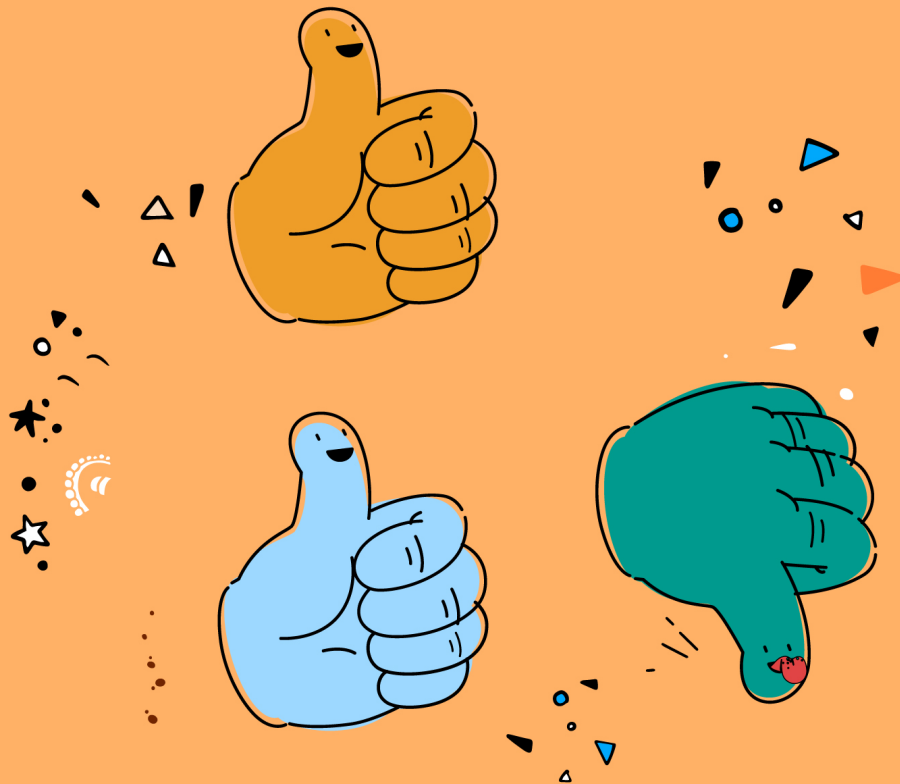


SUMMARY

THINK LIKE A FREAK

STEVEN D. LEVITT
STEPHEN J. DUBNER



Summary of “Think Like a Freak” by Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner

Written by Alyssa Burnette

How challenging convention can help you think
outside the box.



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Introduction

Have you ever seen those motivational slogans that say things like “be a donut in a world of bagels” or “be a flamingo in a flock of pigeons?” Both of these sayings extol the value of originality and being an individual. But that’s often more easily said than done. That’s because human beings often crave conformity. We naturally gravitate toward the comfort of finding safety in numbers. And the protection of a close-knit social group is often awarded only to those who conform and toe the party line. This means that it can often be difficult to challenge convention and take the necessary steps to truly become your own person. But the author believes that taking that plunge is critical for improving your quality of life. And over the course of this summary, we’re going to learn how you can do that and why it will benefit you.



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What Does it Really Mean to Think Like a Freak?

Have you ever found yourself altering your beliefs to align with those of your friends? For example, maybe your friends care a great deal about the environment. (And that's a really awesome thing!) They might be vegan or vegetarian and they might go out of their way to reduce their personal environmental impact. This might mean that they take care to invest in reusable products or purchase locally and ethically sourced produce. They might make a point of taking the bus instead of driving a car. They might purchase clothes only from sustainable retailers or boycott fast fashion. And all of these things are really great! In fact, it's something everyone should do. But what if your friends were misguided in their information? What if they fully believed they were doing the right thing and you had information to prove that it was wrong?

For example, what if they believed that a certain shop was ethical and sustainable, but you had seen reports indicating that the business was lying about its values and practices? Would you rush to tell your friends what you had learned? Or would you keep your mouth shut and allow them to blindly continue supporting a problematic establishment? Now, this is a relatively innocent and uncontroversial example, so your decision might not be that hard. Presumably, your friends are kind, decent people who trust you and want to do the right thing. So, if you talk to them tactfully and provide evidence to support your statements, it's highly likely that the conversation will go well and no one will get upset. But what if you're faced with a more controversial topic? What if you have a moral imperative to provide a friend with some information that challenges their strongly-held social or political beliefs?

In this case, it would certainly be easier to toe the party line and go along with what everyone around you believes. Indeed, embracing convention and refusing to challenge the status quo often sounds like the best solution because it's the path of least resistance. But that doesn't mean it's the best-- or even the right-- thing to do. In fact, this line of thinking is in direct opposition to the principles of "thinking like a freak." But what does it

mean to think like a freak? And why do you need to do it? Well, the author argues that thinking like a freak is important because, for starters, it allows you to make better decisions. This can clearly be seen in the contrast between conventional wisdom and thinking outside the box. For example, if you go along with what everyone around you is thinking, you might achieve comfort and conformity. But you won't necessarily make the right decision for yourself or others.

By contrast, if you choose to think critically and form your own opinions based on sound evidence and statistics, you might not be very popular, but you will be doing the right thing. Now, that doesn't mean that you have to be pedantic about everything or that you have to be like Spock from Star Trek. You don't have to be a know-it-all or a killjoy and you don't have to rely solely on statistics in place of emotions. But it does mean that you should be able to think for yourself instead of blindly following the crowd. It means that your top priority should be to ask, "Is this true? Is this right?" rather than "Do my friends agree with this?" Realigning your priorities might not make you very popular. It might lead to some disagreements with your friends. You might look weird for challenging the commonly accepted convention. But when you learn to think like a freak, you'll find that you're more likely to make the right decisions, rely on sound information, and feel good about the choices you're making. And at the end of the day, no matter what happens, you'll know that you're the sort of person who can think for themselves. Isn't that really what's most important?



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“I Don’t Know” is an Acceptable Answer

When you were a kid, did you ever feel pressured to know the answer about something when you really didn’t know? Did an adult authority figure ever tell you that “I don’t know” isn’t an acceptable answer?” Most people have had this experience and it instilled in us an immense pressure and fear of failure. So, what happened? We learned to make up answers even when we knew we were lying. We learned to pretend we had it all figured out, if for no other reason than to avoid looking stupid. We learned that looking stupid was worse than admitting we didn’t know something. And of course, those priorities are massively out of whack! (Not to mention completely untrue!) Because, contrary to the misguided teachings of many adults, “I don’t know” is absolutely an acceptable answer. In fact, it’s one we need to practice saying more often!

Why? To answer that question, just think about all the times you’ve pretended you knew something when you didn’t. For most of us, this occurs even in extremely innocent contexts, like pretending you know the name of a rapper or YouTuber when you’ve never heard of them. You might pretend you heard someone when you didn’t quite understand what they said. You might laugh along as if you understood a joke when you didn’t. All of these things are harmless and innocent; it’s highly unlikely that anyone will be hurt or offended by your lies in these scenarios. But pretending you know something when you don’t can cause you a significant amount of stress. In fact, in some cases, it can even lead to grave misunderstandings and cause a great deal of offense.

For example, let’s imagine that a friend comes to you with a bit of juicy gossip. They ask if you heard the rumor about someone. You don’t want to appear ignorant, disinterested, or out of the loop, so you say yes. And even though you don’t know the facts of the story, you go along with what they’re saying. Perhaps you even accept their version as a fact and pass the story along to someone else. But what if you didn’t know both sides of the story? What if your friend was biased or similarly misinformed? What if it turns

out that the rumor was both malicious and unfounded? In this case, you've now spread hurtful misinformation to others. Not only have you damaged someone else's reputation, you've harmed your own. And all because you didn't really know what you were talking about.

But if this risk is so prevalent and so potentially harmful, why do we continue to do it? Why can't we simply say, "Sorry, I don't really know enough about that to comment on it?" The simple truth is that, often, we're just afraid of looking stupid. We've spent a significant portion of our lives being programmed to fear failure and stupidity and so we don't want to admit that we just don't know. But this is yet another convention and challenging that is part of thinking like a freak. So, that's why the authors challenge you to get comfortable with saying, "I don't know!" Get comfortable with admitting that you're not familiar with something or that you don't have all the answers. Get comfortable withholding your opinions or judgements until you have all the facts. We promise it won't hurt you! In fact, it will actually improve your quality of life.

Here's how: nobody likes a know-it-all, right? Nobody likes the people who always have to be the smartest person in the room or those who clearly enjoy hearing the sound of their own voices. And as a result, people tend to dismiss what they have to say. Why? Because people don't respect them. If you're constantly engaged in verbal vomit, regurgitating your opinions onto others just to feel included, people will pick up on that pretty quickly. They'll figure out that you don't have anything original to contribute and that you just like to talk a lot. Therefore your words are unlikely to carry a lot of weight. By contrast, if you're slower to deliver your opinions and you can back up what you say with statistics and facts, people are more inclined to listen to you. They'll know that your words hold value because you wait until you actually know what you're talking about. And they'll respect you for admitting that sometimes you don't know enough to be part of the conversation.

As we mentioned in the previous chapter, following this strategy might not make you very popular. And at first, you might feel silly because this is such

a massive breach of convention. But it's valuable because it's so rare and people will recognize that. So, get comfortable admitting that you don't know something, and give yourself the freedom to be wrong. Because in doing so, you'll also give yourself the freedom to learn, explore, and get it right. And that's one of the best parts of thinking like a freak!



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What Does it Really Mean to “Think Outside the Box?”

By now, this term has come up quite a lot in this book. So, it only seems fitting that we should take a moment and explore what it really means. For the sake of simplicity, we'll define the box as “convention” or any school of thought that involves blindly following the crowd. Therefore, thinking inside the box is what happens when you embrace a certain ideology because “that’s the way we’ve always done things” or “that’s what normal people do.” Both of these arguments are bandied about any time anyone tries to challenge the status quo. And in far too many cases, they succeed in ensnaring creative minds who want to shake things up. But that’s exactly why it’s vital to think outside the box!

So, what does that really mean in practice? Well, as we’ve seen through the previous chapters, thinking outside the box typically means rejecting conventional arguments in favor of thinking critically and forming your own opinions. But it also means literally approaching problems in a different way. For example, when we think about massive global problems like war, hunger, poverty, or crime, it’s easy to oversimplify the problem. It’s easy to say something like, “Wars are started because of prejudice” or “There’s too much violence in the world!” But are those really the root causes of the problem?

If you applied critical thinking to your problem-solving exercises, you might find that thinking outside the box can help you arrive at a more holistic solution. For example, you might look at statistics and/or firsthand accounts from wartorn areas and learn that many wars are started unnecessarily by countries like the United States who are pillaging the oil resources in other, developing countries. Similarly, some wars are started because of greed or pride or because a disenfranchised community has launched a desperate power grab in the hopes of reclaiming the resources they need. When you think like a freak and apply critical thinking, you’ll find that your search for answers makes things both more complicated and

very simple. That's because unpacking a big problem will always reveal the additional problems that created it. But the good news is that once you have those answers, you can begin working on a truly helpful solution. And that can be said of any problem from world peace to a minor argument with your neighbor!



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Final Summary

We typically use the word “freak” to denote things that are so out of the ordinary, they’re alarming. And the truth is, when you start thinking like a freak, some people will probably be weirded out! But that’s not because you’re doing anything wrong or disturbing. Rather, it simply means that you’re daring to challenge conventional wisdom and think outside the box. And when you challenge the comfortable status quo that most people have grown used to, some people will definitely be a little uncomfortable. But that’s okay because thinking like a freak will ultimately be a much better decision!

Thinking like a freak simply means that you’re committed to engaging with all the facts and statistics before you decide on your opinion. Rather than blindly following someone else’s beliefs because you like them or want to win their approval, thinking like a freak means that you prioritize what’s right and true. Doing so will help you to cultivate creative problem-solving strategies and help you make healthy life choices. It will also help you to get comfortable with admitting that you don’t know something. And in doing so, you’ll give yourself the freedom to learn, grow, and explore new schools of thought.



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