

Management: ‘The Power of Impossible Thinking’

SUBMITTED BY: Knowledge@Wharton Summer Educator

SUBJECT(S): Management

GRADE LEVEL(S): 9, 10, 11, 12

≡ OVERVIEW:

This lesson provides students access to some of the ideas presented in Colin Crook and Jerry Wind’s book: “The Power of Impossible Thinking: Transform the Business of Your Life and the Life of Your Business.” Knowledge@Wharton featured an interview with the two authors that provides a critical and provocative analysis of the ways in which managers fail to maximize business growth as a result of becoming too entrenched in conventional ways of thinking and failing to see and act upon the opportunities that surround them. Students will be directed to take up and apply one or more of Crook and Wind’s kernels of wisdom in the development of a strategic plan for a business, product or service in the local community.

≡ NBEA STANDARD(S):

- Management, II. Management Theories

≡ RELATED ARTICLES:

- [“Thoughtful Approach: Developing a Questioning Mind and Spirit”](#)
- [“Lessons from the ‘Board’ Room: A Watercraft Maker Talks Beaches and Business”](#)
- [“Innovation in the Classroom: Inspiring Creativity”](#)
- [“Biotech Innovation That Breaks Down Plastic and Feeds the Fish”](#)

Common Core Standard(s):

- *Speaking & Listening*: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10–11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- *Reading Standards for Informational Text*: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- *Reading Standards for Informational Text*: Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.
- *Writing Standards*: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

Objectives/Purposes:

- Students will develop new ways of thinking about strategy.
- Students will gain experience in applying new ideas to solve existing challenges.
- Students will gain practice in making text annotations and extracting important information from lengthy informational texts.

Knowledge@Wharton Articles:

- [“What’s Behind the 4-Minute Mile, Starbucks and the Moon Landing? The Power of Impossible Thinking”](#)

Other Resources/Materials: Internet Access, Projector

Activities:

1) Begin talking with students about where they think businesses often go wrong with strategizing. If possible, have students identify some businesses that have faltered because of obviously poor strategizing (e.g., Eastman Kodak, Blockbuster Video, Krispy Kreme Donuts).

- 2) Inform the students that you will be reading an article aloud to them, and that they are to read along with you silently. If something catches their interest along the way, however, they should feel free to interrupt your reading to talk about that point. Alert students that along with the reading, you will stop and linger on certain points, and that they should take note by underlining the text or writing in the margins. The text selection for the day is an interview with co-authors talking about the importance of thinking outside the box when strategizing business growth, otherwise opportunities get missed to become truly superlative in the market. Students ought to make note of the authors' observations as the students will be challenged later to apply this kind of thinking in the analysis of a local product, business or service.
- 3) Discussion: My recommendation is to emphasize the following passages and to ask students for their reactions to these comments:
- Pg. 1: The response to the first Knowledge@Wharton question.
 - Pg. 2: Crook – “One of the core issues is that we are not just data driven but we are hypothesis driven” and “I now look at the underlying hypothesis in any situation...”
 - Pg. 2: Wind – “This work has reinforced the need to examine the models that are shaping our thinking...We think the barriers are in the world, but often they are in our own minds.”
 - Pg. 2: Wind – “To challenge your thinking, you need to interact with diverse people and be able to see the potential wisdom of weird ideas.”
 - Pg. 3: Crook – “We think we see the real world, but we actually see what’s already in our own minds...We become very comfortable and dependent upon our current mental models...”
 - Pg. 3: Wind’s entire response to Knowledge@Wharton’s question, “What are some practical approaches to addressing these challenges that you discuss in the book?”
 - Pg. 3: Crook – “Changing the world is much more challenging than coming up with new thinking.”
 - Pg. 3: Crook – “It is not enough to just change your thinking; you have to also address the practical infrastructure and routines that support the old mental model.”
 - Pg. 4: Crook’s entire response in the first paragraph.
 - Pg. 4: Wind – “It is not a great revolution but rather a series of small experiments that leads to larger investment. You also need to create a portfolio of models and use the one that works best for a particular situation.” ...”When a new model emerges, it often becomes dogma.”
 - After discussing the article, have students view two video clips from the Knowledge@Wharton interview with Colleen Barrett. These clips demonstrate some of the points that Crook and Wind emphasize about unconventional thinking as good business strategy. Ask students to respond to the videos as follows:

- i. What was unconventional about Southwest's approach to airline service?
- ii. In what ways did Southwest change the world through a change in thinking about how business was done in the airline industry?
- iii. Wind's comment on page 3 speaks to the importance of generating new models and developing an integrated portfolio of models. How did Southwest Airlines accomplish this?

4) Wrap-up: Have students do an exit slip that consists of them writing down the most compelling idea that they encountered in class today. As an alternative, they could write about an idea they have for how a local business might be transformed through Crook and Wind's strategy approach. Both ideas should be limited to an index card.

Tying It All Together: It might be worth talking to students further about the parameters of *avant garde* thinking in the business world. Although innovation is wonderful, how can you safeguard against going too far? Can they think of instances when companies went outside the box and failed? How steep were the consequences of doing so? What did it do to the brand?

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