

Why we should all say 'I don't know' more often than we do

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By Adam Grant

Are you sure it is a bad idea to quit a job? In *Think Like a Freak*, Stephen J. Dubner and [Steven D. Levitt](#) argue that we are often overly confident about what we think we know, and they recommend a way to think differently to solve problems and make decisions. In this interview, Dubner discusses why we should say, "I don't know" much more often than we do:

What motivated you to write *Think Like a Freak*?

We get a lot of emails from people. Of all the things that the digital revolution has produced, one of the coolest is that you can now contact people who write books that you read. We hear from people with all these problems and questions and queries about the way the world works. We couldn't answer them all. To answer one email could take months of research. Rather than trying and failing to answer a shard of those questions, we thought, "What if we could write a book that deputises the entire world or whoever wants to think like we do?" We wanted to develop a set of rules, a blueprint for problem solving. It's not always problem solving, but that's mostly what we try to do.

Grant: Where did the "I don't know" insight come from?

Dubner: Steve Levitt, my co-author, lives in the world of academia. I've been a journalist for my whole adult life. Both of us wouldn't have a job if we pretended we knew all the answers. But there are huge quadrants of modern society where people are constantly pretending they know the answer to a question or the solution to a problem. There's a big incentive to get it right in business, but there's also a lot of, for lack of a more sophisticated term, peer pressure to be the gal or guy who has the plan.

Grant: In the book, you describe how you actually got people to agree to let you randomly assign them to do things like ask for a raise or quit their job or even break up with their significant other. What was the logic behind that?

Dubner: We do a [Freakonomics Radio](#) podcast and public radio show. We did an episode called *The Upside of Quitting*. It was making an economic argument to some degree, which is considering that most of us have been conditioned to not quit. We've been conditioned to think that quitting is a failure, a form of failure. How do we know that that's true? We argue that there's a significant upside and that people are really bad at estimating opportunity costs — what they could be doing if they quit and so on.

We came up with was a website called *Freakonomics Experiments* for people who had a decision to make, like "Should I quit my job and go back to grad school?" or "Should I leave my boyfriend or husband?" If they had a decision, and they were really, truly on the fence, then we offered to help them out and flip a coin for them. All we asked is that they fill out a survey beforehand telling us about it and that then they tell us whether they followed the coin — because we have no power to make them follow the coin. We said we would follow up with them and do research later to find out what their outcomes were. The short answer is: when people quit something they were really worried about quitting, their lives generally become a little bit better.

Grant: What's the core lesson in *Think Like a Freak*?

Dubner: If you could tell me or I could tell you the most foolproof strategy to reach a decision or the best decision to take, there might be a lot of good reasons why you still won't be successful. That's because the people that you are now employing that strategy on, or the people that you're now offering those incentives to, don't respond the way you think about the problem.

You need to be as scientific as you can while understanding that, "Even if I can present 100 people with the science that says, "Hey, you should really do this," 90 of them might have a really good reason for not wanting to do it. They might be wrong. I might be right. But it doesn't mean I'll win the argument. Being right doesn't win that many arguments, weirdly enough. There are a lot of people who are right about a lot of things who don't get their way.

That's really the trickiest part. I'm working on a radio podcast episode right now about the flu vaccine. The flu vaccine is pretty effective — about 60% or so. Influenza, along with pneumonia, is always one of the 10 leading causes of death in the US, which most people don't think about or don't know. Yet, a lot of people who should get the flu vaccine don't. Why? It's kind of a conundrum. We're going through all these different layers of behavioral and financial decisions to try to figure out how is something as seemingly simple as this so hard to accomplish? That is what I'm constantly reminded: The smart money may be smart, but unless it can deliver on something that really raises everyone's behavior then it's not worth that much.

(The author is a [Wharton management professor](#). knowledge@wharton. Reproduced with permission from [Knowledge@ Wharton 2015](#) and the Trustees of [University of Pennsylvania](#). All rights reserved.)