

THE CONTRARIAN HANDBOOK

8 Principles for
Innovating Your Thinking

Contrarian /noun/.

A person who takes up a contrary position, especially a position opposed to the majority view, regardless of how unpopular it may be.

Dick Fosbury was a contrarian. You may not have heard of him, but if you've ever watched an Olympic high jump event, you've seen his technique in action. In the 1968 summer olympics, Fosbury dazzled the world by flipping the high jump script. Instead of jumping face first parallel to the bar like everyone had done before him, he jumped back first.

His approach at first invited ridicule. One newspaper called him the "world's laziest high jumper." But he proved his critics wrong by taking home the gold medal—by doing the exact opposite of what everyone else was doing.

The Fosburys of the world are a rare breed. We're genetically programmed to follow the herd. Thousands of years ago, conformity to our tribe was essential to our survival. If you didn't conform, you'd be ostracized, rejected, or worse, left for dead.

Not anymore. Continued success in the modern world requires continued innovation. The ability to disrupt established methods and find new ways of looking at old ideas is one of the most sought-after qualifications in all fields.

It's a super power that allows you to be right when others are wrong.

Yet this super power is becoming increasingly rare. We've been brainwashed from an early age to toe the line, use # 2 pencils, and color between the lines.

Good boy. Good girl.

But here's the hard truth.

You can't get ahead if you're simply following.

The status quo can be a straitjacket. It can hide nuances and obscure possibilities.

Escaping the status quo requires a fundamental rewiring of our brain and a reprogramming of our approach to life.

This isn't just a "think different" platitude. Thinking is one thing, but doing or saying the opposite of everyone else is something else. Fosbury didn't just think about jumping differently than his competitors. He did it. He challenged the status quo and found a better method.

When you learn how to challenge the status quo, you won't just change the way you view the world.

You'll be empowered to change the world itself.

But being a contrarian is easier said than done. How do you break the pattern? How do you see the holes in the status quo? How do you invent the Fosbury flop in your own field?

Here are eight fundamental principles to get you started.

[01]

ASK A LOT OF QUESTIONS.

As a law professor, I tell my students that in law, as in life, questions are far more important than the answers.

Questions jolt the status quo. They reveal possibilities not considered.

It's no wonder that innovators ask a lot more questions, and to a lot more people, than the rest of us. Even if the opinion giver is a self-proclaimed expert, innovators push and prod to challenge conventional wisdom and get a deeper understanding of the topic.

“How does it work?”

“Why does it have to be that way?”

“Why can't we adopt this alternative?”

“What facts did you rely on? How did you obtain those facts?”

Questions are underrated in our conformist society. We're reluctant to raise our hand and ask a question because we're afraid of sounding dumb or acknowledging ignorance. We've mastered the art of pretending to know the answers, smiling, nodding, and bluffing our way.

But this attitude comes with a cost. The failure to change the status quo is almost always due to fear or a historical lack of someone raising their hand and asking “Why not?”

[02]

CHANNEL YOUR INNER SIX-YEAR-OLD.

Children are masters at ignoring conventional wisdom.

Before they hit their teens, they go about their day blissfully ignorant of what others think of them.

They don't take things for granted. They ask questions and follow-up questions that annoy adults who believe everything important has been settled already.

They experiment. They try, fail, and try again. They validate Herbert Simon's principle that one finds limits by pushing them.

No, I'm not suggesting that you act like a six-year-old, stick your tongue on the ski lift, and see what happens.

Rather, I'm suggesting that you should bring more childlike curiosity to your world.

The Japanese call this *shoshin* or beginner's mind. As Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki explains, "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities. In the expert's mind there are few."

When you remain open to the possibility that there is no good reason for the status quo, you'll be in a better position to change it.

[03]

SAY “I DON’T KNOW” MORE OFTEN

As Stoic philosopher Epictetus put it, “it is impossible to learn that which one thinks one already knows.”

The pretense of knowledge puts on our blinders, closes our ears, and shuts off incoming educational signals from outside sources. We march on pretending to know what we think we know, oblivious to glaring facts that contradict our ironclad beliefs.

When you pretend to know the answer to a question, you not only fool other people, but more importantly, you fool yourself. And as physicist and Nobel laureate Richard Feynman put it, “you are the easiest person to fool.”

Something beautiful happens when you candidly acknowledge that you don’t know. Your mind opens up and your ears perk up. It’s the first step to developing shoshin—an attitude that eschews prior judgments with fixed points of view and remains eager in anticipation of possibilities to learn and grow.

[04]

EXPLORE BAD IDEAS.

Is this idea really bad? Who said so? Why is it bad? Why won't it work?

Consider these historical examples of “bad ideas”:

“There is not the slightest indication that nuclear energy will ever be obtainable. It would mean that the atom would have to be shattered at will.” Albert Einstein, 1932

“This ‘telephone’ has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us.” Western Union internal memo, 1876

“Rail travel at high speed is not possible because passengers, unable to breathe, would die of asphyxia.” Dr. Dionysys Larder, professor of Natural Philosophy and Astronomy, 1793-1859

When you dig deeper on a seemingly bad idea, you may be surprised to find gems lurking underneath the surface.

An ostensibly bad idea may also be reframed and reenvisioned to become great.

[05]

STRESS TEST ALL OPINIONS, INCLUDING YOURS.

Ask others, “What fact would change your opinion?”

If the answer is “No fact will change my opinion,” you are not in a conversation worth continuing.

A person who is unwilling to change his or her mind even with an underlying change in the facts is, by definition, a fundamentalist. And fundamentalists are notoriously bad at changing the status quo.

Ask yourself the same question, “What fact would change one of my strongly-held opinions?”

Marc Andreessen has a saying that I love: “Strong beliefs, loosely held.” Strongly believe in an idea, but be willing to change your opinion if the facts show otherwise.

To stress test your opinions, befriend people who disagree with you.

We live in an echo chamber. We friend people like us on Facebook. We follow people like us on Twitter. We read the news outlets that are on the same political frequency as us.

Confirmation bias exacerbates this problem. We interpret facts to confirm our existing beliefs. We filter out the opinions and arguments on the other side. As a result, our opinions solidify. It becomes increasingly harder to disrupt existing patterns of thinking.

Expose yourself to environments where your opinions can be challenged.

Be brave to speak up when you know others will disagree with you.

But above all, welcome disagreement, as uncomfortable and awkward as it might be.

[06]

LEARN TO DANCE WITH CRITICISM.

When you challenge the status quo, you will get called out by the conformists.

The conformists don't want you to raise your hand, take on a challenging assignment, or give a presentation. They want you to play it safe.

If you had any doubts about society's obsession with the status quo, take a look at all these idioms dedicated to avoiding change. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." "Don't rock the boat." "Don't change horses in the middle of the stream." "Go with the devil you know."

Recall that the Fosbury flop initially invited ridicule, without one newspaper calling Dick Fosbury the "world's laziest high jumper."

If you're out to disrupt the status quo, you must learn to dance with the fear of criticism. To be sure, pay attention to the generous feedback intended to improve your work. But ignore the conformist feedback that simply tells you, "Go back to coloring between the lines."

Most of all, brace yourself. Be prepared to be misunderstood, sometimes for a long time. The rewards are well worth it.

[07]

PAY ATTENTION TO THINGS THAT DON'T MAKE SENSE.

Pay attention to things that don't make sense.

Don't move on. Dig deeper.

If something sounds fishy, it probably is.



EMBRACE FAILURE.

Sara Blakely was selling fax machines door-to-door before she became the world's youngest self-made female billionaire.

When she was growing up, Sara's father would ask her and her brother the same question over dinner every week.

What have you failed at this week?

If Sara didn't have an answer, her father would be disappointed.

Compare this to the typical exchange that takes place over a family dinner.

Julie, what did you learn in school this week?

Joe got an A on his exam! We're so proud of you.

Clarence made the football team. He's an NFL star in the making.

These exchanges only reinforce what is painfully obvious.

Achievements are good. Failures are bad.

The fear of failure is in our genetic programming. Centuries ago, failure meant getting eaten alive by a lion.

Not any more. As best-selling author Seth Godin explained in [my interview with him](#), "Today's failure merely means shame, or a conflict or a restart. You're unlikely to die from it."

As uncomfortable as it is, failure is a prerequisite to successfully challenging the status quo.

In asking his children what they failed at each week, Sara's father gave them the breathing room to tackle interesting problems, to question established wisdom, and yes, to fail. To him, not trying was far more disappointing than failure itself.

Behind every canvas unpainted, every goal unattempted, every business unlaunched, every book unwritten, every song unsung is the looming fear of failure.

This is not an endorsement of failure for the sake of failure. Failure, by itself, isn't enough. You must reflect on it, learn from it, and improve on your next attempt.

Hence the review question: What have you failed at this week?

If you don't have a good answer to this, you're not trying hard enough.

Don't let these principles become meaningless inspirational wall posters that you buy from Sky-mall.

They only work if you commit to living by them.

The good news is, you're not alone. If you joined my community and signed up for the Weekly Contrarian, you'll be running in the same direction as like-minded people.

If you haven't signed up yet, head over to [this link](#).

Each Thursday, I'll visit you in your inbox to challenge conventional wisdom, celebrate unpopular opinions, and change the way you look at the world. You'll learn from famous contrarians who excelled in life precisely because they refused to sing the same tune as the crowd.

Until then,

Oran Varol