

‘Don’t listen to what people say, watch what they do’

Freakonomics is no longer just the title of a book. It’s now a brand, complete with mandatory essence, personality and character. Other than its first usage, *Freakonomics* is now also a movie, a radio program, and a blog, among many other applications in the pipeline.

The *Freakonomics* brand is the handiwork of two brilliant minds: Steven D. Levitt, an award-winning economist whose idiosyncratic but expository approach to everyday issues brought him celebrity status in the academic circle but was relatively unknown in the world outside university grounds, and Stephen J. Dubner, a magazine writer with a flair for storytelling. Essentially, Levitt provided the message and Dubner put the message into gripping narratives. Both plainly saw the world like no one else, and the two iconoclastic thinkers and collaborators have, to date, produced three books.

The first, *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything*, was based on a sound economic principle — the division of labor. It had a clever “orange-inside-an-apple” visual on its front cover, and carried unexpectedly juicy insights: sumo wrestlers cheat, teachers rig exams and drug dealers are penniless mama’s boys. Such incongruent takes could be dismissed as assorted trivia, but what awed its followers was not so much the influence of the discoveries as the methods by which they were uncovered. The authors share two guiding principles: “Incentives matter and numbers do not lie. Read the motives forced on people by a given situation, and you can figure out how the unscrupulous will behave. Read the data left behind and you will find traces of their transgressions like footprints in snow.”

The second book, *SuperFreakonomics*, showed the same “distorted fruit” on the first cover, exploding open. The tome exposed bigger, freakier arguments, about random subjects — global warming, terrorism, and car seats, among many other interesting themes. Its messages revolved around “the narrative of an underdog who outwits a conventional wisdom by sniffing the ground while others eye the heavens.”

The third installment, *Think Like a Freak*, portrays a little black swirl, looking like a doodle on a piece of paper rendered by someone getting bored in a meeting. This third in the series carves up these steps toward thinking like a freak:

- **Learn to say, “I don’t know.”** Until you can admit what you don’t yet know, it’s virtually impossible to learn what you need to. Take encouragement from the kids’ progress. The next time you run into a question that you can only pretend to answer, go ahead and say, “I don’t know,” but follow up, certainly, with “but maybe I can find out.” And make sure you find out. Work as hard as you can to do that. You may be surprised by how receptive people are to your confession, especially when you come through with the real answer a day or week later. But even if this goes poorly — if your boss sneers at your ignorance or you can’t figure out the answer no matter how hard you try — there is another, more strategic benefit to occasionally saying, “I don’t know.” The next time you’re in a real jam — facing an important question that you just can’t answer — go ahead and make up something and everyone will believe you, since you’re the guy who all those other times was crazy enough to admit you didn’t know the answer.

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- **Think like a child and you’ll come up with better ideas and ask better questions.** Kids are much harder to deceive for several reasons: their attention is more diffuse, which makes them harder to fool; they don’t buy into dogma, and are free of assumptions and expectations about how the world works; they are genuinely curious, and usually exert effort to figure out how a trick works, they don’t overthink and are simply sharper than adults. That said, the authors aren’t suggesting you should market all your behavior after an eight-year-old. Certainly, that would cause more problems. But wouldn’t it be nice if you smuggled a few childlike instincts across the border into adulthood?

You'd spend more time saying what you mean and asking questions you care about; you might even shed a bit of that most pernicious adult trait — pretense.

- **Find the root cause of a problem.** That's nothing you don't already know. Attacking the symptoms — as often happens — rarely fixes the underlying issue. You face barriers — physical, financial, temporal — every day. Some are unquestionably real. But others are plainly artificial — expectations about how well a given system can function, or how much change is too much, or what kinds of behaviors are acceptable. The next time you encounter such a barrier, imposed by people who lack imagination, drive and creativity, think hard about ignoring it. Solving a problem is hard enough; it gets that much harder if you've decided beforehand it can't be done. The adverse power of defeat can surely overcome you.

- **Take a master class in incentives.** For better or worse, incentives rule your world. You can follow a simple set of rules that can point you in the right direction: Figure out what people really care about, not what they say they care about; incentivize them on the dimensions that are valuable to them but cheap for you to provide; pay attention to how people respond — if their response surprises or frustrates you, learn from it and try something different; whenever possible, create incentives that switch the frame from adversarial to cooperative; never, ever think that people will do something just because it is the “right” thing to do; and know that some people will do everything they can to game the system — finding ways to win that you never could have imagined.

- **Learn to persuade people who don't want to be persuaded.** Being right is rarely enough to carry the day. As hard as it is to think creatively about problems and come up with solutions, it is even more challenging to convince people who already have a fixed mindset. But if you're hell-bent on persuading someone, you might as well give it your best shot by considering these actions: Understand how hard persuasion will be, and why; never pretend your argument is perfect — your opponent will never buy it; acknowledge the strengths of your opponent's argument — a rival who feels his argument is ignored isn't likely to engage with you at all; keep the insults to yourself — name-calling is a bad idea if you want to lure somebody to your side; you should tell stories — the most powerful form of persuasion that uses data to portray a sense of magnitude and includes the passage of time and shows the degree of constancy or change.

- **Learn to appreciate the upside of quitting.** You can't solve tomorrow's problem if you aren't willing to abandon today's dud. Quitting is at the very core of thinking like a freak. Or if that word still frightens you, think of it as “letting go.” Letting go of the artificial limbs that hold you back — and the habits of mind that tell you to kick into the corner of the goal even though you stand a better chance by going up the middle. Will you be better off if you quit more jobs, relationships and projects? Not by a long shot, but there's nothing in the authors' research data that suggests that quitting leads to misery, either. You can keep that in mind the next time you face a tough decision. Or maybe you can just flip a coin. True, it may seem strange to change your life based on a totally random event. And it may seem even stranger to abdicate responsibility for your own decisions. But putting your faith in a coin toss — even for a tiny decision — may at least inoculate you against the belief that quitting is necessarily taboo.

Minus the hardcore, and applying the principle of “new box thinking,” the tome challenges a number of business and life adages, one of which is the claim that “the best communicators listen and listen well,” by declaring, “Don't listen to what people say; watch what they do.” The authors believe that “Human beings are the most candid creation on the planet. We often say one thing and do another — or more precisely, we'll say what we think what other people would want to hear and then in private do what we want.”

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