The New Leadership Mindset

Mindfulness and neuroplasticity are the foundations of a growth mindset, the essential prerequisites for leaders in today’s fast-changing world.

We live in an incredible time. More change in the next 10 years than in the last 250 years.

New technologies are transforming the ways in which we live and work. Technologies enable incredible change. It is how we unlock their potential that matters.

Digital platforms connecting buyers and sellers in new ways, blockchain having the potential to transform relationships and trust, 3d printing having the potential to transform value chains to deliver anything personalised and on-demand, AI and robotics giving us the capabilities to be superhuman in our minds and bodies.

These are just some of the fantastic new capabilities that enable us to innovate beyond what we can even imagine today. The future isn’t like the future used to be. We cannot just evolve or extrapolate the past. Today’s future is discontinuous, disruptive, different.

It is imagination that will move us forwards ... unlocking the technological possibilities, applying them to real problems and opportunities, to drive innovation and growth in every industry, in every part of our lives.

Imagine a world where you press “print” to get the dress of your dreams, the food of your fantasies, or the spare parts for your car. Instantly, personalised and on demand. Think then what does that mean if we don’t need the huge scale of manufacturing plants, warehousing and transportation. Maybe we will even subscribe to the IP catalogues of brands, rather than buy standard products, in the ways we currently subscribe to Netflix.

This requires leaders to think and act, to lead and manage, in new ways.

Mindfulness and the ambidextrous leader

In 1940 Alvin Toffler said “We need to learn to think in new ways to cope, let alone thrive in this world of chaotic complexity and ever changing rules.”
“Mindfulness” is a theme of Buddhist tradition, and means being present to what is going on around you, rather than the just being focused on your own little world. Meditation, a quieting the mind, is probably the best-known way to do this. “Presencing” (or ‘becoming one with one’s deepest source of future potential” according to Otto Scharmer) and “action inquiry” (doing the task, and evaluating how you are doing it at the same time, as developed by Bill Torbert) are approaches used by the likes of Microsoft and Eli Lilly.

Mindfulness it is about conditioning people to think better – more focus, clarity, creativity and compassion. It is about having a heightened level of attention on what matters, learning not to be distracted by relatively trivial things, embracing ideas from more diverse sources, and doing it in a way that has compassion for people and communities.

System thinking becomes essential. Issues like improving sustainability are much more complex, than transactional challenges like launching a new product. System challenges are a “spaghetti” of causes and effects, with every aspects have implications for many others. In an interconnected world, leaders need to think how to think, not just think. I worked with Mastercard to create an incredibly useful model for decision making – finding new opportunities, testing new ideas, optimizing current performance. Similarly, innovators like Novo Nordisk develop multi-million dollar dynamic system models to simulate cause and effects.

As consumers become more intelligent and empowered, as business becomes more collaborative and complex, and as success is driven by thinking rather than just doing, the business brain matters more.

First let's take a simplified understanding of the brain. There are four characteristics that matter most

- **Analytical.** This part seeks data and turns it into patterns, at out of which comes logical interpretations.

- **Expressive.** This part likes stories and visualisation, it is about engagement and inspiration.

- **Curious.** This part likes to explore and investigate, it is seeks discovery and sense making.

- **Sensual.** This part is about aesthetics and feelings, it is how we appreciate beauty, design and humanity.

Winning in a changing world requires "ambidextrous" minds that can switch back and forth between the two strategies, using the different parts of the brain. In simple terms, we use the left (logic and structure) and right (intuition and emotion) sides of our frontal cortex to achieve this. The interesting question is whether entrepreneur's brains are wired differently.

Research by IE Business School shows that managers prefer the left side, whilst entrepreneurs use both. When faced with a new problem or opportunity, entrepreneurs tend to using “think bigger” techniques to evaluate a problem more simply and quickly, intuitive as much as logical, but then begin to focus in more deeply, once they have embraced the problem. Non-entrepreneurs, or typical corporate managers, tend to spend more time considering an opportunity, slower and more cautious. This may be of course, be because of how they have been conditioned to behave.
Entrepreneurs are likely to enjoy riding speedboats more than supertankers, to build on our early analogy. Their way of thinking is more likely to embrace new opportunities faster. Whilst you could argue the rigour of the corporate manager results in less risk, it is more likely that he will struggle to embrace new rules and paradigms within his existing structures, and therefore far greater risk that he will reject many of the best new opportunities. The implication for strategy and innovation is to keep evaluation broad and simple, then get into the detail once you have a focus, once you have found the space in which you want to be special.

**Neuroplasticity and the pursuit of growth**

Topfler also famously said "The future belongs to adaptive learners and ambiguity surfers"

Dr Tara Swart is the world's leading expert in neuroplasticity. “The reality is that our brains don’t decline, they just become more malleable. They are shaped by how we use them, but we can equally proactively shape them to help us be better”.

Kaleidoscope thinking, pattern recognition and scenario planning, reframing ideas and brands in different contexts, innovating through creative fusions, and being able to resonate with different audiences, are examples of the gamechangers need to think differently. Swart argues that “the ability to learn, unlearn and relearn demands that we constantly re-shape our brains”.

The brain grows until people are around 25 years old, rather than around 18 as we used to think. From 25 to 65 it has plasticity, before starting to decline in old age.

Swart says “The brain works in three dimensions – horizontal (left and right), vertical (body and brain), and across (gender and culture). The agile mind can work on both sides of each of these dimensions”

Innovators adopt a “growth” rather than “fixed” mindset:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fixed mindset</th>
<th>Growth mindset</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seeks perfection</td>
<td>Seeks opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of mistakes</td>
<td>Fear of missing out</td>
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<tr>
<td>Failure is painful</td>
<td>Failure is adventure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Innovation is incremental</td>
<td>Innovation is transformational</td>
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<tr>
<td>Most managers</td>
<td>Gamechanger leaders</td>
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Making the shift requires a more agile mind. The emerging science of “neuroplasticity” explains how this can be achieved.

Swart says “Innovators are constantly learning, and therefore constantly sculpting their own brains”. They do this through explicit learning (left brain) such as reading and formal education, and by implicit learning (right brain) through real experiences, successes and failures.

Changing your brain means understanding which aspects to stimulate and how to achieve this. The starting point is keeping your brain fit. This is both a physical and mental challenge. Physically it’s more about glucose, more water, more exercise to deliver more oxygen and more sleep. “Don’t drink alcohol or use digital media within one hour of going to sleep” warns
Swart in all seriousness. Mentally it’s about staying curious, having diverse interests and learning. Learning a new language is one of the best ways.

A healthy brain is more active, more connected. The bundles of neurofibres which help us to make sense of the bigger picture, and think in bigger, faster ways. Women have a natural advantage in this, born with 4 times more connective tissue than men. As a business leader we face a barrage of knowledge, be it endless spreadsheets of data, or infinite sources of information. The challenge is not about how much we can process, but how we synthesise and apply it to our worlds, how well we make the connections.

Organisational ways to encourage this more agile mindset in business include rapid prototyping (fail fast and often), disruptive innovation, design thinking, and resource limiting. “Cognitive stimulation is the key. Trying new and different things because learning keeps your brain active. Fluidity matters. Neurones that fire together, wire together”. Or most simply, use it or lose it.

**Time to embrace your Musk Mindset**

Time to embrace your Musk mindset … Unlock your Einstein dreams and Picasso passion … Embrace your Mandela courage and Ghandi spirit. Be more curious, be more intuitive, be more human. Ask more questions. Don’t be afraid to have audacious ideas, to challenge the old models of success, and turn future ambitions into practical profitable reality.

How else did Zespri reinvent the Chinese gooseberry as the kiwi fruit? How else will SpaceX reach Mars by 2025? How else did Netflix came to be, or NuTonomy, or Nespresso, or Nyx?

This is why 23andMe’s Anne Wojicki wont give up in her quest to make DNA analysis available to everyone, and to ultimately find a cure for cancer. And it’s why Jack Ma didn’t give up as he rose from $1000-per year English teacher to technological royalty.

The secret is the growth mindset.

To realise that the future is malleable. So we need to grab hold of it, and shape it in our own vision. To our advantage.

This is what “gamechanger” leaders do.

Are you ready?

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*This is an extract from “Gamechangers" by Peter Fisk © Peter Fisk 2017*

Peter Fisk is a global thought leader on growth, innovation and leadership. He is founder of GeniusWorks, a business innovation company, based in London; Professor of strategy, innovation and marketing at IE Business School in Madrid; and Thinkers50 Global Director.

From nuclear physics to managing the Concorde brand, he has 35 years of practical business experience, working with business leaders in over 300 companies and 55 countries. He is author of 7 bestselling books, including the most recent, “Gamechangers”.

More at www.theGeniusWorks.com