

Think of It This Way, That Way, or Another Way



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One of my favorite sleep apps encourages insomniac users to say the mantra “Don’t Think” over and over while listening to a distracting noise pattern. I’ve learned that green is my favorite distracting “noise” and “don’t think” is a helpful mantra. At first, the mantra seemed silly. But I’ve come to realize that it makes sense; it’s *thinking* (and over-thinking, re-thinking, etc.) that prevents me from falling asleep quickly. When you’re silently repeating a mantra, there isn’t space for thoughtful thinking.

I’ve been a bit obsessed with thinking lately as I made my way through Monica Guzman’s book, *I Never Thought of it That Way*. Truthfully, it’s taken me longer to finish this terrific book than anything else I’ve read in the past few years. Why? I frequently put the book down to think about what I’ve just read. Maybe that’s what the author intended!?

Guzman’s book skillfully tackles the issue of polarization that leads many of us to see people with whom we disagree as wrong, misguided, and worse. She offers practical ways to get out of the echo-chambers and silos we hide in. I feel inspired after reading the book to stop avoiding difficult conversations with people whose views I believe are in stark contrast to my own.

New Thinking Tips

Be ever curious. Guzman reminds her readers of the power of curiosity, a trait each of us can and should cultivate. As children, we were endlessly curious. If you’ve been close to a little one lately, you’ve no doubt heard questions that begin with Why, How, and What. As we grow older and wiser, we become more confident and less curious. Referring to curiosity, Guzman writes, “At its weakest, it keeps our minds open so they don’t shrink. At its strongest, it whips us unto a frenzy of unstoppable learning.” She continues, “‘What am I missing?’ is not just any question. It’s the question. It’s the doorstop to put down in the hallways of your mind, pathway after pathway, to keep open possibilities from slamming into harmful assumptions.”

To test your curiosity, jot down 3 topics or subjects you consider areas of expertise. After each word, list things about that topic that spark your curiosity. If you are truly an expert, it should be easy to come up with a long list of things you wonder about. See an example, [here](#).

Embrace complexity and foster friction. I’ve always favored simple solutions over complicated ones, one-page policies over wordy treatises. As I read *I Never Thought of It That Way*, I came to understand how my KISS

approach backfires when it comes to controversial and sensitive topics. My overly simplistic view keeps me stuck in my narrow perspective, dousing the potential to learn many different ways to see and understand. Guzman writes, “To bridge divides, we need friction. To make sure that friction sparks the kinds of insights that serve as a check on the warped, narrow view from our silos, we need to put our curiosity to work—minding the gaps between what we know and what we don’t, collecting knowledge that inspires different questions, charging ahead on the most complicated issues, and not letting lazy, easy answers suffice.”

Learn to listen. In his book *The Creative Act: A Way of Being*, music producer Rick Rubin reminds us that the art of listening requires that we suspend disbelief. This is important, but difficult to do! When listening to an explanation from a co-worker, board member or subject matter expert, does your mind wander? If yes, you’re not alone. We’re all guilty of beginning to think about our counter-argument or better example while we pretend to listen. Remind yourself—and practice—to stop doing that. Put aside disagreement and disbelief to make sure you understand what someone is saying. If you think you understand, try: “I think what you said was... is that right, or did I get it wrong?”

Don’t shrink from using words that everyone understands. Adding “enterprise” to risk management or “mitigating” in lieu of more familiar words and phrases like “preparing,” “coping” and “getting ready” won’t increase the likelihood of success. Just the opposite! When colleagues don’t know what you’re referring to, they will likely be confused instead of inspired to act.

In his book *Risk Management for Success*, my colleague Norman Marks invites readers to “reset the language and expectations of management from ‘managing’ or ‘mitigating risk’ to *understanding what might happen* and increasing the *likelihood of success*.” He opines that risk management is about “understanding and acting on what might happen.” The words “managing” and “mitigating” are false beacons in risk management: none of us has the power or prescience to manage possibilities. The best we can hope for is being better prepared.

Accelerate learning by admitting you don’t know. One of the best ways to avoid misunderstanding is to seek clarification. “Could you spell that acronym for me?” “I’m sorry, I’m not familiar with that term! What does it mean?” When we pause to acknowledge that we don’t understand a concept, we open the door to learning. Without that pause, your ignorance or misunderstanding continues.

The next time you feel like you don’t know enough in a risky situation or circumstance, pause to embrace that feeling. It’s the essence of risk! We can never know exactly how possibilities will play out, or how well our coping and readiness strategies will work. But if we ask questions, seek to understand, and challenge our traditional ways of thinking, we’ll be in a great position to embrace the upsides and handle the downsides.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is the executive director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. After two-plus decades in her role, she’s constantly realizing that she was wrong-or confused-about everything related to risk. She invites your similar ‘ah ha’ moments on risk learning at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504.