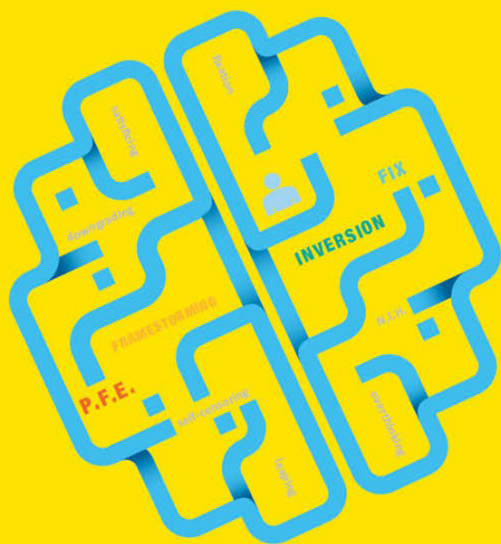


Winning ^{the} Brain Game

FIXING THE 7 FATAL
FLAWS OF THINKING



MATTHEW E. MAY

Author of *The Elegant Solution* and *The Laws of Subtraction*



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FLAWS OF THINKING

MATTHEW E. MAY



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A M A N T R A

What appears to be the problem, isn't.

What appears to be the solution, isn't.

What appears to be impossible, isn't.

–THE ELEGANT SOLUTION

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INTRODUCTION

7 Fatal Flaws

We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

It's 2005. I am seated in a corporate conference room on the top floor of an eight-story building in southern California, surrounded by 12 highly skilled bomb technicians from the Los Angeles Police Department who have been hand-picked and gathered to address a complex challenge regarding new methods and approaches needed to respond to bomb calls in the new age of everyday terrorism. They received their training at the same Kentucky facility that trains all bomb technicians in the United States, regardless of military or paramilitary branch.

The problem is as wicked as a problem could possibly be: how to handle fluid, potentially catastrophic situations involving highly lethal improvised explosive devices (IEDs) capable of massive devastation and death in public places.

The current strategy isn't working as well as they need it to, because a new breed of terrorism has entered the mix, one that is unpredictable, constantly changing, operates an essentially leaderless organization, defies all conventional warfare,

logic, and rationality, and has no qualms about taking the lives of civilians . . . or their own lives, for that matter.

I am excited to have been chosen to be the facilitator over the course of the next two days, at the end of which they will present their solution to LAPD's counterterrorism senior command staff. I am also as apprehensive as I've ever been, with any team, anywhere, in any setting.

These are the most highly paid officers in the entire department, the guys and gals who have to cut the right wire, so to speak. It's a job that requires quick thinking, quick reads, quick decisions, and quick action—all under enormous pressure in a situation that presents them with something they've never seen before. They often must improvise in a split second. They do not have time in the field to think deeply.

Above all, they are men and women of action. Sitting in a brainstorming session with some civilian who possesses absolutely no experience or expertise in doing their incredibly challenging job isn't exactly their cup of tea. They didn't volunteer to be here. They'd rather be out chasing bad guys and protecting the world from the evil crazies. The fully armed officer to my left takes off his gun belt and riot stick, then leans over to whisper, "I'm only here because I was ordered." This doesn't help my level of apprehension. I am unarmed.

There's a good bit of discomfort, skepticism, and tension in the air. So while I have no explosives training, I do need to defuse the situation just a bit. I certainly have no authority over them, but I do "own" the process. I need to not only establish some rules of engagement, but do so in way that opens minds and encourages divergent thinking, because

that's what's needed here. Go-go "Git 'er done" thinking won't cut it.

By way of introduction, I ask the good problem-solvers to raise their hand. Every hand goes up. No surprises there, bombs are problems, and problem-solving is the air they breathe. I tell them to keep their hands held high, which they do with surprising obedience. I continue the query, by asking those who consider themselves great learners to now raise their other hand. Same result, all hands up. Twelve LAPD officers with both arms up in the air. I can't resist: "Do I ever wish I had a camera right now." Grins, groans, eyerolls, snickers. Then, I ask the true innovators to keep their hands up. Every hand down. No takers. None.

I didn't ask that question to destroy confidence, but to change the frame. I make the point that as a practical matter, innovation, problem-solving, and true learning—the kind where new knowledge is actually created by the learner—employ the same iterative process: questioning, framing, hypothesizing, ideating, testing, reflecting. So, I've essentially now dubbed them innovators.

The ice may be melting, but it's not quite broken. Because they're accustomed to working closely with a partner, I split the group into six pairs and give them a quick thought challenge to tackle, one based on a real problem and involving something they're fairly familiar with—compliance—but one that is much simpler than any problem they will ever face on the job.

My hypothesis is that the LAPD bomb techs will do what everyone else I had ever seen work on this kind of challenge had done, in all the same ways, and in all probability fail to solve the problem.

THOUGHT CHALLENGE*

Imagine that you own a luxury health club. As part of the membership perks, each of the 40 shower stalls—20 men's and 20 women's—is stocked with a bottle of very expensive (\$50), salon-only shampoo, which is only available in beauty supply retail stores to licensed hair stylists. The customers love it and rave about this particular perk. Unfortunately, bottles disappear from the showers all the time. In fact, the theft rate is 33 percent, presenting a costly situation, not to mention a bad experience for members reaching for the shampoo, only to find the bottle gone. Your staff must constantly resolve complaints among your "honest" members. You've tried a number of things to solve the problem: reminders, penalties, and incentives to try and reduce theft, but nothing so far has worked. The front desk even sells the bottles at a very slim profit margin.

You decide to ask your employees, all of whom are hourly, to help solve the problem, and give them several nonnegotiable conditions: the solution must completely eliminate theft; it cannot involve discontinuing or limiting the current shampoo offering in any way (one full-size bottle of the current brand per stall must not change); any solution must be of extremely low, and preferably no, cost (pennies per stall, at most); there can be no additional burden on the member; and the solution must be easy to implement, without disrupting the normal operation of the club.

* This problem is based on a Los Angeles-area health club. I turned the story into a thought challenge.

You tell your employees that they are free to be as innovative as they wish and do anything they want, as long as all conditions are met.

I reiterate to the bomb tech team that they are free to be as innovative as they wish, come up with any solution they wish, be as wild and crazy as they wish, but that their idea will be peer-graded by the rest of the room on the basis of how well their solution meets *all* of the conditions, while violating none. And because working under time pressure is part of their job, I give them just five minutes to come up with their best idea. I challenge them to match their problem-solving chops with those of the part-time health club employees, who in fact solved the problem elegantly. I put a little skin in the game and tell them that the team that comes up with the best idea gets a special gift. It's now a friendly competition.

I'd been using another version of this exercise* in a creative problem-solving seminar at the University of Toyota, and my observations of several hundred participants over the course of several months had begun to reveal some interesting patterns. I liked these types of challenges for several reasons. First, because they are based on very real business problems and, as mentioned, are far less complex than everyday work-related problems. Second, because these sorts of conundrums catch people doing many if not all of the things that prevent them from seeing the solution that achieves the maximum effect with the minimum means. I have for years used this as the simple definition of an *elegant solution*.

* I will share another version of the exercise with you later in the book.

THE ELEGANT SOLUTION

One that achieves the maximum effect with minimum means.

Try your hand at solving this thought exercise. Put this book down and let your mind play with the possibilities. I'll even double your resources: you have 10 minutes. Enlist the help of someone else if you like—some people prefer to collaborate. Jot down all your ideas, select the best one, and then we'll continue.

Seriously, try it. I'll wait. The rest of the book will be more meaningful if you do.

Back? How did it go? Do you think you came up with the elegant solution? If you're like 95 percent of the people I give this kind of problem to, including the LAPD bomb techs, you undoubtedly came up with several ideas.

Here are the most frequently given solutions:

- keep bottles at the front desk to check in and out
- hire a locker room attendant to check them in and out
- put travel-size bottles in the stalls
- install cameras
- loyalty program offering a free bottle for keeping a clean record
- install lockable pump-top dispensers in each stall
- have a gym bag-checker at the exit
- discontinue the shampoo in the stalls
- charge a separate fee for shampoo
- sell the shampoo at cost

- “most wanted list”: pictures and names of offenders
- chain the bottles somehow to the wall
- put the shampoo in unmarked bottles
- install “do not remove shampoo” signs in stalls
- give out free sample-size bottles at the front desk
- hire shower security guards
- puncture the side of the bottle near the top
- install radio-frequency identification (RFID)
- consider loss due to theft a cost of doing business
- keep the bottles near empty at all times

Unfortunately, all of these solutions violate one or more of the conditions imposed—some more than others, of course—and none of them represent the rather elegant solution produced by the health club employees, which I will get to in a bit.

THE SEVEN FLAWS & FIXES

Every time I watch folks wrestle with this challenge, I’m constantly amazed at how people so consistently fall victim to the same patterned thinking traps and exhibit the same kinds of behaviors over and over again. I was not disappointed as I watched the bomb techs work.

The scientific community has a whole host of sophisticated labels and pet names for these behaviors, as well as a long laundry list of other patterns, but let me simplify things a bit: they are fatal thinking flaws. There are seven of them. Each carries with it the potential to kill a great idea, and prevent an elegant solution from ever seeing the light of day.

That there happen to be seven is purely coincidence!

1. Leaping

When I watched the LAPD bomb techs work on the problem, they immediately began offering up solutions in rapid-fire fashion. They spent nearly all their time doing one thing: brainstorming. Or as designerly types call it, ideating. (Horrible word. Hate it.) What struck me as curious was that they invested little if any time doing what they were all actually trained very well to do: first gather the facts, then synthesize them into a theory of the crime and the motive behind it, before ever trying to solve it. Sherlock Holmes would've been disappointed, having advised Watson in no uncertain terms, "It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has facts. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories instead of theories to suit facts." In real terms, they bypassed entirely any discussion of why people were stealing the shampoo.

Moreover, the conditions of the challenge are generally ignored. I have observed that it appears to be easier, or at least more common, for people to think "outside the box" than inside it; and that is not necessarily a good thing.

Immediately and instinctively leaping to solutions in a sort of mental knee jerk almost never leads to an elegant solution to an unfamiliar, complex problem, because not enough time is devoted to framing the issue properly. In the thought exercise, I listed facts and constraints in a slightly disguised attempt to paint a picture of the desired future. I did not, however, explicitly frame the problem. I wanted to leave that to the LAPD bomb techs, and to you.

Perhaps you thought you were solving the problem of dishonesty, which is one way to frame the challenge. But it is not the only way, nor is it the best or most useful way, because your chances of alchemically transforming dishonesty to

honesty in the context of petty theft are, well, nil. There is an art to framing and reframing problems, and part of the art is in the timing. The fix for the Leaping flaw is generating multiple ways to frame the problem. In other words, instead of coming up with answers right away, you come up with questions right away. It's called *Framestorming*.

In this case, figuring out why people are stealing the shampoo is key. Dishonesty is indeed one cause, but one too abstract to correct. There are others, including accessibility to a highly desirable item. The bottle of shampoo is too tempting, at least for a third of the health club's patrons. Once you understand that, you can frame the problem to focus on the question of how to make it utterly undesirable to remove the bottle of shampoo, without incurring cost or burden to anyone. Remove the temptation, eliminate theft entirely.

Framing a problem properly has everything to do with whether it gets solved elegantly.

2. Fixation

Fixation is an umbrella term for our general mental rigidity and linear thinking—our go-to mindsets, blind spots, paradigms, schemas, biases, mental maps, and models—that make it easier for us to make it through the day, but harder for us to flex and shift our perception. The term itself comes from what psychologists call “functional fixedness.” Our brains are amazing pattern machines: making, recognizing, and acting on patterns developed from our experiences and grooved over time. Following those grooves makes us ever so efficient as we go about our day. The challenge is this: if left to its own devices, the brain locks in on patterns, and it's difficult to escape the gravitational pull of embedded memory

in order to see things in an altogether new light. In other words, those deep grooves make it tough to go off-road and, as the Apple tagline goes, think different.

Fixation and Leaping are interconnected . . . two sides of the same coin. If you spend a bit more time framing the problem properly, you can often avoid getting mentally stuck in gear. In the shampoo bottle challenge, your brain may have blocked any notion of decomposing the image of the bottle itself: bottle with top, one unit, inseparable.

The health club's elegant solution? Remove the tops of the shampoo bottles. Problem solved. No one wanted to put a topless bottle of shampoo in their gym bag!

If you're thinking that this solution will irk the 67 percent of the patrons who weren't stealing shampoo, well, that's just your Fixation flaw speaking. The cure for Fixation is what I call *inversion*, and captures the essence of several creative thinking techniques used by designers and artists to radically shift their thinking from the current reality of how things are in order to pursue the possibility of how they could be: Steve Jobs was known for his "reality distortion field"; Stanford engineering professor Robert Sutton often refers to *vuja de*, which is the opposite of *deja vu**; his Stanford colleague and creativity professor Tina Seelig suggests that to spur new thinking we take the current conditions of the situation and think of the polar opposites; TED Ideas editor Helen Walters argues that we should regularly "flip orthodoxy."

* If *deja vu* is the feeling that a certain event has happened before, *vuja de* is the direct opposite . . . an event or situation that should be familiar is suddenly very different. The late comedian George Carlin jokingly coined the term, describing it as "the strange feeling that, somehow, none of this has ever happened before." <https://youtu.be/B7LBSDQ14eA>

3. Overthinking

On the other end of the thinking spectrum from Leaping is Overthinking, which can be thought of as our knack for creating problems that weren't even there in the first place. Overthinking is a rather deep bucket filled with a host of variations on a theme: overanalyzing, overplanning, and generally complicating matters by adding unnecessary complexity and cost. In looking at the list of most common theft-prevention solutions, notice that many require the addition of resources of some kind: manpower, money, material. Most of them not only violate the conditions of the challenge, but are completely impractical. We often ignore the most important constraints of a given problem, which blocks the discovery of a more elegant solution.

Why *do* we overthink, overanalyze, and complicate matters? Why *do* we add cost and complexity? Most interestingly, why do we all do it so naturally, intuitively, and, perhaps most disturbingly, so consistently?

Part of the answer is that we're hardwired that way. Through eons of evolution, our brains are designed to drive hoarding, storing, accumulating, collecting-type behavior. We are by nature "do more/add on" types. When it comes to problem-solving, this instinct translates into adding complexity and cost as a first course of action, especially when we recognize the problem as being a complex one requiring a deeper level of thinking, analysis, and planning. "I can solve the problem, but it's going to take more resources" is the oft-heard refrain. But it doesn't necessarily take genius to spend resources . . . it does, though, to work within the resource constraints you're given. What cost and complexity did you add in trying to solve the thought problems?

Another part of the answer is a simple lack of a reliable approach that enables us to grapple with uncertainty, risk, external forces beyond our control, and rapidly changing circumstances that eschew any sort of traditional planning. We've lost the required childlike learning and experimenting capability needed to make innovative problem-solving simpler, safer, and speedier. MIT's master of business experimentation Michael Schrage calls that capability "serious play," and puts it this way: "Innovation too often is too slow, too expensive, too complicated, too risky, too rigid, too dull, too little, and too late."¹ Schrage doesn't even like the word "idea" and prefers to couch all challenge-chasing efforts in terms of "simple, fast, and frugal" tests meant to reveal the validity of a concept.

He's right. Until any concept is raised to the level of reality, it is merely a guess, or set of guesses, in need of testing. The simple fix for Overthinking is *Prototesting*, a combination of prototyping and testing. From a back-of-the-napkin sketch to a first draft to a minimally functional mockup to technical A/B testing to the reverse engineering of a set of strategic choices, Prototesting enables us to tangibly tease out the mental leaps of faith made in crafting any kind of solution and run a simple test quickly and cheaply in order to learn. Prototesting lends proof of concept, with the intent being to prove an initial concept is worth developing further.

4. Satisficing

People favor action and implementation over nearly all else, and certainly over incubation. By nature we *satisfice*, a term combining satisfy and suffice, and coined by Nobel laureate

Herbert Simon in his 1957 book *Models of Man*. We glom on to what's easy and obvious and stop looking for the best or optimal solution, the one that resolves the problem within the given goals and constraints. We over-compromise and suboptimize, accepting the halfway solution and relying on our ability to push it forward. Unfortunately, when it comes to complex problems, that usually amounts to a rather Herculean but useless effort akin to pushing water uphill. We fool ourselves into thinking "good enough is," thereby creating something that demands massive work in order to succeed. By thinking less, we end up working more.

Breakthrough thinking demands something to break through. Generally, it's the space between conflicting goals, causing creative tension. With the shampoo example, I deliberately set goals in conflict under a short time frame to force a creative tension in your mind to raise awareness of what your brain is doing.

Did you refuse to make trade-offs, refuse to compromise on the criteria, or did you simply pick a solution at the 10-minute mark and rationalize why it would work?

As Rotman School professor and renowned business strategist Roger Martin tells us, "By putting in the necessary thinking work and refusing to accept the unattractive trade-offs, we can unleash our ability to build new and better models and create value for the world."² At the heart of Martin's integrative thinking methodology is a synthetic process that calls up what he terms the *opposable mind*, which merges the very best parts of two opposing but satisficing solutions in an elegant mash-up that defeats the tendency to satisfice and settle for anything less than the best solution.

The fix for Satisficing is thus: *Synthesis*.

5. Downgrading

Downgrading is the close cousin of satisficing, with a twist: a formal downward or backward revision of the goal or situation, often resulting in wholesale disengagement from the challenge. It comes in a few basic flavors. First, there's the twisting and sifting of facts to suit our solution, arrived at by Leaping or Fixation. Second, there is the "revised estimate." The result is the same: we fall short of the optimal or ideal solution, pick one that gets us most of the way there, then sell the upside and downplay the downside.

Basically, we commit what amounts to preemptive surrender, which in a perverse way enables us to do what we really want to do, which is to declare victory. We do it all the time, because no one wants to feel like they didn't succeed. It's not very resourceful, creative, or heroic.

But here's the thing: you can't win a football game by aiming for the 97-yard line. You can't score a run in baseball by only making it to third base. You can't reach Mars by shooting for the moon. You can't . . . well, you get the drift.

Studies of brainstorming sessions reveal that idea generation generally stalls after about 20 minutes. At that point most groups stop and turn their attention to evaluating their ideas. However, the research shows that teams with the best ideas don't stop there. Rather, they embrace the psychological barrier and push through the stall zone, somehow resetting their minds to opening up new channels of widely divergent thinking.

The fix for Downgrading is *Jumpstarting*, defined just as it is in the dictionary: starting a stalled vehicle whose battery is drained by connecting it to another source of power. Jumpstarting redoubles your focus on both your will and your

way, the two elements needed to attain any well-set goal, to give yourself a boot in the brain in lieu of disengaging or abandoning the challenge entirely. Jumpstarting combines simple techniques that not only have recent studies shown to be quite effective for pushing past the surrender mark, but that I know to work in well in the field.

In considering the shampoo problem, did you think: 0 percent theft is impossible, throw up your hands and simply give up, turning the pages until you found the solution somewhere in the narrative? If you did, I bet the teacher caught you peeking at your neighbor's answers on that third-grade math quiz in elementary school.

I watched the bomb techs do the equivalent. They ran out of obvious ideas well before the five-minute mark, and immediately began looking at the other pairs around the room, looking for answers. Interestingly, even when a stolen glance yielded an idea they hadn't thought of, they would wrinkle their nose or shrug their shoulders, dismissing it out of hand.

This brings up the final two flaws, which deal with the outright rejection of ideas. There is a nuanced difference between rejecting ideas of others and rejecting ideas of our own, so I will treat them separately.

6. Not Invented Here (NIH)

NIH is a well known acronym in management literature* for "Not Invented Here" syndrome, defined as an automatic negative perception of, and visceral aversion to, concepts and solutions developed somewhere else, somewhere external to

* In a database search of scholarly papers, I found over 600 journal articles referring to NIH syndrome.

the individual or team, often resulting in an unnecessary reinvention of the wheel. It means, “If I/we didn’t come up with it, I/we won’t consider it,” and “I/we can do anything you/they can do, better.” We don’t trust other people’s solutions. While there may be a basis in neuroscience related to triggering our threat response, our expression of it is always the same: shutting out another person’s or group’s idea immediately and without due consideration merely because *they* came up with it. The next time you’re in the lobby waiting for the elevator to go up to your office or hotel room, count how many people hit the up button even though they can see that you’ve already pushed it. That’s NIH.

How much time did you spend pondering why previous solutions didn’t work? I’ll bet almost none. The LAPD bomb techs sure didn’t. The impulse to do something, anything, and fast, leads us to focus on execution, and as a result we ignore the facts. In laying out the thought exercise, I specifically said that reminders, incentives, and penalties had not worked in the past. Yet it never fails: in every session in which I use this kind of thought exercise, I’m given some form of at least one of those. Go back a few pages and see how many of the popular ideas are really just another form of what hadn’t worked in the past . . . reminders, incentives, penalties. Perhaps you caught yourself thinking, *they didn’t do it right*, which is acceptable if you intend to focus on learning why those previous attempts failed, because doing so would eventually lead you to reframing the problem. But simply pushing your version of the same idea just because those other attempts didn’t originate with you is harmful NIH.

As Walter Isaacson pointed out in his biography of the late Steve Jobs, most people know Apple took the graphic

user interface from Xerox, an act “sometimes described as one of the biggest heists in the chronicles of industry.” According to Isaacson, Jobs was proud of it, and said: “Picasso had a saying—‘good artists copy, great artists steal’—and we have always been shameless about stealing great ideas.”

And therein lies the fix for NIH. Instead of calling it stealing, however, I will simply steal the phrase Procter & Gamble’s open innovation program—Connect & Develop—coined when in 2000 newly appointed CEO A. G. Lafley decreed that fully 50 percent of the company’s innovations must come from outside the organization: *Proudly Found Elsewhere* (PFE). Implementing a PFE strategy is quite literally an opening of the mind to let in, leverage, and recycle the ideas and solutions of others.

7. Self-Censoring

When we reject, deny, stifle, squelch, strike, silence, and otherwise put *ideas of our own* to death, sometimes even before they’re born, it is an act of Self-Censoring. I believe Self-Censoring is the deadliest of the fatal flaws, because in my admittedly subjective opinion, any voluntary shutdown of the imagination is an act of mindlessness, the long-term effects of which eventually kill off our natural curiosity and creativity. Like NIH, Self-Censoring is a special form of Fixation, bordering on mental masochism: we field or create a great idea, we recognize it as such, but deny or kill it anyway. I often think of it as “ideicide.”

Whether it’s because we’re too critical or because we recoil at the impending pain of change and disruption of normalcy, Self-Censoring arises out of fear. That fear shrinks us, mentally. We lose our childlike, uncensored urge to play, explore,

and experiment. We render ourselves mindless. When that happens, we are vulnerable to our other thinking flaws, such as Fixation and Overthinking, which become both judge and jury. Then we slap ourselves on the forehead when someone else “steals” our great idea.

I know for a fact that the elegant solution to the thought challenge exists among the participants and is often suggested in small team discussions far more times than it is selected as the best idea. I distinctly saw one of the bomb techs slap his teammate on the arm and whisper through gritted teeth: “I knew we should just take the tops off!”

Being what I consider the deadliest of the fatal flaws, Self-Censoring requires a potent fix, one which has foundations in the larger and broader concept of mindful awareness, or mindfulness for short. Not to be confused with Asian meditation-based philosophies seeking to suspend thinking, mindfulness is active thinking centered on achieving a higher order of attention, considering different perspectives, and noticing moment-to-moment changes around you. David Rock, in his book *Your Brain At Work*, defines it as “living in the present, being aware of experience as it occurs in real time, and accepting what you see.”

The fix for Self-Censoring is based on a classic tool, introduced by philosopher Adam Smith over a century and a half ago, which he called “The Impartial Spectator.” It is a method for attuning your attention in a way that indeed puts you in the present and gives you a more unbiased perspective, in much the way our attention is focused when we travel to a new place. As visitors we are outsiders looking in: naturally mindful, fully present, noticing details the locals now take for granted. Psychologists refer to it as *self-distancing*, and as

the name implies, the concept is one of distancing yourself from, well, you. Researchers at the University of Michigan recently discovered that the simple practice of replacing the first-person pronoun “I” with either the third-person pronoun “You” or their own name in working through a stressful situation reduced anxiety, rumination, and what athletes call “choking.”³

Thus the seventh fix: *Self-Distancing*.

WINNING THE BRAIN GAME

Fixing the Seven Fatal Flaws of Thinking

FLAW

Leaping
 Fixation
 Overthinking
 Satisficing
 Downgrading
 NIH
(Not Invented Here)
 Self-Censoring

FIX

Framestorming
 Inversion
 Prototesting
 Synthesis
 Jumpstarting
 PFE
(Proudly Found Elsewhere)
 Self-Distancing

Leaping, Fixation, and Overthinking make up Part One of this book, which I’m calling *Misleading*, because of the power these flaws have to lead us astray. Part Two looks at Satisficing and Downgrading, and is labeled *Mediocre*, because these two flaws undercut our best thinking and performance. Part Three covers NIH and Self-Censoring, which

from my observation and experience are not quite as dominant and prevalent as the others, but certainly equally as deadly, if not deadlier, and are properly classified as *Mindless*.

In reality, all seven of these thinking flaws are not truly separate and distinct, but rather interrelated variations on a general tendency to let our lazy brains take over and orchestrate the symphony of thought our minds are capable of. Regardless of playing field, I believe mindful thinking is the new competitive advantage, and the seven fixes are a magic set of tools for achieving it. In my work with professionals and organizations of all kinds, I have found them to be best in class. The seven can all be placed in a larger toolbox properly labeled *Reframing*.

Reframing is the singular response to the question of how to respond to our mantra, which as you may recall is: *what appears to be the problem, isn't; what appears to be the solution, isn't; what appears to be impossible, isn't*.

So what happened in your own problem-solving? If you didn't arrive at the actual and elegant solution as your best idea, my bet is that you got tripped up by one of the seven fatal thinking flaws, just like the LAPD bomb squad. If you did in fact arrive at the elegant solution, you are to be congratulated. Give this book to a friend. You don't need it, and I can't help you.

Back to my story.

As I explained these mental “glitches” to the bomb techs, they began to loosen up and lean in. They chimed in with examples of how these various traps had played out on the job and even in their personal lives. They arrived at the desired conclusion: don't let these traps prevent the new strategy from being anything less than elegant.

In the end, the 12 bomb techs created an altogether new, far more fluid way to respond to bomb threats. They presented the concept to their commanders, and after some field tests and a few months of tweaking, it became the new standard for the Los Angeles Police Department.* Would they have done so without a little off-road thinking activity? Perhaps. But previous attempts hadn't made much headway, and I like to think I helped the team in some small way.

Fast forward to the following year. I'm on the sixth floor of LAPD's Parker Center,† with then-Chief William Bratton and his rather large staff of nearly 20 assistant chiefs, deputy chiefs, and special commanders, including current LAPD Chief Charlie Beck, along with the department psychologist. They liked what had happened with the bomb squad. They want to think through a new strategy using the same approach. I start them off with another thinking challenge.‡ They experience the same kinds of results as the bomb squad. They too learn how to fix the seven fatal thinking flaws, eventually creating a new and elegant top tier operational strategy for enforcing the law in Los Angeles.

Fast-forward to the present day, over 10 years and several hundreds of thought challenges given to many thousands of people after that day in 2005, in which I now have enough evidence, arsenal, and guidance from several world-class thinkers I'm fortunate to count as close advisors that I can now offer you this little crash course in winning the brain game.

* For reasons of security and confidentiality, I am unable to share the beautifully elegant and simple visual created by the LAPD Bomb Squad.

† The old Parker Center, not the new one opened in 2009.

‡ I will share this exercise with you in the next chapter.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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