

'Dr Jason Fox is in search of curiosity, courage and humanity at work. In this deep, personal and thoughtful book, he challenges each of us to dig a little deeper on our way to making a difference.'

— Seth Godin, author of *What To Do When It's Your Turn*



Q How to Lead a Quest

a handbook for pioneering executives

Dr Jason Fox

best-selling author of *The Game Changer*



WILEY

How to Lead a Quest

A handbook for pioneering executives

Dr Jason Fox

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About the Author

Dr Jason Fox is a motivation design specialist who shows forward-thinking leaders around the world how to unlock new progress and build for the future of work.

His clients include *Fortune* 500 companies such as Microsoft, PepsiCo, McDonalds and Beam Suntory, and other multinationals such as Toyota, Sony Playstation, Gartner, Telstra, Macquarie Group, Commonwealth Bank, Red Cross, Suncorp Group, Singtel Optus, Origin Energy, AMP, Xero, Bellroy and the International Institute of Research (along with a bunch of universities and other research institutions).

Some of Jason's best work has seen him partner with senior leadership teams to navigate through unprecedented and wickedly complex enterprise challenges. Such adventures typically span beyond a year, and involve deep strategic immersions and a refreshed approach to leadership development and culture change.

In addition to his work as an adviser and mentor, Jason is an in-demand conference speaker (frequently booked over a year in advance) who works particularly well with sceptical audiences who have 'seen it all before'. Jason delivers fresh and relevant thinking to instil new curiosity for meaningful progress and future growth.

And when he's not speaking at events, he's creating them. Jason is the director of The Cleverness conference, Clever Happenings think tanks, a director of The Future of Leadership, and an ambassador for the idea execution conference 99U.

Jason is also the best-selling author of *The Game Changer* — a book that unpacks the science of motivation and game

design to drive progress and change at work.

When not liberating the world from default thinking and the curse of efficiency, Jason enjoys partaking in the fine art of coffee snobbery, sun avoidance and beard maintenance.

Learn more at www.drjasonfox.com

PS: About the Illustrator | Dr Kim Lam is the much more delightful counterpart to Dr Jason Fox. Kim loves drawing. Drawing stories, drawing diagnoses, drawing in rock-paper-scissors, but most of all — drawing illustrations. At the quarter-life mark, Kim decided to swap her veterinarian-day-job and moonlighting-illustrator combination. She now operates with a pen, running projects as Dangerlam, and saves little furry lives as a rather specialised side-hobby. She loves the thrill of chasing complex ideas and capturing them in simple and compelling ways through illustration and animation.

You can see more of her work at www.dangerlam.com

Gratitudes

Here are a heap of hat tips, hugs and endearingly misplaced/mistimed high-fives to the many fine folk who made this book possible. Without their support, I couldn't have written this book for you.

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I'm so grateful for everyone who purchased my first book *The Game Changer* and made it a best-seller. It gave me the confidence to write the slightly more daring book you hold in your hands right now. I'm also especially grateful those who left a kind review online — this feedback kept me buoyed when the doubt got heavy. Thanks also to all the savvy folk who subscribe to my museletter, and who attend our events. I love you all.

But yes, I've been building up to the two most special people I am most grateful for.

First, to my business manager Bianka. Ah B, you are such a blessing. Not only do you curtail all the entropy that comes

with a dynamic business like ours — you keep all of our clients thoroughly nurtured and happy too. I love your proactive empathy, strategy and intuition, and your ability to make good things flourish. Thank you for everything!

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Oh and thank *you*, dear reader, for being the type of person curious enough to read these acknowledgements. I love people like you. People like you are the best.



Introduction

Almost every leadership, strategy and motivation book on the planet advocates the importance of having a crystal-clear goal or vision for the future.

But, intuitively, we know this is an incredibly flawed position to take.

Sure, this outlook may serve in the short term. And, of course, an enterprise *needs* goals. If you want to galvanise a group of people towards achieving a particular outcome, a clear goal or vision is essential. People like goals — they remove the angst of uncertainty, and give us something to focus our efforts towards. Clear goals can also be reverse-engineered and broken down to create a roadmap, with clear milestones and executable steps. Past experience can be leveraged to improve performance, and systems can be optimised to improve efficiencies. Goals are easy to implement and incentivise, and a raft of precedents prove their efficacy.

But what happens if you don't know what the future has in store for your enterprise? What if you don't have a clear goal? What if you only have a vague hunch, or a fuzzy sense that something needs to change? What then? Do you simply wait for clarity? Or do you manufacture a goal and a forced sense of certainty?

Or worse: *What happens if you wake up after a long 'winning streak' only to discover that your enterprise is no longer relevant?*

This is the major challenge many enterprise leaders face, and the fundamental flaw with leadership focused on clear goals and operational wins.

Naturally, this is quite a predicament. We cannot afford to simply *wait* for clarity. But at the same time, we cannot set forth a single, clear vision for the future while knowing that the future is infinitely complex and uncertain. What to do?

LEAD A QUEST

This book presents a different approach to enterprise strategy and leadership. I wouldn't go as far as to say it is an 'alternative' approach; rather, it is something much more complementary: *pioneering* leadership.

Rather than simply work within existing parameters of operational excellence (incrementally optimising your business model to meet customer needs), pioneering leadership sees you embarking upon quests. Such quests allow us to systematically explore complex and uncertain futures. We don't set goals in the hopes that a particular future will manifest — rather, we explore multiple possible futures, and prepare proactive stratagems to capitalise on each.

The result of this continuous and dynamic approach is that enterprise strategy and leadership is enriched with viable, alternative options to pursue. Such options allow enterprise leaders to mitigate risk, obtain strategic advantage and ensure meaningful progress as the world changes.

If this sounds too good to be true, don't worry — it quickly won't.

Pioneering leadership is challenging to initiate and maintain — especially when compared to the established approach that favours fast results with a bias toward prudence and predictability. But! If we can crack through our default thinking, pioneering leadership offers enterprise leaders the chance to obtain the most important thing of all — *enduring relevance*.



USING THIS BOOK

The biggest paradox about writing a somewhat practical book about the dynamic and non-linear nature of leading a quest is that a book is static and linear. Because we don't have the benefit of exploring this concept together over a dynamic conversation with coffee and expansive gesticulation (at least, not right now), the inescapably static and linear nature of a book requires that I arrange relevant concepts into a seemingly logical sequence.

And so, I have attempted to do this. The result is okay — but it's not perfect. In fact, you may find yourself jumping back and forth between chapters. ^[1] To assist you with this dance, here's a nifty overview of the parts that make up this book:

Part I: Default Thinking and the Kraken of Doom frames the *why* behind this book. Yes, I used that classic approach of framing the problem and context first. Call it constructive discontent. In part I, we explore default thinking, the Curse of Efficiency and the Delusion of Progress. We also review the default growth arc of an enterprise, and discover how great businesses can one day wake up to discover they are no longer relevant.

If you want to get into the meat of the book, you could skip part I — but I don't advise it. You see, I have this terrible tendency to weave metaphors through my stories (rather than use bland corporate speak). A key metaphor in this story — the Inevitable Kraken of Doom — is introduced in part I, and you don't want to miss this beast.

Part II: A Quest Beckons unpacks the *what* — Quest-Augmented Strategy. This is a framework for meaningful progress and enduring relevance, and is the main proposition of this book: providing a means to augment enterprise strategy with pioneering leadership. The model presented in chapter 5 summarises this framework, so, hot tip: if you find yourself getting lost, return to chapter 5.

Part III: Cultivating Options includes the first of our more focused *how* chapters. This may be the most challenging and paradoxical part of the book. Here, we explore infinitely complex and uncertain future contexts. Your existing business rationale is then contrasted against these possible futures, to identify any incoherencies.^[2] Such incoherencies may harbour alternative options — new pathways that may be of strategic merit to your enterprise. We harvest these.

Part IV: Crafting Experiments then switches our focus from pioneering thinking to pioneering *doing*. Here we explore how you can support experiments that enhance learning and yield strategic insight. It's through this focus that our alternative strategic options are validated.

Part V: Augmenting Strategy sees us switch back into more familiar operational territory. Here, we focus on how you can augment existing enterprise strategy with the viable alternative options generated through pioneering work. This is how we secure enduring relevance.

Part VI: Making Progress is what happens when we don't succumb to The Delusion of Progress — that is, our tendency to get caught up in the busy work. This section offers some practical insight for enterprise leaders looking to make meaningful progress 'the new normal'.

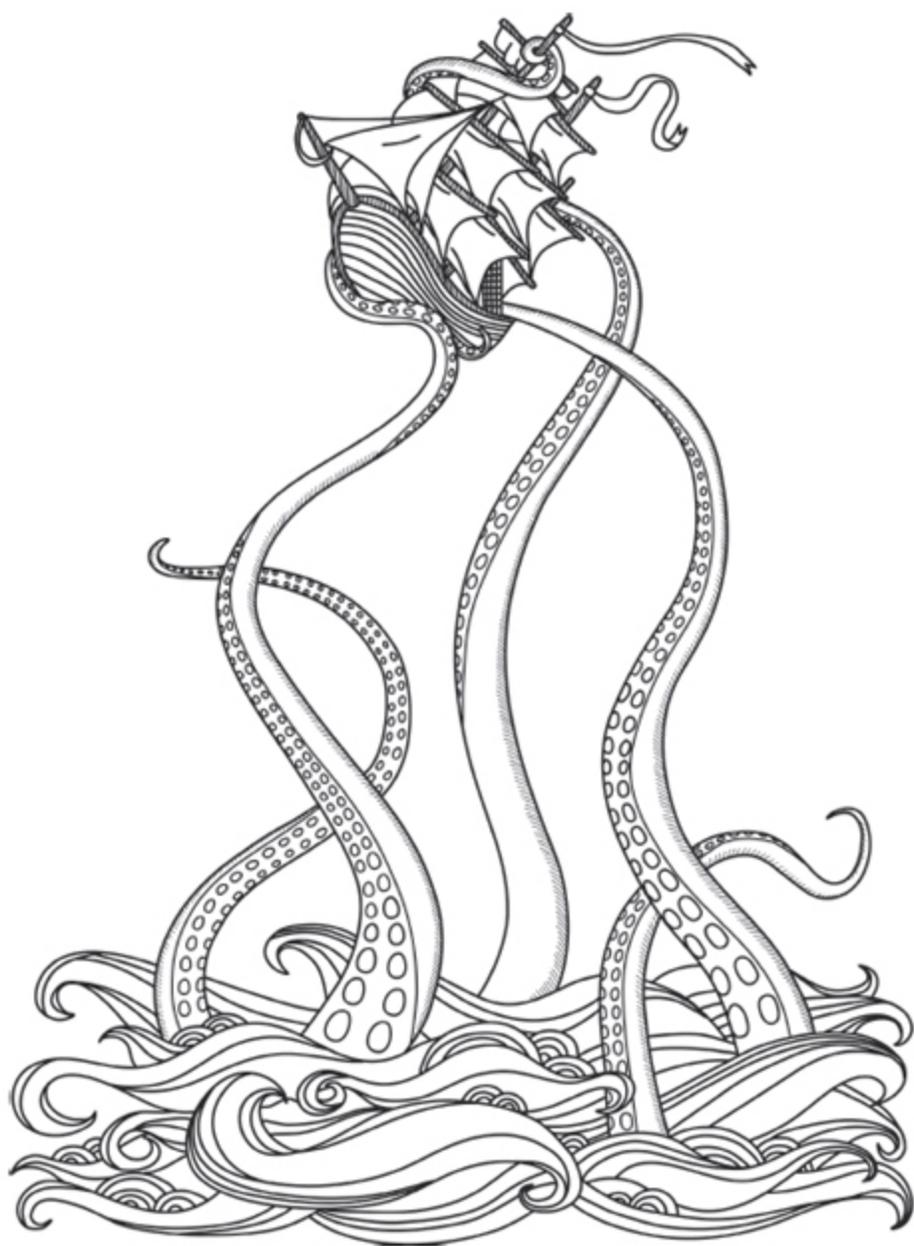
Part VII: Pioneering Culture is a whole heap of fun. Having progressed through each quadrant of Quest-Augmented Strategy, we then cast our focus on new rituals you can integrate — personally and with your team — to lead meaningful progress. Through this, you begin to integrate pioneering leadership into workplace culture.

And then it all wraps up with a short **conclusion**. You may find that you are left with more questions than answers. If so, marvellous. This is my gift to you.

Righto, shall we? Let's get into it.

Notes

- [1](#) Think of this book as a *Choose Your Own Adventure*, rather than simply a 'follow the instructions' book.
- [2](#) Don't rush this chapter.



Part I

Default Thinking and the Kraken of Doom

Default [noun]: an option that is selected automatically in the absence of viable alternatives.

Ahoy the default! It's always there, and it's such a time-saver. So handy. Thanks to the default, we get stuff done and we make things happen.

But sometimes — because it's always there — we stop seeing the default. We stop questioning the very thing that influences every decision we make. And, thus, we assume our assumptions are valid, sound, correct and appropriate for the current and emerging context we operate in.

Our default thinking (and the biases it harbours) becomes like air to a bird, or water to a fish. We are so unceasingly immersed in it that we don't even comprehend it to be there. And so the things that we do become the perpetual echoes of things we did before, and the reflection of the norms we're immersed in.

Change, progress and growth only truly happen when we challenge our thinking, and explore alternative options.

But, of course, the default is not all bad! It's actually really rather handy, most of the time. So before we proceed with our fancy future-focused, proactive, default-eschewing, strategic-progress-making magic, in chapter 1 we're going to pay a brief homage to default thinking and the wonderful things it brings. Things like systems, templates and other Established Ways of Doing Things. Such constructs save us from having to reinvent things or think too hard over every little task we do, which in turn liberates us from duplicated effort and wasted time — efficient, eh?

Naturally these constructs work fine for formulaic work with predictable outcomes (improving efficiencies within existing systems), but this unquestioning approach does not beget brilliant strategy or pioneering growth. In fact, this kind of thinking only leads to one thing: the Inevitable Kraken of Doom — a not-so-mythical beast that feeds upon irrelevance (introduced in chapter 3).

Despite outward appearances, this book is *not* about how to quest towards irrelevance. How ridiculous! It's quite the opposite. This is about ensuring that you, your enterprise business model and your modus operandi stay relevant and useful, and that your work continues to grow and prosper — now and into the future.

And so, before we embark upon any sort of quest, let's explore the current premise that we're operating from. What is informing and influencing your thinking right now? Where do your defaults come from?



1

The Anatomy of Default Thinking

The 'default' is defined as an option that is selected automatically unless a viable alternative is specified.^[1] It's influenced by the sum of our experiences, and is usually the option that requires the least effort (or least angst/uncertainty/discomfort) for the most short-term gain.

'But from whence does the default come?' I hear you ask. Well, linguistically, 'default' stems from the Old French word 'defaut', which in turn stems from 'defaillir' or 'to fail' (from 'fallere' — a Latin word meaning 'disappoint' and 'deceive').

Failure, disappointment or deception, eh? Fun. This connotation of default typically applies to not meeting a loan repayment — but there's an important message for leadership in this, too. Rely solely on default thinking, and you're going to encounter disappointment.

But, enough of that! Don't tempt me with further discussions of linguistics and semantics — I hold a doctorate in philosophy, which makes me quite inclined to engage in confusing and somewhat-irrelevant tangential pursuits of linguistic and philosophical whimsy. **sets cognac aside**

Now, in practical terms, the default comes from our ability to recognise, match and leverage *patterns*.

This is what Daniel Kahneman — Nobel Prize winner and author of *Thinking, Fast and Slow* — might describe as 'system 1 thinking'.^[2] This type of thinking is fast, automatic, frequent, emotional, stereotypic and subconscious. The opposite to default thinking would be what Kahneman might describe as 'system 2 thinking'. This type of thinking happens consciously and is, by contrast, slow, effortful, infrequent, logical and calculating.

A lot of my work involves helping leadership teams engage in more 'slow thinking'. It's critically important, and it's how we lead and progress worthy quests. But, in my experience, the framing of a dichotomy of 'fast versus slow' does slow thinking a disservice. Thanks to the Curse of Efficiency (see chapter 2), selling the importance of slow thinking in a world that wants fast results is ... tricky.

And so, I've replaced 'slow' with 'thorough'. Thus, our options are to think fast, and leverage our default thinking, or we can think more thoroughly — challenging our default assumptions by exploring diverse perspectives and generating alternative options. But the detail on that comes later.

First, let's return to the anatomy of our fast, default thinking.

PATTERNS

From the moment we are born, we start to recognise patterns — those discrete, discernible and repeatable experiences. Every such experience we observe is encoded to inform our model of how the world works.

Indeed, the linguistic roots of the word 'pattern' come from the Old French word 'patron' — the idea being that this patron serves as a model or example to be copied. I love linguistics.

The more frequently we experience or observe particular phenomena, the stronger this encoding becomes. It's why we train for sport, and practise mathematics, music and language. Without this incredible ability to recognise patterns, we would never learn anything. We wouldn't even know how to communicate. In fact, our ability to recognise and codify patterns to form our own model of the world could arguably be a cornerstone of our existence.

#profound

And all this pattern recognition is automatic: by just observing and experiencing the world around you, you are codifying new patterns or reinforcing existing ones.

From a very young age, for example, we're picking up objects and then dropping them. We observe a repeatable pattern, learn it, and are eventually given a label for it — 'gravity'. Likewise, we learn about our preferences through our experiences. I commonly order my default coffee preference at a cafe, without even thinking about it. Sure, some fancy new single origin may be on the menu, but I'd need to be aware and mindful to look for it first.

Many of us experience the phenomena of pattern recognition and default thinking when driving (or riding) home from work. If you've had a particularly tiring or busy day, or if you have a lot on your mind, the well-encoded pattern of your usual route could have you arriving home without you even truly realising it. Another example is musicians learning new music by studying patterns of input. It's clunky to start with, but with enough repetition (practice), the pattern becomes embedded, and the music

can be played without having to actively think about it. Much like riding a bike.

Think about a software developer writing code for a program. If they have diverse experience, chances are, when confronted with new challenges, they can quickly call upon a rich database of potential solutions. On the other hand, a less experienced coder would need to invest more time to experiment with and explore the efficacy of new patterns, in order to find a solution.

Our memory is a database for such patterns. It stores patterns contextually, and is optimised for speed. This speed allows us to take the cognitive shortcuts that enable us to draw conclusions quickly. And the more experience we've had — the more patterns we have observed — the more cognitive shortcuts we have at hand.

But this speed comes at a cost — accuracy. Despite what we may think, our memory is often an inaccurate source of information, influenced as it is by myriad factors — such as our emotional (psychophysiological) state, time elapsed since we recognised the pattern and our current context. ^[3] This means that many of the patterns we call upon to inform our default thinking may be inaccurate in any given context or moment — or even no longer valid or relevant in this new context. Thus, without challenging our own default thinking, we may be proceeding with flawed assumptions.

Default thinking is not the result of consideration or any form of reasoned, intuitive or active thought. It takes effort to draw awareness to the potential inaccuracies or inherent biases within our thinking. Such effort is confronting, and slows down the cognitive process and decision-making, running counter to the efficiency and productivity we need for most of our work. ^[4]