seem; in effect, make the group surface a top list of ideas in spite of that. This can be preceded by a quick discussion of what constitutes "best." In the construct of the workshop, "best" is not defined by conventional feasibility confines; indeed, that will quickly lead the results back in the direction of very incremental innovation. The goal here is to go for ideas that best re-define the space and could lead to disruptive innovation, whether in an offering, the business model, how the company relates to customers, etc.

Again, the guiderails for this part of Step Four ought to connect back to those established in Step One: (1) what are the most vulnerable parts of the organization; and (2) where are the most sacred beliefs held. Ideas generated in Step Three that address either or both of these aspects should go to the top of the list.

And, this is where convergence should take place, with participants quickly discussing and sharing views as they determine the final list.

Once a prioritized list is developed, the exercise moves to the second question in Step Four. This is now about getting to action, so the hurdle that needs to be avoided is, "yeah, cool list, but we can't really do any of these things." Therefore, the question is, "how could we…," not "can we?" and here again, facilitators need to help participants jump those guardrails if they get stuck. The overall goal of the entire workshop is to develop and execute on new ideas to drive the organization forward, not just to engage in some fun thinking.

Presumably there will be participants who can be actual owners of executing on some new ideas, (or at least significant influencers of those who are); the workshop will be all the more impactful if this is the case. Owners are likely to have the clearest thinking about how they might, indeed, maneuver the new idea into being. They may have just needed the "flip their thinking" exercise to free themselves of some tacit constraints.

The key to success is ultimately in the ability of the company to embrace the four "F's" of disruptive-oriented experimentation: fail fast, fail often, fail cheaply, and learn from failures and move on. Best practices here are to have broad but clear guiderails as to what constitutes success; to determine specific check-in times to monitor progress; have a straightforward and quick "kill" process; and to extract and proselytize learnings from failures.

So, the end result of this entire exercise is to surface some small, but bold disruptive experiments an organization can try quickly and then either swiftly scale up and exploit, or kill and shift resources to others. Organizations with a "failure is not an option" mentality are not likely to fully benefit from the Flip Your Thinking exercise unless they set their sights on changing mindsets as opposed to driving new initiatives.

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OVERVIEW

This paper is a part of a series devoted to presenting strategy and leadership tools and frameworks that can help companies navigate the challenges and opportunities posed by the era of disruption and the dawn of exponential times. They are meant to be used in support of the recommendations presented in our associated series of white papers addressing the larger leadership, strategic, organizational, and individual issues posed by disruption to many legacy incumbents.

This paper looks at how to use ***Flip Your Thinking***, a process of radical re-framing to help leaders in legacy incumbent organizations break out of the constraints that create blind spots and leave them open to potential attack by disruptors. This process also provides a roadmap for legacy incumbents to begin "disrupting themselves," instead of waiting for others to do so.

Other papers in this series include:

Do You Fully Understand Your Customer's Journey?
Using a mini-case study of a day in the life of a premium airline customer, this paper seeks to help leaders re-focus from the "product-service dominant" logic that prevails in many incumbents toward a more "breakthrough customer experience" logic that is a key hallmark of highly successful disruptors. It is intended as a more cognitive, first step in helping to bring about this shift, by focusing leaders in legacy incumbents on process and structural issues that impede the customer journey, such as capacities and scheduling, boundaries and hand-offs, and connecting your products and services to the social and emotional needs they meet or provoke in customers. It is a companion piece to:

Do You Know Your Customers' Points of Friction?
In this era where many customers have more choice, better access to information, and have developed escalating expectations of transparency, speed, and performance, many legacy incumbents have rightfully re-emphasized truly understanding the customer, from adopting the empathetic mindset at the heart of Design Thinking to learning more about the job their customer is trying to accomplish. Yet, while almost all of us can easily tell a powerful story of frustration with another company's product or services, (complete with the emotions we felt along the way), we often find leaders of legacy incumbents have difficulty truly seeing points of friction their own customers might be experiencing. This paper focuses on how to use a four-point customer friction framework to help identify specific instances in the customer interaction process where frustrations are created—and where vulnerabilities for disruptors emerge. It then shows leaders how they can use some of the tools of disruptors to address the friction and start to re-focus the organization mindset more toward creating a breakthrough customer experience.

Using a "10X" Challenge to Drive Disruptive Change.
Using field examples, this paper discusses how incumbents far more conditioned to incremental innovation can learn to apply the "10X" phenomenon that has so often defined successful disruptive change in many industries. 10X means the ability to change something for the positive for customers by a factor of ten: as in improving a product's performance; driving costs down; speeding up time to transact; reducing processes, etc.; all by a factor of ten. It is generally recognized that achieving 10X in the market is disruptive and provides a potentially powerful competitive advantage. Inculcating a 10X mindset can also help incumbents take on other key characteristics of successful disruptors, such as increasing clock speed, pursuing creativity less bounded by organizational constraints, and reducing the unnecessary complexity that comes with large and mature companies.

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