> ‘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*

How to Lead a Quest

a handbook for pioneering executives

Dr Jason Fox

best-selling author of *The Game Changer*

WILEY

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Table of Contents

About the Author | ix
Gratitudes | xi
Introduction | xv

Part I

Default Thinking and the Kraken of Doom

Why lead a quest?

1. The Anatomy of Default Thinking | 3
Cognitive shortcuts & the virtues of laziness

2. The Curse of Efficiency | 15
A Delusion of Progress & the bane of strategy

3. A Rainbow of Growth and Despair | 23
A default growth arc & the Inevitable Kraken of Doom

∆ Summary | 35

Part II

A Quest Beckons

What makes up a quest?

4. An Alternative Option | 41
A call to adventure & the hidden benefits of doubt

5. Quest-Augmented Strategy | 59
A framework for meaningful progress & enduring relevance

6. Here be Dragons | 69
Dissociated metacognition & the siren call of self-sabotage

∆ Summary | 79

Part III
Cultivating Options
How do we find alternative pathways?

7. An Intuitive Reckoning | 85
A nagging hunch & the hint of strategic advantage

8. Intriguing Incoherence | 93
Pioneering through uncertainty, complexity & paradox

9. Pathways of Possibility | 113
A quiver of options & the anticipation of chooks

Δ Summary | 119

Part IV
Crafting Experiments
How do we validate alternative pathways?

10. It's Not About Ideas | 125
The many virtues of a science-based approach

11. Planning to Fail | 141
Navigating the nine layers of Fell

12. Viable Alternative Options | 155
Packaged intelligence & a path to follow

Δ Summary | 163

Part V
Augmenting Strategy
How do we lead better strategy?

13. Back to the Future | 169
Getting strategic about strategy

14. Choosing to Choose | 177
Mapping options & dodging cognitive bias

15. Strategy for Breakfast | 191
The networked enterprise & a responsive hydra

Δ Summary | 201

Part VI
Making Progress
How do we create meaningful progress?

16. Bimodal Beginnings | 207
Planting seeds & growing new ways of working

17. Meaningful Progress | 215
Finding progress amongst a sea of vagueness

18. Mission Impossible | 219
Projects with imperative & a few caveats

Δ Summary | 223

Part VII
Pioneering Culture
How do we embed pioneering leadership into work culture?

19. Lost in Translation | 229
Finding the behaviours that make strategy happen

20. Structures, Artefacts and Rituals | 237
Getting deliberate about the vibe

21. Contextual Momentum | 245
A map of rituals to get you moving

Δ Summary | 267

Conclusion | 269

Index | 273

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.

Firstly, I'm grateful for all of the authors and thought leaders that have gone before me. Writing a book requires a degree of dedication that borders upon ridiculousness. But by venturing through doubt, uncertainty and paradox, these past adventurers have captured the knowledge we build upon today. They're the pioneers, and I doff my hat to them.

I'm also grateful for the folks at Wiley. Thank you Kristen for seeing the merit in this book right away, and for your trust in me. Thanks also to Ingrid for your support at every stage, and to Chris and Alice for pulling it all together at the end. Without your support, I'm not sure this book could have ever been published —I'd still be writing and exploring.

Big hugs to Charlotte, my supercool editor. I was worried that all of the jolly quirks in my writing would be ironed out into something bland —but quite the opposite happened. Thanks to the thorough, clever and effective editing of Charlotte, this book actually makes a bit of sense and has become even more of a delight to read. Huge thanks also to Jack and Mel for your editing support.

There have been a few mates that have been quite influential in my own thinking. Sweeping feathered hat tips (in no particular order) to Matt Church, Peter Cook, Darren and Alison Hill, Jennifer and Dougal

Jackson, Amantha Imber, Sean Fabri, Will Dayble, Dan Gregory, Kieran Flanagan… plus a bunch of folk who I will no doubt regret having forgotten to mention here. They're all thought leaders and champions in their own right.

I'm lucky to work with some pretty ace clients. Thanks especially to the University of Melbourne's Centre for Workplace Leadership. Peter, Sarah and the gang—you guys are legendary, and your support has contributed much richness to this book. Love you guys.

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I need to thank my friends and family—they have all been incredibly patient and kind to me as I write this book. I've been that guy who ghosts on weddings and birthdays, and who brings book writing to dinner. Thanks for still liking me and wanting to hang out.

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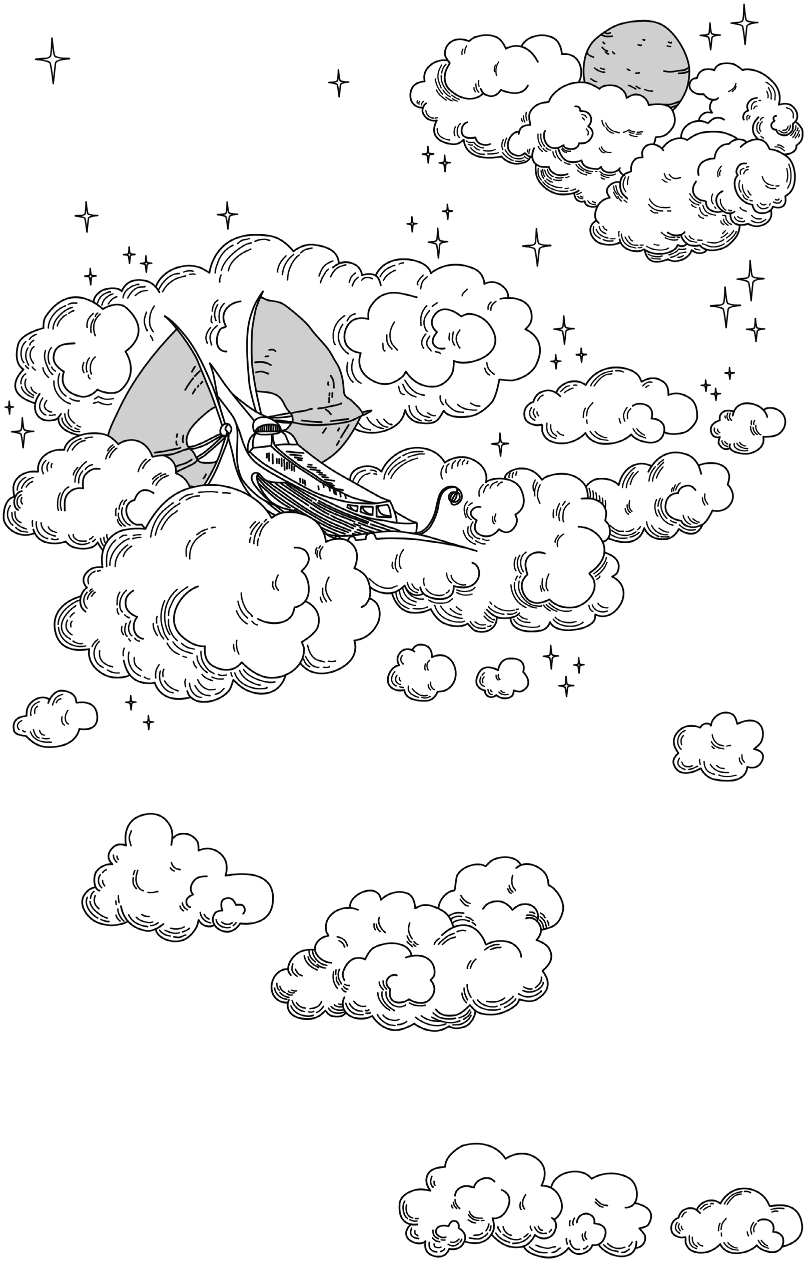
I'm so grateful for everyone who purchased my first book *The Game Changer* and made it a best-seller. It gave me the confidence to write the slightly more daring book you hold in your hands right now. I'm also especially grateful those who left a kind review online—this feedback kept me buoyed when 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!

And finally, my wonderful darling Kim (aka the 'dangerlam'). You have been the most supportive of all. You've been the light in the dark, and you've kept me aloft throughout—even when things became stupidly busy. I literally couldn't have done this without you. I'm so grateful to share life with you, and to have your illustrations in this book. You are pure wonder, insight and delight!

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

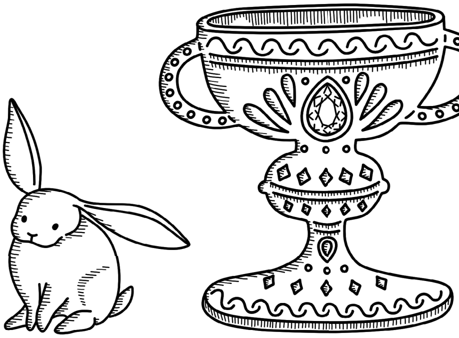
This book presents a different approach to enterprise strategy and leadership. I wouldn't go as far as to say it is an 'alternative' approach; rather, it is something much more complementary: *pioneering* leadership.

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

---

1 | Think of this book as a *Choose Your Own Adventure*, rather than simply a 'follow the instructions' book.

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.

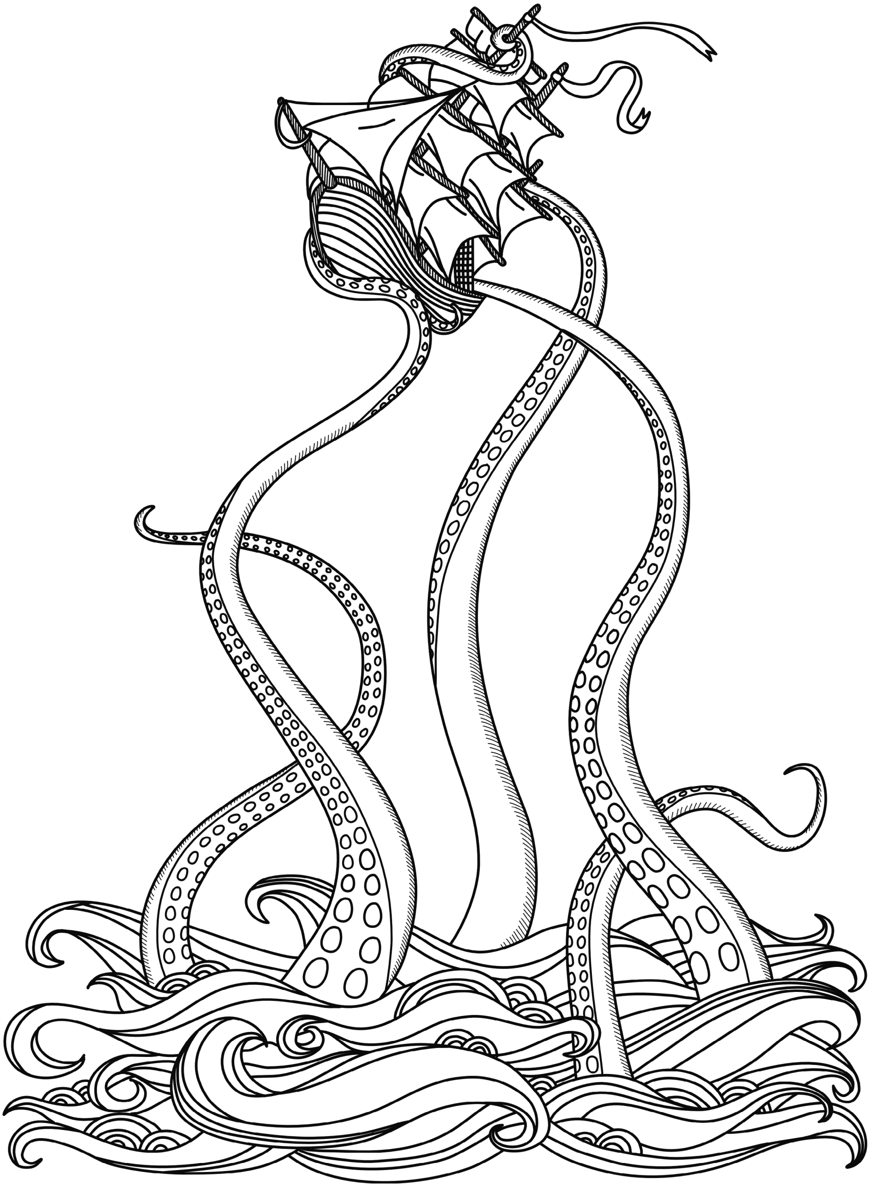
Part VI: Making Progress is what happens when we don't succumb to The Delusion of Progress—that is, our tendency to get caught up in the busy work. This section offers some practical insight for enterprise leaders looking to make meaningful progress 'the new normal'.

2| Don't rush this chapter.

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.



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.

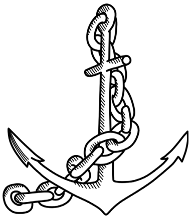
But, of course, the default is not all bad! It’s actually really rather handy, most of the time. So before we proceed with our fancy future-focused, proactive, default-eschewing, strategic-progress-making magic, in chapter 1 we’re going to pay a brief homage to default thinking and the wonderful things 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*.

---

[1] Ah, so…how do you generate viable, alternative options to consider? A splendid question! And also the main thesis of this book.

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

---

[2] Of course, he would describe it in much greater depth and with more elegance than I have here. If you're unfamiliar with his work, I highly recommend you explore it.

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]

Of course, it would simply be infeasible to engage in slow, deep and thorough thinking for every facet of business—we'd get nothing done. It'd be silly to go back to the drawing board when attempting any new task.

And so systems are created to help us to manage increasingly complex patterns of work.

SYSTEMS

Most organisations today simply would not function without clever systems. Systems keep entropy at bay.[5]

3| Not to mention a swag of cognitive biases (see chapter 14).

4| You may have already suspected this, but I'm setting up 'default thinking' to take a fall. Don't get me wrong—it is utterly brilliant for 80 per cent of our work.* If you're looking to replicate existing work more efficiently, to simply tick boxes, be productive, get shit done and progress formulaic processes with predictable outcomes, your ability to recognise patterns, take cognitive shortcuts, leverage past experience and run with default thinking is an absolute asset. But—and it's a big but—if you're looking to venture beyond the default, to truly innovate and pioneer into uncharted territory, you need to 'ware the perils of our default thinking, lest we meet the Inevitable Kraken of Doom.

* Where did I get this figure from? Not research. It just seems 'about right'—I essentially defaulted to the Praeto principle, which states that (for most events) roughly 80 per cent of the effects come from 20 per cent of the causes. And why did I do this? Because it serves as a good reference point. And that's what default thinking can be, if we can heighten ourselves to see it: a reference point for decision-making. But not the only reference point.

5| Or, at least, they attempt to—but entropy relates to increasing disorder (the higher the entropy, the greater the disorder) and disorder will always win, in the end.

Whenever we've got multiple, interconnected patterns happening, we have the opportunity to create systems to increase our efficiency and avoid wasted effort.

I use, and love, a heap of systems — one being the software I'm writing this book with, and the operating system that nests it. These complex systems were developed by very intelligent teams. Short of an ecosystem or the human body, few systems are quite as complex.

But not all systems are of such a high order.

Take the typical sales sequence, for example. I've chosen 'sales' because it is a fairly universal function within any business or organisation — even if your organisation or business unit doesn't sell products or services for money, value is still generated and a currency of exchange is still at play.

The typical sequence looks like this:

1. First, a business needs to generate leads ('leads' being code for 'potential opportunities'). Assuming you are doing something of value, generating leads could look like advertising, marketing, public relations or networking. In my world, leads are generated as a consequence of doing great work with clients (which generates referrals), sharing fresh research and insights (via my 'making clever happen' museletter), speaking at conferences, running our own events, and publishing research and books like this. Each of these activities is also a collection of patterns — but they form part of this bigger sales sequence.

2. Once leads are generated, they need to be qualified. If your organisation trades entirely online, your situation may be that the customer is self-qualifying, and your focus is on enhancing conversion. But if your organisation is service-based, or you engage in business-to-business sales, you likely need to qualify your leads. This means sorting out the valuable opportunities from the dead ends. In my world, we scare the tyre kickers away with our fee guide.

3. Next comes the nurturing. Some sales cycles are incredibly short, and as such, minimal client nurturing

is required. A sales rep might know the typical questions that prospects have about a product, and be able to easily call upon the right answers for these questions. Other sales cycles are incredibly long, and require a lot of client nurturing. An example might be a large organisation adopting a new piece of software for tens of thousands of their employees—it's a big decision. Eventually, with enough nurturing prompts and the right frequency of positive interactions, clients are ready to consider investing in the work.

4. Then comes the pretty proposal. Once prospective clients are primed and ready to buy, some sort of proposal or agreement is required. This may be something automatically generated, like a software license agreement, with pricing structures that scale in proportion to the number of users. Or it could be manually generated. I used to spend a heap of time on these (mainly on design and layout), but over time we had developed enough confidence and experience to be able to recognise patterns and present proposals that frame our methodology and value (without getting bogged down in detail).
5. Then comes doing the work. And providing the value (although of course, you'd want to be providing value before any proposal is submitted). This nests a whole heap of systems and patterns too. Patterns, patterns everywhere! But sometimes we have good systems to corral them into something manageable.

And that's kind of how we make sales happen. Each step nests its own level of complexity but, not to worry—we have a system to manage this complexity. If you're a small business, your system might look like a spreadsheet that lists the current status of particular opportunities. If you're a bit more advanced, you might be using customer relationship management and/or sales pipeline software as your sales system. Thanks to these systems, we can track where various opportunities are at, and can ensure we are investing the right effort in the right folks at the right time.

But this is an incredibly simple example of a very small and agile thought-leadership practice. As things scale up, things get much more complex.