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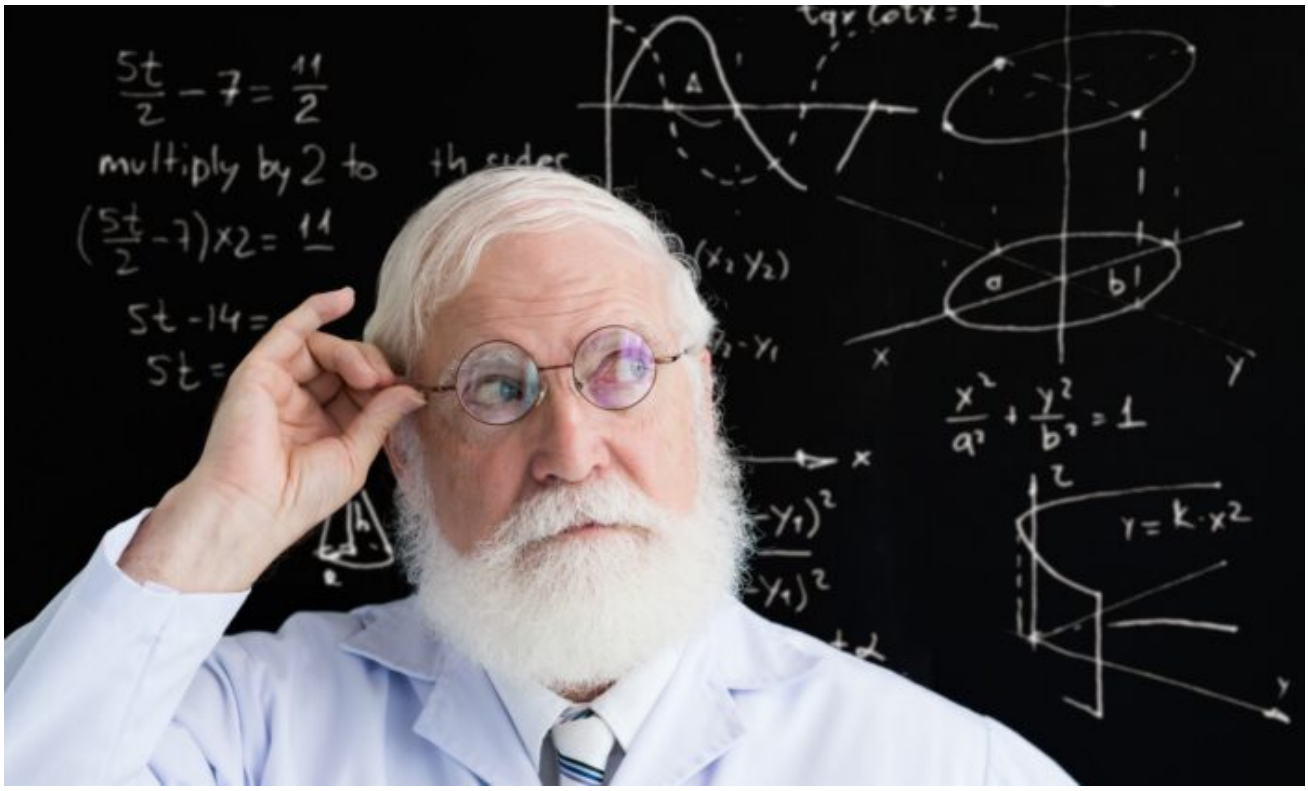

If you're more concerned with learning and growing than just being right, then it is much easier to accept new information and deepen your understanding. (Dragon Images/Shutterstock)

MIND & BODY

Why Thinking Like an Open-Minded Scientist Is Good for You

A new book raises the importance of questioning our knowledge and opinions in the face of new evidence

BY JILL SUTTIE | April 8, 2021 Updated: April 8, 2021

In a rapidly changing world, it's important to be able to adapt rather than stubbornly adhere to old ideas and opinions. This was one of the lessons of 2020, a year that forced us to question many of our assumptions about what behaviors are safe, how work and school can be conducted, and how we connect with others.

In his new book, "Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know," organizational psychologist Adam Grant explains why it's so important for people to be humbler about their knowledge and stay open to learning and

people to be humbler about their knowledge and stay open to learning and changing their minds. The book is filled with fascinating research and guidance on becoming more flexible in our thinking, while helping others to be more open-minded, too.

This skill is crucial not only for facing crises like the pandemic, but also for navigating complex social issues, making good business decisions, and more.

"In a changing world, you have to be willing and able to change your mind. Otherwise, your expertise can fail, your opinions get out of date, and your ideas fall flat," says Grant.

I spoke to Grant recently about his book and what we can take away from it. Here is an edited version of our conversation.

Jill Suttie: Your book focuses on the importance of people questioning what they think they know and being open to changing their minds. Why is it so hard to do that?

Adam Grant.

Adam Grant: It's hard for a few reasons. One is what psychologists call "cognitive entrenchment," which is when you have so much knowledge in an area that you start to take for granted assumptions that need to be questioned. There's evidence, for example, that when you change the rules of the game for expert bridge players, they really struggle, because they don't realize that the strategies they've used for years don't apply. There's also evidence that highly experienced accountants are slower to adapt to the new tax laws than novices because they've internalized a certain way of doing things.

A second barrier is motivation: "I don't want to rethink; I'm comfortable with the way I've always done things. It makes me feel and look stupid if I admit that I was wrong. It's easier to just stick to my guns (or my gun bans, depending on where I stand ideologically)."

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The third reason is social. We don't form beliefs in a vacuum. We generally end up with opinions that are influenced by and pretty much similar to the people in our social circles. So, there's a risk that if I let go of some of my views, I might be excluded from my tribe, and I don't want to take that risk.

Ms. Suttie: In your book, you talk about the importance of the "scientific mindset." What do you mean by a scientific mindset and how does it help us in rethinking?

Mr. Grant: I think too many of us spend too much time thinking like preachers, prosecutors, and politicians. [Phillip] Tetlock made a very compelling case that when we're in preacher mode, we're convinced we're right; when we're in prosecutor mode, we're trying to prove someone else wrong; and when we're in politician mode, we're trying to win the approval of our audience. Each of these mental modes can stand in the way of "thinking again," because in preacher and prosecutor mode, I'm right and you're wrong, and I don't need to change my mind. In politician mode, I might tell you what you want to hear, but I'm probably not changing what I really think; I'm posturing as opposed to rethinking.

Thinking like a scientist does not mean you need to own a telescope or a microscope. It just means that you favor humility over pride and curiosity over conviction. You know what you don't know, and you're eager to discover new things. You don't let your ideas become your identity. You look for reasons why you might be wrong, not just reasons why you must be right. You listen to ideas that make you think hard, not just the ones that make you feel good. And you surround yourself with people who can challenge your process, not just the ones who agree with your conclusion.

Ms. Suttie: Why would people ever want to look for reasons to be wrong?

Mr. Grant: One of the reasons you want to is because if you don't get good at rethinking, then you end up being wrong more often. I think it's one of the great paradoxes of life: The quicker you are to recognize when you're wrong, the less wrong you become.

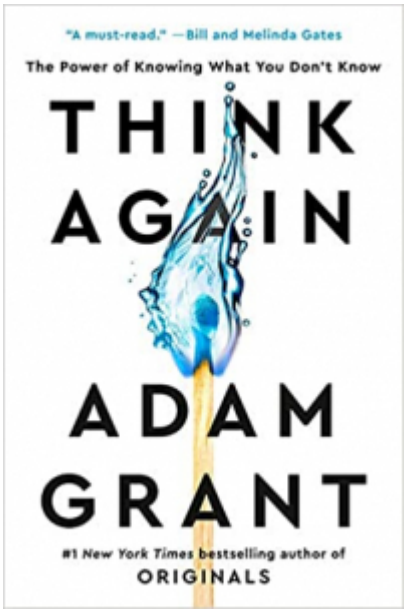
There's an experiment where entrepreneurs were being taught to think like scientists that's such a good demonstration of something we can all practice.

Italian startup founders went through a three-to-four-month crash course in how to start and run a business. But half of them were randomly assigned to think like scientists, where they're told that your strategy is a theory. You can do customer interviews to develop specific hypotheses, and then when you launch your first product or service, think of that as an experiment and test your hypothesis.

Those entrepreneurs that we taught to think like scientists brought in more than 40 times the revenue of the control group. The reason for that is they were more than twice as likely to pivot when their first product or service launch didn't work instead of getting their egos all wrapped up in proving that they were right. To me, that is some of the strongest evidence that being willing to admit you're wrong can actually accelerate your progress toward being right.

Ms. Suttie: But shouldn't we be able to embrace our expertise rather than always giving every idea equal weight?

Mr. Grant: I'm not saying that you shouldn't have standards. The whole point of rethinking is to change your mind in the face of better logic or stronger evidence—not to just roll the dice and say, I'm going to pick a random new opinion today.



Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know (Viking, 2021, 320 pages)

There's a great way of capturing what I'm after here, which is something Bob Sutton has written about for years. He defines an attitude of wisdom as acting on the best information you have while doubting what you know. That's what I'm saying here. You need humility.

I think people misunderstand what humility is. When I talk about humility in experts or in leaders, people say, "No, I don't want to have no self-confidence. I don't want to have a low opinion of myself." But, I say, that's not humility. The

Latin root of humility translates to "from the earth." It's about being grounded, recognizing that, yes, we have strengths, but we also have weaknesses. You're fallible. Confident humility is being able to say, "I don't know and I might be wrong," or "I haven't figured it out yet," which is essentially believing in yourself but doubting your current knowledge or skills.

Ms. Suttie: People often seem to not want to rethink, and they'll use strategies to shut down conversation, like saying, "I'm entitled to my opinion" or "I don't care what you say, I'm not changing my mind." How can you encourage somebody to be more open to rethinking if they're unmotivated?

Mr. Grant: Your options are not always going to work. But one option is to show your own openness and admit that you might be wrong or your knowledge might be incomplete. The reason people shut down is often because they're afraid of being judged. So, they would rather disengage and avoid that. But if you say, "Hey, you know what? I'm not sure about my opinion here," there's a possibility they'll realize that you're both here to learn from each other.

A second option might be to ask questions that help to consider what would open their mind, which at least encourages them to contemplate situations where they might rethink. If they acknowledged evidence could change their mind, at least it's a step toward progress.

A third possibility is to do something I've been doing since I wrote the book: to acknowledge my own stubbornness at the beginning of these kinds of conversations and admit that I have a bad habit of going into "logic bully mode." I bombard people with facts and data, but that's not who I want to be. I want to come into conversations with people who disagree with me in the hopes that I can learn something from them. I don't want to be a prosecutor.

So, I invite people to catch me doing that and ask them to please let me know. A couple of things happen when I do that. One is sometimes people will call me out and it helps me. Just last week, I was in a debate by email with a colleague and he said, "You're going into lawyer mode again." It was a good prompt for me to think, "Uh oh, I'd better rethink the way that I'm having this fight." The other thing that happens is when I put my cards on the table, often the other person will say, "Oh my gosh, I do that, too. I don't want to be like that either." It sets the terms for the

my gosh, I do that, too. I don't want to be like that either." It sets the terms for the conversation a little bit.

Ms. Suttie: At the end of your book, you have 30 practical takeaways for rethinking. Can you mention a few that are particularly important or easier to embrace?

Mr. Grant: One of my favorites is being a "super-forecaster," which means, when you form an opinion, you make a list of conditions that would change your mind. That keeps you honest, because once you get attached to an opinion, it's really hard to let go. But if you identify factors that would change your mind up front, you keep yourself flexible.

For encouraging other people to think again, you can avoid argument dilution. Most of us try to convince people with as many reasons as possible, because we think that giving people more reasons makes it easier for them to change their mind. But we forget that two things happen. (I'm tempted to give you many more, but I'm going to try to avoid diluting my own argument.) The more reasons we give, the more we trigger the other person's awareness that we're trying to persuade them, and they put their guard up. Also, if they're resistant, giving them more reasons allows them to pick the least compelling reason and throw out the whole argument.

The lesson here is, if you have an audience who might be closed to your point of view, sometimes it's more effective to give two reasons instead of five. Lead with your strongest argument.

On the collective side, I love the idea of doing a rethinking checkup. We all go to the doctor for regular checkups, even when nothing is wrong. We should do the same with the important decisions in our lives. I've encouraged my students for years to do annual career checkups where they just ask themselves once or twice a year, "Have I reached a learning plateau? Are the interests and values I had when I came in still important to me now?" We can do the same thing with our relationships or pretty much anything that's important to us.

Ms. Suttie: You write that being wrong is tied to a more joyful life. Why is that?

Mr. Grant: I absolutized Daniel Kahneman [the Nobel-winning psychologist

Mr. Grant: I had noticed Danny Kahneman [the Nobel prize-winning behavioral economist] just lights up with joy when he finds out that one of his hypotheses is false. So, I asked him, "Why do you look so excited when you find out that you're wrong?" And he corrected me. He made clear to me that no one enjoys being wrong, but that he takes real joy in finding out that he was wrong, because that means now he's less wrong than he was before. All of a sudden, it clicked for me: Being wrong means I've learned something. If I find out that I was right, there's no new knowledge or discovery.

In some ways, the joy of being wrong is the freedom to keep learning. If you can embrace the joy of being wrong, then you get to anchor your identity more in being someone who's eager to discover new things, than someone who already knows everything or is expected to know everything.

Ms. Suttie: Do you have any hopes for people engaging in rethinking as a way of bridging our political divide?

Mr. Grant: It depends on who's doing the talking. So many of us fall into binary bias, and we only focus on the most extreme version of the other side, which is a caricature, where we say they're either dumb or bad. If you let go of that, there's a whole complex spectrum and many shades of gray between these two political extremes.

Peter Coleman's research shows that, instead of introducing a complex topic like abortion or guns or climate change as representing two sides of the coin, if you can encourage people to think about it through the many lenses of a prism, they become more nuanced and less polarized, and they're more likely to find common ground. Any time you see someone creating an "us versus them" dichotomy, you can ask, "What's the third angle, what's the fourth lens on that?" That gives people the chance to belong to multiple belief systems and to open their minds to multiple ideas, as opposed to sticking to one.

Ms. Suttie: What are your hopes for this book?

Mr. Grant: I hope that it will encourage more people to be more flexible in their own thinking, to say they care more about learning and improving themselves than about proving themselves. Too many of us get trapped in mental prisons of our

own making. But if we could be committed to rethinking, we might have a slightly more open-minded society.

Jill Suttie, Psy.D., is Greater Good's book review editor and a frequent contributor to the magazine. This article was originally published by the Greater Good online magazine.