Disrupt Yourself!

Create the World You Want with Liminal Thinking.
Dave Gray

People talk a lot about disruption these days.

Leaders in large organizations fear that rapidly emerging competitors will disrupt them and make them irrelevant. Netflix has disrupted Blockbuster. Uber has disrupted the taxi industry. AirBnB has disrupted hospitality. Brexit disrupted an entire system of government—in one day, with one vote. Who's next? In an era where change has become the norm, we spend a lot of time worrying about how to avoid being disrupted by others. We'd be more successful if we learned how to disrupt ourselves.

What if I told you the number one reason companies go out of business is that their senior leaders don't know how to listen? That they are not paying attention? That they are completely blind to disruptive new businesses that are staring them right in the face?

My friend Mick Calder is a turnaround guy. When a company has run out of money and options, Mick comes in and buys the company, for pennies on the dollar, and he turns it around. He's the disrupter you don't want to meet.

One day, I asked Mick, "How do you do it? How do you come in and turn around a company when leaders with 20, 30, sometimes 40 years of experience couldn't pull it off?"

His answer was simple. "By the time I come in, the management team is out. We know that and they know that. So there is nothing to talk to them about, aside from ushering them out. Then we go out and talk to the customers. We walk around the company and talk to the employees, and we listen. Between the customers and employees, they always know what to do."

Why do people who have been successful stop paying attention? How do people become blind to obvious things that are right in front of them? When do smart, successful people stop listening to employees and customers?

The answer is that they go on autopilot.

When you are successful at something, you pick up certain skills, tricks, and techniques that make you more effective. Over time, these skills turn into habits, and then routines. They become your default, your autopilot. Like walking or driving, it becomes automatic. You don't need to think about it, you just do it.

There's a danger though, when you go on autopilot. Just because you've learned something that works, that doesn't mean it will work forever. The world continues to change. People's tastes

evolve. New technologies crop up. In the short term, these changes are imperceptible. In the long term, they become significant.

If you're on autopilot and the world shifts—which it will—you're going to miss it. And by the time you realize that, it'll be too late. Why? Because your autopilot routines develop slowly, over a long period of time, and once you've run on autopilot for years, and sometimes even decades, your brain has lost its ability to perceive change, let alone adapt to it.

I was working on a project at Nokia when the iPhone was first announced. I asked a senior executive in the company, "Aren't you worried about Apple getting into the phone business?" He said, "No, we're not worried. They're just going to increase the market for smart phones, and ours is better." At the time, Nokia was the number one player in the global smartphone market, and had dominated that market for years.

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When you've been good at something for a long time, you tend to discount new information. our autopilot filters it out. After all, you're good at this. You're an expert. Nokia was an expert in the phone business. Apple was a newcomer. Nokia executives assumed it would take Apple years to learn from it had learned, and that Apple would never catch up.

Only it didn't happen that way, because the world had changed, and Nokia, successful, on top of the world, and operating on autopilot, had not noticed. When the iPhone was launched Nokia controlled 40 percent of the mobile phone market. Now it's less than one percent.

If you want to avoid being disrupted, or taken over by my friend Mick, you need to develop the practice of disrupting your own thinking. This practice is called liminal thinking.

Liminal thinking is a way to keep your autopilot in check, so you remain in touch with reality as it changes and shifts. It's a way to train your brain to flex into new ways of seeing, listening, and doing.

Liminal is a word that means threshold, or boundary. Imagine standing on the threshold of a door. The word liminal refers to that space, and that feeling, of being in-between. In this state, you can find and open new doors that allow you to see new things. Passing through these unexplored doors is both disorienting and exhilarating.

But most of these boundaries and doorways are invisible. So how do you identify boundaries when you don't even know what the boundaries are, because you can't see what you don't see and you don't know what you don't know?

The first and most important step is to turn off your autopilot. Disrupt your routines by bringing your mind into the here and now.

Think about this moment, right now. You decided to download this. You're reading these words. There's a reason for that. You might sense that something in your life needs to change. Maybe you know what it is, maybe you don't. It might be your company, your job, or something in your home life, but there's something inside of you that's telling you, something needs to change.

You can't change the past. We all know that. And that the future doesn't exist yet. There's only one place where you can actually create change: right here, right now. But most of the time you are not in the here and now. Your body is here, but you're on autopilot. Your mind is somewhere else, thinking about your to-do list, or that argument you had yesterday, or what TV show you're going to watch later.

Autopilot is not all bad. It helps you accomplish routine tasks. If you drive the same route to work everyday, you can think about other things while you're driving. In these situations, autopilot comes in handy. But if you're looking to create change, autopilot prevents you from getting there.

How do you shut off your autopilot? Before you can shut it off, you need to see it.

Here's an example from my personal life.

Have you ever had an argument with your wife, or husband, or your partner, where one of you ends up sleeping on the couch? And when you wake up in the morning, you're not sure what the argument was about, but you know you're in trouble? Well, we had one of those nights.

This story takes place on the morning after a fight like that. It was a freezing, frigid, February day in St. Louis, where we live. A cold, cold, Saturday morning, and I was sitting in a chair in the living room, reading on my iPad.

In our marriage, at that time, when we had a fight like that, we had a routine. It's called the silent treatment. We wouldn't talk to each other. Sometimes for a day, sometimes even two. That was our autopilot.

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I was sitting in the living room, on my iPad, reading the news or something. And about 10am, my wife Michelle came down the stairs, swooped by, and as she walked by me she said "Were you ever going to check and see if I was alive?"

There was no opportunity to answer because she was already gone, she was in the kitchen making a coffee, and this was a familiar feeling. We were in a pattern that needed disrupting.

So I thought to myself, "What is my autopilot? How do I shut that off? My autopilot was to do nothing, just to say to myself, "I'm just going to wait this out, and then it will cool off, and we will never talk about it, and eventually things will just go back to normal. Just wait it out; that was my autopilot.

And I thought, no I'm going to shut off my autopilot. What was I going to do? I didn't know. This is what I mean when I say that you don't have to know what you're going to do. Just do something different. Anything different will pull you back into the here and now.

So even though I didn't know what I was going to do, I walked upstairs and knocked on the door of the guest room where she had been sleeping. I peeked in the door and I said "I'm just checking to see if you were alive."

She was sitting there with her iPad and a coffee, kind of hunched up in a sort of defensive posture. I think she was surprised I was even there. She looked up at me and she said "Are you going out?" And I thought, what would my autopilot response be? Because I was determined that I wasn't going to respond that way.

My autopilot response would have been something like, "Hell no, it's February, it's freezing cold out, it's Saturday, And I don't even have my shoes on. No, I'm not going out!"

But I tried to shut it off. Easy to say, hard to do in the moment sometimes. Shut it off. And I said "Yes, actually. Funny you should ask. Yes, I'm going out."

And then she looked at me for a minute. She was really surprised by then, I could see it on her face. And then she said "Are you going to McDonald's?"

And I said "Why yes! I am!" And by then we were both laughing, and I said, "Is there anything I can get for you while I'm out?" And she said "Yes, a Filet-o-fish sandwich, please!"

And all of the tension just broke, and we laughed, and we had a great day. The world of the probable, an icy cold day of silence, gave way, and a new world of the possible opened up for both of us.

To disrupt your autopilot, you need to recognize it, stop it, and do something different.

Autopilot not only affects individuals, it impacts groups—even companies. These automatic routines can become so embedded they're invisible. Even in the physical environment.

Hunter Industries is a company that makes software-operated irrigation and sprinkler systems. Their software developers worked in cubicles, and if you wanted to hold a meeting, you had to reserve a meeting room. Since meeting rooms were at a premium, no one was allowed to book them for more than two hours. Pretty reasonable, right?

Woody Zuill was hired to manage the software team, and one of the first things he noticed was how stressed out his team looked. They spent a lot of time sitting in meeting rooms. They had meetings on top of meetings. He noticed, too, that the software was breaking a lot. Whenever something broke, they had to hold more meetings to figure out what was going on.

Woody could see this approach wasn't working. He decided to try something different. He instituted a weekly learning session. On Friday afternoons he'd book a meeting room for his team. He brought in a laptop and a projector, and the team would show each other things that they found interesting. They passed the laptop around the table, like a show-and-tell. It was an inspired way to spend a Friday afternoon. Team members felt excited to share their expertise and to learn from each other.

Then during one of their Friday sessions, the team organically started to talk about a complex project they were challenged by. Pretty soon the team started passing the laptop back and forth like they did in their weekly learning meetings as a way to exchange ideas to solve their problems. When their two hours were up, they looked at each other and said, "Well, we're not done yet. Let's book another meeting room."

They booked another room and kept on working together. Instead of returning to their cubicles, they continued to collaborate, treating their meeting rooms like a team workspace. They continued like this for the rest of the day, going from meeting room to meeting room and moved the project forward together.

The next week, Woody blocked out meeting rooms all day, every day, and the team traveled from room to room, collaborating and getting more done than when they used to work on their own in their cubicle farm.

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It took them another three weeks to find a room where they could keep working li
all the time.

So what happened?

There was an unspoken autopilot that determined what a meeting was and how it should be run. The boundary of the two-hour room reservation kept them from seeing rooms as working space for team collaboration. They viewed cubicles as designated work space, yet were in them so rarely because they were always in meeting rooms, getting nothing done. The belief became a company-wide autopilot, a cultural habit that affected how much work the team got done.

By creating space for learning and reflection, Woody disrupted the belief and the routine. He opened up some wiggle room for a new way of working to emerge—a way of working that combined meetings and work into a single activity. The team is still meeting all the time but in a different, more productive way.

Woody created such incredible results that he now teaches this new way of working, called "mob programming," to organizations around the world. His ability to activate liminal thinking and disrupt a team habit led to a new career.

Life is full of these kinds of patterns and routines. Over time they become invisible.

Solutions to your problems will not come from examining your past or setting goals about the future. They will come from paying close attention to what you are doing, and what is possible, in the here and now.

Think about your route to work. If you're like me, you take that trip on autopilot. You take the same route every day, so you see the same things, and over time it gets to the point where you don't even notice them. But if there is construction or something and that road is blocked, you are forced to find a new way, and you are inevitably going to pay attention in new ways and notice new things.

You can do this intentionally in other parts of your life as well.

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Whenever you find yourself stuck in any kind of recurring pattern, try something random. Anything you can do that throws that train off the rails will create new openings and might help you see the whole situation in a new way.

Disrupting yourself with liminal thinking will enable you to become a positive force in the world, for yourself and for others, the kind of person who makes things better just by being there, and who leaves things better than you found them. Don't think that you need to be the boss to bring these ideas to life. The leaders in an organization, or a family, or a nation, or any group, are not always the people at the top. You can lead from anywhere.

Liminal thinking is something anyone can learn to do, but it's not easy. It's uncomfortable, even unsettling. It's a lot of work! Why would anyone want to do all these uncomfortable things, especially when it seems like the only rewards are increased ambiguity, uncertainty, and doubt? The answer is this: Because it matters.

It matters because you matter. You owe it to yourself to be a whole, self-actualized person. It matters because your friends matter and your family matters. They deserve to be understood, even when they disagree. It matters because your work and your community matters. You owe it to them to be an important part of those communities, not just the people who agree with you. It matters because the world matters.

Turning off your autopilot is something you can start doing today.

Our interactions with each other create a shared world, reinforcing good habits and bad habits alike. Over time, these habits become deeply embedded routines: a complex, dense, interconnected system of beliefs and behavior that is not easy to untangle and understand. The more we reinforce those habits and routines, the more invisible they become, until one day they are just "the way it is."

But "the way it is" is something that we have created together, and if we can create it, we can change it.

You can start today. Turn off your autopilot, do something different, and see what happens. I think you'll be surprised with what you find. 🖎

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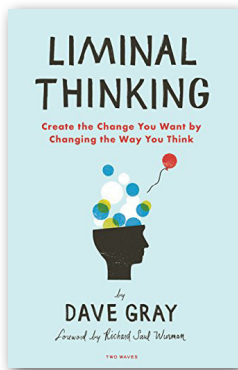
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Dave Gray is the founder of XPLANE, the visual thinking company, a consultancy focused on increasing clarity, understanding and alignment in organizations. His first book, *Gamestorming*, has sold more than 100,000 copies and has been translated into 16 languages.

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