SUMMARY

BY ALYSSA BURNETTE

SUPER THINKING

BY GABRIEL WEINBERG AND LAUREN MCCANN

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Summary of “Super Thinking” by Gabriel Weinberg and Lauren McCann

Written by Alyssa Burnette

How to maximize your mental ability.

Introduction

Have you ever thought about thinking as a superpower? Probably not, right? Instead, when we think of superpowers, we think of things like invisibility, flight, or x-ray vision. But the human mind is actually the most powerful computer in the world! And that's why it's important to use your mind to its full potential. But how can you do that? The authors believe that you can cultivate "super thinking" by drawing insights from multiple sources of wisdom. And by blending academic knowledge with what the authors call "worldly wisdom," you can curate a wealth of knowledge that will be applicable in everyday life. So, over the course of this summary, we'll explore the value of learning things that you can actually use and why that's more important than filling your brain with facts. We'll learn why the right balance of practical knowledge and academic wisdom can make you smarter and more successful. And, most importantly, we'll learn how all of these things add up to constitute "super thinking."

How Super Mental Models Can Help

How do you make decisions? Have you ever really stopped to think about that? Human beings make thousands of decisions on a daily basis, but we often neglect to consider the processes that lead us to those conclusions. At the core, they usually boil down to a matter of priorities. For example, let's say that I have 30 minutes to get from my house to my university. 20 of those minutes will be spent driving to campus. The remaining ten will be used in parking, getting to the right building, and finding my classroom so I can be present at the time the class starts. But what if, on my way to class, I decide to take time to stop at the Dunkin Donuts on my way? Do I have time to stop at Dunkin? Almost definitely not. In fact, one thing is fairly certain: if I stop at Dunkin Donuts, I will be late for class. A simple analysis of the amount of time I have would lead to this conclusion. So, if I decide to stop anyway, that means that on this particular morning, I value iced coffee more than punctuality. And, in all honesty, many of us probably do!

But we probably don't go through that entire thought process and ask ourselves, "Do I really value iced coffee more than punctuality this morning?" Instead, we're more likely to create a mental picture of the situation that helps us envision the consequences we might face. For example, as we imagine how delicious that iced coffee would taste, we might also imagine ourselves being late for class and the potential stress that might induce. We might also consider the embarrassment and the possibility of our class grades being marked down. Likewise, we might imagine an alternate scenario in which we arrive for class on time, but without the iced coffee. So, in the end, our decision would be the result of a quick review of those mental images and a conclusion about which scenario we would prefer.

But of course, sometimes we get things wrong. We can't anticipate every eventuality and this means that we often wind up in unexpectedly sticky situations. For example, maybe you predicted that it would only take about 5 minutes to get your coffee and get back on the road. Based on that

prediction, you assumed that you might only be 2-5 minutes late for class and that this would be manageable. But what if there is a massive line at Dunkin Donuts? What if you wind up sandwiched between 15 angry cars, with no choice but to stay trapped in the line until you can get your coffee and leave? By the time you finally get your coffee and get back on the road, your coffee run has taken 30 minutes instead of the anticipated 5. And now you've missed half the class period! It would be too embarrassing to try to go now, so you must struggle with a new decision: do you go anyway and face the shame? Or do you go home and take the absence, knowing that it will likely be detracted from your course grade?

This is a relatively innocent example that is unlikely to cause an overwhelming amount of stress or lasting consequences. However, it might still cause you to have an anxiety attack or an unduly low grade in that class. But even if this is a small-scale example, the sad truth is that this decision-making process still applies on a much bigger scale. Just as you might think that a quick coffee run won't derail your trip too much, it's also easy to think that a brief fling with a co-worker won't derail your marriage. But as we saw from this example, in both cases, it's all too easy to miscalculate and regret it. And that's why the authors posit that there must be an easier way to make decisions! That's where "super thinking" comes in. "Super thinking" works by replacing our existing mental models with "super models" that are more helpful and more effective. And in the next chapter, we'll explore what they are and how they work!

Always Invert the Problem

Mathematicians know a lot about solving problems. It's kind of their whole thing! But people often assume that solutions to mathematical problems don't apply in the real world. However, the authors argue that the reality is the opposite! For example, the author cites the work of the German mathematician Carl Jacobi, whose lifelong solution was to "invert the problem." If this isn't a common phrase you use everyday, to invert something is to "turn it inside out or upside down." So, for practical problem-solving, that means that you should approach your problem by turning it inside out or upside down! In other words, change how you're looking at your problem. In most cases, you'll find that a simple shift in perspective makes the answer appear obvious!

So, if we were to apply this logic to the problem of making good decisions, how would you define your objective? Would you say the goal is to make good decisions? To "win" by finding the right solution? Or would you say that your goal is to avoid doing dumb stuff? The latter might sound overly simplistic, but the author argues that it's actually a perfect example of inverting the problem! If you reframe your thinking so that your goal is to avoid doing dumb stuff, then you also change the way you approach decision-making. It encourages you to be conscious and intentional about how you make decisions rather than simply going with the first or easiest mental picture you can think of. And when you eliminate these simple logical errors from your life, it's no surprise: you'll find that you're doing less dumb stuff!

For example, the Dunkin Donuts example we referenced in the previous chapter was totally avoidable! Of course you didn't expect that there would be a massive line, but that's precisely the point. No matter how much you wanted that iced coffee, the truth is that making yourself late to class (even by five minutes) is a pretty dumb choice. And once you put yourself in that position, you run the risk of encountering additional risks that you didn't foresee. So, if your goal is to avoid doing dumb stuff, you would simply plan

better! Either leave the house earlier so you have time to get coffee and get to class on time or simply skip the coffee run. Those are the smart choices in that scenario and you can easily identify smarter solutions if you invert the problem.

The Simplest Answer is Often the Right One

When faced with a situation that puzzles you, do you often explore multiple possibilities that explain why that event could have happened? Do you find that your explanations often get more and more complicated? If your answer is yes, you're not alone; many of us entangle ourselves in a complicated web as we try to explain the actions and motivations of other people. But as you've probably noticed, these convoluted theories don't always help us find the answers. In fact, sometimes they just make things worse! For example, let's say that you tagged a friend in a funny meme on Facebook. You thought it would make her laugh. But she never reacts to that meme or acknowledges it at all. However, despite that lack of reaction, she has continued to post on Facebook and like other people's things. You begin to get a little anxious. Did she hate the meme? Did she find it offensive? Maybe it was upsetting to her for reasons you didn't know. Maybe she's mad at you.

You let your insecurities build until you finally give in and ask her about it as casually as you can. And once you've asked her, you discover that the answer was much simpler than anything you thought of! Instead of being upset or offended, she had simply checked the notification at a red light and needed to start moving again before she could react. She had actually loved the meme-- she just got busy and forgot about it! This answer is so simple, but it's often the last possibility to come to our minds. And that's why the authors advise us to remember the logic of Ockham's Razor: the philosophical principle which posits that the simplest answer is usually the most likely one. If we applied this principle to many areas of our lives, the authors believe that we could reduce a lot of stress. And this is especially true when it comes to dating!

Finding lasting love has always been tricky, but the pressures of the modern world have introduced new complexities. And to make matters worse, we're drowning in an overabundance of choice! If you've ever tested the waters of dating apps, then you know just how true this is. There are dating apps for

people who like cats, for people who are Christians, for people who are farmers. There are apps for gay people, apps for straight people, and apps for people who just want to hook up. There are apps that allow you to filter by age, location, and physical characteristics. It's overwhelming! And indeed, many people allow this surplus of choices to go to their heads. With so many options to choose from, many people conclude that they should take advantage of the opportunity to be as picky as possible. So, they filter their romantic prospects by superficial characteristics that shouldn't matter, like someone's taste in music, eye color, and proximity to the local book store.

The truth, of course, is that these characteristics only complicate your options! And although it might seem like you're filtering for compatibility, these restrictions might not bring you closer to your soul mate at all! You might think that your ideal partner is someone who shares all your interests and tastes, but in reality, your true love might be a visiting executive who's flown in for a business trip. She's not local to your area at all and she hates your favorite music and your favorite book store. But she makes you laugh and she feels like home. And in the end, that's what matters! So, wherever possible, remember that the simplest explanation is often the right one.

As you can see from these examples, they contain elements of academic or scientific principles (like Ockham's Razor) but they also show you how to apply this knowledge in real life. The ability to apply what you've learned in real-life situations is invaluable because without it, your knowledge is useless. You may have seen this firsthand if you've ever met anyone who was incredibly intelligent but lacked common sense. Although that person might have been able to solve math equations with the skill of Einstein, their lack of worldly wisdom would have caused them to struggle in life. And that's where super thinking comes in! Super thinking enables you to bridge the gap between what you learn in books and what you need to apply it in real life. Once you're able to apply these intellectual principles in your daily routine, you'll find that your life gets easier. And that's what makes super thinking so super!

Final Summary

Life can get pretty complicated. But sometimes we unintentionally make our lives harder for ourselves. We do it in little ways, like using the wrong decision-making skills, by drowning ourselves in complicated theories, and approaching problems in the wrong way. But the authors believe that you can correct these mistakes by replacing them with some super mental models that will cultivate “super thinking!” Super thinking is an updated mental model that helps you to simplify your life by cultivating critical thinking skills.

In practice, this means improving your decision-making skills, learning to invert the problem, and removing stress from your life by seeking simple explanations. Although these solutions might sound overly simplistic, the reality is that they require sophisticated shifts in your perspective. And this shift in perspective ultimately leads to creative problem-solving, superior critical thinking skills, and reduced anxiety. Sounds pretty super, right?