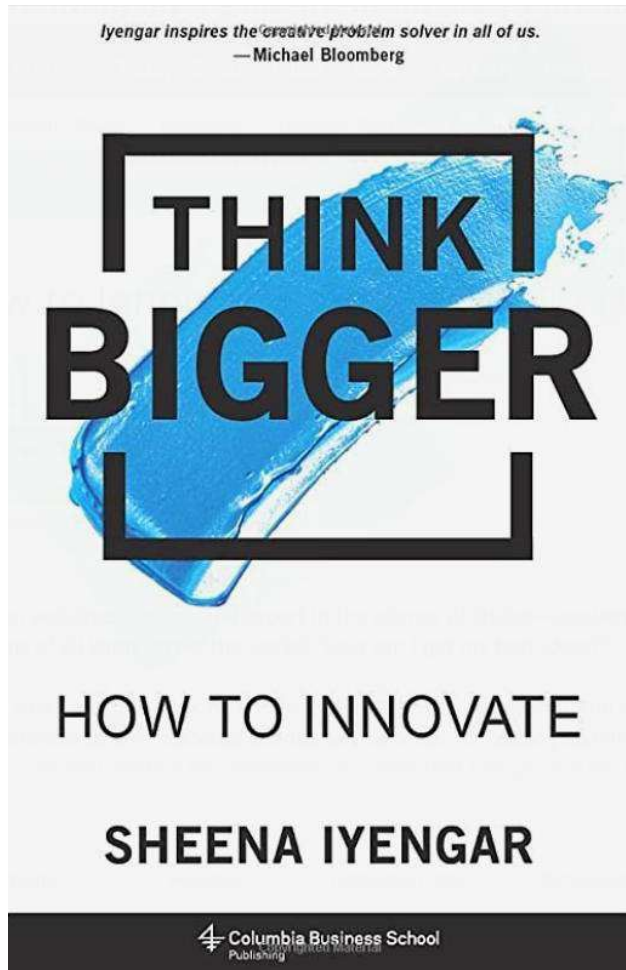


Solving problems in ‘Think Bigger: How to Innovate’

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“Think Bigger: How to Innovate” by Sheena Iyengar. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2023, 248 pages, \$24.95 (hardcover).



“What do you do when you have a problem and there is no known solution?” Sheena Iyengar asks as an introduction to “Think Bigger: How to Innovate,” her new treatise on a skill that will no doubt be integral to our survival as a species. “My earlier book, ‘The Art of Choosing,’ summarizes years of research on one key question: How do we get the most from choice? There I describe the various dilemmas we face for different kinds of choices and what we can do to become better at finding and picking the best from the bunch. But sometimes we face a bigger problem: there are no choices to pick from. We have to create new choices; not choose among those we already know.”

“Growing up blind,” she continues, “I faced this bigger problem again and again. Could I learn to cook? Would I ever be able to travel the world on my own? Could I become a scientist? Could I perform on stage? Today, I know the answers to these questions is ‘yes,’ and I know the ‘how’ behind them. That knowledge comes from my personal struggles but also from a treasure trove of new research on problem-solving.”

Such a relatively inauspicious prologue scarcely foreshadows the exquisite perceptions, insights

and revelations that are about to descend upon the reader. I was – and still am – a huge fan of “The Art of Choosing,” her previous foray into the subject matter Iyengar seems on a lifelong quest to master. But the latest installment takes her thinking to an entirely new level. As good as that rookie effort was, it really only scratched the surface when compared to her latest release. And while most authors would consider 13 years to be a fairly long interval between offerings, I am happy to report in this instance the wait was well worth it. “Think Bigger” represents a giant leap forward.

Consider the following from “The Creative Brain,” one of the chapters that really piqued my interest in Iyengar’s central thesis:

“What exactly struck Newton under the apple tree? It wasn’t an apple. And it wasn’t the existence of gravity. For centuries, scientists knew that objects attract each other from their centers. The idea of a ‘center of gravity’ goes all the way back to Archimedes, born in 287 BC. Newton did not discover gravity; he discovered the precise mathematical formula that explained it ... If working out the formula for gravity wasn’t a new problem, what made Newton succeed? Well, he was doggedly committed to solving that one problem among the hundreds of other problems that science faced in

the middle of the 1600s. For reasons we'll explore much more deeply in later chapters, it's important to understand that passion is a key element for effective, creative problem-solving. So yes, let's remember Newton under the apple tree. Not for solving the problem of gravity, but for finding a worthwhile problem he very much wanted to solve."

Notice how the author takes a story most people are at least vaguely familiar with and recasts it in a new and invigorating way that adds depth and poignance to what actually happened under that proverbial apple tree. And by-the-way, it was two decades after being hit on the head that Newton finally worked out the intricacies we all take for granted today.

"Think Bigger" is extensively researched, with 12 pages of scholarly references at the conclusion of the 8 chapters comprising the main narrative. Structurally, the book is constructed in two parts; Part One (the first two chapters) explains the overall concepts being explored as well as a dissection of the attributes that constitute the creative brain. Part Two (the next six chapters) takes the reader through the innovative process, beginning with how to go about selecting an appropriate problem to solve and ending with an explanation of how to garner support for your ideas among those who are initially skeptical of their efficacy. As an added bonus, the prose is liberally augmented with a plethora of historical photographs, illustrations and other graphics which serve to bring the manuscript to life in a way that would not have been possible otherwise.

A recipient of the Presidential Early Career Award, Iyengar is the S. T. Lee Professor of Business at Columbia University. Her undergraduate degree is from the Wharton School of Business; she has a doctorate in social psychology from Stanford University. Her innovative research on choice has been funded by the Institute for Advanced Studies, the Jerome A. Chazen Institute of International Business, the National Science Foundation, and the National Institute of Mental Health. Her work is regularly cited in periodicals such as the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal, Fortune and TIME magazines, and in books such as Blink and The Paradox of Choice. As alluded to previously, this is her second book, her first being "The Art of Choosing," which was published in 2011.

Historical anecdotes and revelatory examples notwithstanding – the book is chock full of them – it's Iyengar's description of the creative process in general, especially as it relates to the daunting challenges we currently face, that I found most enlightening and reassuring. Case-in-point, I found myself shaking my head in agreement with the following passage from "Compare Wants," the fifth chapter:

"Research shows that we're far better decision-makers when we predefine our criteria – meaning, we do so before identifying our choices and beginning the process of comparing and contrasting. For example, researchers observed that when hiring managers predefined their hiring criteria, they were less likely to hire based on gender stereotypes and more likely to hire based on performance and fit for the role. This holds true, even when considering seemingly analytical tasks like stock picking. A 2007 study examined the experience of 101 stock pickers making investment decisions on a daily basis. For stock pickers who identified and addressed their more intense feelings – rather than shying away from them – their daily investment returns were higher on average than those who reported less emotional attunement."

Needless to say, I really liked this one. If you are concerned about how we can better navigate the turbulent landscape that lies ahead, either personally or professionally, you might want to pick up a copy of "Think Bigger" at your first opportunity. You won't be disappointed. Highly recommended.

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