

LIMINAL THINKING
BY DAVE GRAY

Liminal Thinking by Dave Gray is a great book that challenges the way you think and the way you see the world. Gray emphasises that we all have a choice in how we see and navigate the world, and the first step to success is to engage in liminal thinking and allow ourselves to explore new opportunities. Liminal thinking is a little bit like enlightenment, it has the power to open up a whole world of new opportunities.

WHAT IS LIMINAL THINKING?

Liminal Thinking is the art of creating change by understanding, shaping, and reframing beliefs.

Have you had moments like this in your life, when you suddenly saw things in a new and different way? A new way of seeing the world—and yourself—opens the door to change and growth.

You can cultivate a way of thinking and being that will allow you to have these breakthrough insights more often, to find and create new doorways to possibilities, doorways that are invisible to others.

The idea behind liminal thinking is that there are thresholds, doors of opportunity, around you, all the time. Most of them are invisible to you, because you are focusing on other things. But they offer potential for growth and change. Tuning your mind to liminal thinking will help you see opportunities that others will be unable to see or even imagine. It's a kind of psychological agility that enables you to create change where others cannot.

PART I. HOW BELIEFS SHAPE EVERYTHING

Principle 1. Beliefs Are Models

Reality is something that is out there. It has a concrete existence, whether you believe it or not. A belief is something you hold in your mind, a kind of map or model of that external reality. But just as maps and models can be wrong, so can beliefs.

Beliefs are not reality. They are not facts. They are constructions. You construct your beliefs, even though for most people this is an unconscious process. By beliefs, I mean everything you know.

The obvious is not obvious. Even the obvious. Especially the obvious. All beliefs are approximations, because the whole of reality is unknowable.

Liminal thinking is learning to see that there are many “obviouses”—and that what is obvious depends on your experiences and your point of view. It also means cultivating the ability to listen and to pay attention to “obviouses” that are different than yours.

Principle 2. Beliefs Are Created

The obvious is not obvious. It is constructed. We work together, as individuals and in groups, to construct the obvious every day. We band together in “obvious clubs” that reinforce the same version of reality and defend competing versions of reality.

We construct beliefs slowly, layer by layer, over time, using something I call the pyramid of belief.

1. Experiences

Starting as a baby, you go through your life, experiencing reality through your senses and perceptions. Your experience of reality is limited by the range of your experience.

2. Attention

You are also limited by what you pay attention to. In any given moment, the more you focus on one aspect of your experience, the less you will notice everything else.

3 & 4. Theories and Judgements

Based on those things that you notice, you will form theories and make judgments.

These four things—your experiences, attention, theories, and judgments—form a foundation that reduces the unknowable to a kind of map or model

that is simple enough to understand and use in daily life. This is essential. We all need this simplified reality in order to function.

The Pyramid of Belief

It's important to realize that this Pyramid of Belief reduces reality from infinite complexity to a small set of theories, which form the foundations on which you construct our beliefs.

We all stand on top of our self-constructed Pyramid of Belief, living in the land of the obvious. We think that the ground is reality, that it's obvious. But we actually constructed this ourselves.

Learning how to navigate this "below the obvious" construction zone is one of the core skills of liminal thinking. Liminal thinking requires you to become more conscious of that invisible belief construction process, in yourself and others.

Principle 3. Beliefs Create a Shared World

A belief is a story in your head, a cause-and-effect chain, like a recipe or rule for action. The basic recipe looks like this: If you have a need, then look for a belief that provides a rule for action to get the result that you want. Many beliefs take the form of "If x, then y; if you're hungry, then eat."

The basic way that we learn how to be effective in life is called a learning loop: a continuous feedback cycle of needs, thinking, and action. Overtime, this loop creates habits of belief and behaviour.

- Learning loops start when you feel a need. That happens at the base of the pyramid. You have experiences, and you pay attention to the things most likely to meet your needs.
- Those needs become beliefs through the process of exploring theories and making judgments.
- Then, as you act on those beliefs and experience the results, you interpret what happened as part of your learning process.
- Beliefs cause behavior.

We co-create shared worlds all the time. Your beliefs inform your actions, and your actions are interpreted by others, and those interpretations become the basis for their beliefs, which inform their actions.

Learning loops can reinforce good habits and bad habits alike. They are co-created by the people (and dogs!) who participate in them. They are a by-product of ongoing interactions.

Principle 4. Beliefs Create Blind Spots

Beliefs are necessary. We couldn't survive without them. They are tools for thinking. We use them to navigate the world, and they guide our actions. But they also limit us. The same boundaries that make it possible for us to think also limit what we can conceive.

Liminal thinking is a way to identify limiting beliefs and open yourself to hitherto unseen possibilities that can open new doors.

Principle 5. Beliefs Defend Themselves

Collectively, we create a kind of bubble of belief that reinforces and protects our existing beliefs by denying that alternative beliefs are within the realm of possibility. We co-create this in order to maintain a group map that we use to navigate the world.

These shared maps are useful because they allow us to do things together, based on shared assumptions. But a shared map also has some dangers, especially when, over time, the map begins to get out of sync with what's really going on or reality.

People rarely test ideas. If it doesn't make sense from within the bubble, you're going to think it's a mistake, or a lie, or somebody got it wrong. You will tend to do whatever is necessary to protect the consistency and coherence of that bubble, because to you, that bubble is reality itself.

Liminal thinking requires a willingness to test and validate new ideas, even when they seem absurd, crazy, or wrong.

Principle 6. Beliefs Are Tied to Identity

Superficial, surface beliefs are relatively easy to change. You don't have so much invested in them. But some beliefs are deeply connected with your sense of self, your identity. They define who you are. Those are the beliefs that are most deep-rooted and hard to change, because to change them would mean changing how you see yourself.

Your governing beliefs are part of the story webs that hold your relationships together. Governing beliefs form the foundation of your (version of) reality. They generate feelings of self-worth, group identity, and social stability. They give order and meaning to life. When you feel that your governing beliefs are threatened, it's like you, yourself, are being threatened.

Liminal Thinking requires courage: When your beliefs are being threatened, and your instinct says "defend the belief," you need to go toward that fear if you want to open the door to lasting change. A truly significant change to your world will almost always require some kind of corresponding change to your self.

PART II. WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

Practice 1. Assume You Are Not Objective

The Johari window is a framework developed by two psychologists as an aid for understanding the self. It's a great tool for liminal thinking. You can imagine it as a building with four rooms.

1. One room is open. This represents things that both you and others know about you. The 'public you'.
2. Another room is hidden. This represents things you know about yourself that others don't know. The 'private' you.
3. Another room is unknown. This represents the things that you don't know about yourself, and neither does anyone else. The "unknown" you.
4. The last room is your blind spot. This represents the things that others can see about you, but that you are unaware of.

These blind spots can be crippling to your effectiveness. Blind spots cut both ways, of course. It's very easy to see problems and logical inconsistencies in other people. It's very hard to see them in yourself.

"Your biggest blind spot is yourself."

If you are not willing to look at your own contributions and inputs to the situation as part of the problem, you won't be able to see it clearly. Your understanding will be distorted and so will your beliefs.

Practice 2. Empty Your Cup

In order to learn anything truly new, you must empty your cup, so your existing knowledge, theories, assumptions, and preconceptions don't get in the way. In Zen practice, this is called beginner's mind.

Beginner's mind means that you take on an attitude of openness, curiosity, and eagerness to learn, that you come to a new situation with a blank slate and an open mind, just as a beginner would, even if you are already an expert in a subject.

This opening up of your mind, this willingness to feel dumb, to be vulnerable, to, in effect, rewire your brain in times of change, is the essence of liminal thinking.

Practice 3. Create Safe Space

When people's basic emotional needs are met, they do better work. When they feel valued and important, they perform at much higher levels. When they have a sense of control, they will take initiative. When they feel a sense of belonging, they will contribute more. When they feel they are being treated fairly, they will go the extra mile.

If you take these things away, you are starving them emotionally. When people are emotionally starving, they come up with conspiracy theories. They cover up, hide, and hoard information. They play political games.

Liminal thinking involves an awareness of the important role that emotional needs play in the formation of beliefs; how beliefs then become habits of action; and how through those actions we create the world we live in.

The only way that you can really understand what people's motivations are is to create a space that's safe enough for them to come out of their self-sealing logic bubble, to cultivate curiosity and openness, and to give them a feeling of safety.

Practice 4. Triangulate and Validate

Most of the time we are all walking around with our heads so full of “obvious” that we can’t see what’s really going on.

Cultivate as many theories as you can—including some that seem odd, counterintuitive, or even mutually contradictory—and hold onto them loosely. Don’t get too attached to any one of them.

Then you can start asking questions and seeking valid information to help you understand what’s really going on. The way to seek understanding is to empty your cup, step up and give people your full attention, suspend your beliefs and Look at situations from as many points of view as possible. Consider the possibility that seemingly different or contradictory beliefs may be valid. If something doesn’t make sense to you, then you’re missing something.

Practice 5. Ask Questions, Make Connections

By asking people for their hopes, dreams, fears, and frustrations, you are looking to reveal the latent needs and goals of the people in the system—a kind of ecosystem of needs and solutions.

By asking questions, you find liminal, in-between spaces that people may not have seen or considered. Then, by finding possible intersections between needs and solutions, and forming new connections, you can create new opportunities that were already latent in the system, just waiting to be discovered.

Practice 6. Disrupt Routines

We spend so much time on autopilot. Sometimes, when a problem seems intractable, there’s an invisible routine at work, and simply disrupting that routine, even in random ways, can shift the situation and allow you to see it in new ways.

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. Just do something different.

Practice 7. Act As If in the Here and Now - Double Loop Learning

Double-loop learning is a way to break out of a rut by challenging your own beliefs and trying on new ones. You can even test beliefs that you think are wrong—and you should.

In the case of double-loop learning, you don't have to believe a hypothesis in order to test it. All you have to do is act as if it were true and see what happens. Ask yourself, "How would I act if I believed this were true?"

Change is only possible in the here-and-now, and the way to create change is by acting in the here-and-now as if a different world existed. For example, act as if the world you want to create is already here.

Double-loop learning is a powerful tool because it gives you a way to test new ideas that you would otherwise ignore or discount, because they are coming from outside your existing bubble. You don't have to actually believe something is true in order to test it. All you have to do is act as if it were true and see what

Practice 8. Make Sense with Stories

When someone tells you a story, they are sharing an experience and expressing their beliefs about that experience at the same time. In addition, both teller and listener are pairing their brains, building relationships and creating social cohesion that makes it easier for them to develop shared goals and move toward those goals in a collaborative, coordinated way.

Prompting other people to tell stories, and listening to them, is as much of an art as storytelling. When you ask someone to tell a story, you are telling them that their experiences are important, that they have meaning, and that they matter.

If you have beliefs that you want to share, beliefs that you think may change the world for the better, the way to help those beliefs take flight is to share them as stories.

Listen to the stories someone tells, notice the stories they respond to most positively, and you will begin to understand their beliefs—and their bubble.

Practice 9. Evolve Yourself

Change is a tricky thing. It's all around us, all the time, but so much of the time it seems like change controls us, when we really would like it to be the other way around. We all want more control over the changes that impact our lives.

Your beliefs can't evolve if you're not willing to introduce some chaos into the mix. To open new doors, you need to embrace that complexity. Liminal thinking is a way of navigating change by opening the door to ambiguity and uncertainty, recognizing that there can be no real creation without some destruction, a kind of urban renewal program for the mind.