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Ever since the publication of Peter Senge’s *The Fifth Discipline*, 25 years ago, companies have sought to become “learning organizations” that continually transform themselves. In our era of digital disruption, this goal is more important than ever. But even the best companies still [struggle](#) to make real progress in this area.

One problem is that they’ve been focused on the wrong thing. The problem isn’t learning: it’s *unlearning*. In every aspect of business, we are operating with mental models that have grown outdated or obsolete, from strategy to marketing to organization to leadership. To embrace the new logic of value creation, we have to unlearn the old one.

Unlearning is not about forgetting. It's about the ability to choose an alternative mental model or paradigm. When we learn, we add new skills or knowledge to what we already know. When we unlearn, we step outside the mental model in order to choose a different one.

As an example, last summer I rented a car to travel around Great Britain. I had never driven this kind of car before, so I had to learn the placement of the various controls. I also had to learn how to drive on the left side of the road. All of that was relatively easy. The hard part was *unlearning* how to drive on the right. I had to keep telling myself to “stay left.” It's the reason crosswalks in London have reminders for pedestrians to “look right.” It's not easy to unlearn the mental habits that no longer serve us.

The same thing happens in business. Many of the paradigms we learned in school and built our careers on are either incomplete or ineffective.

In strategy, an entire generation grew up with Michael Porter's [five forces](#). In this model, competitive advantage is achieved by driving costs down, driving prices up, locking in customers, and locking out competitors and entrants. In [Porter's view](#), “the essence of strategy is that you must set limits on what you're trying to accomplish.”

But in a networked economy, the nature of strategy, value creation, and competitive advantage change from [incremental to exponential](#). Companies like Google, Uber, Airbnb, and Facebook focus on how to remove limits rather than set them. They look beyond controlling the pipe that delivers a product and instead build platforms that enable others to create value. They look to create network effects through ecosystems of customers, suppliers, and partners.

The Porter model of strategy isn't obsolete. But it is decidedly incomplete. It takes unlearning to see the model as only one possibility rather than canonical truth. As the saying goes, “The map is not the territory.”

In the field of marketing, our thinking is permeated by the mental model of mass communication. The world has become [many-to-many](#), but we still operate with a one-to-many mindset. Everything is linear and transactional. We segment into discrete buckets even though people are multidimensional. We treat customers as consumers even when they want to be cocreators. We target buyers and run campaigns that push messages through channels even though real engagement increasingly happens through shared experiences. We move people through a pipeline that goes in one direction even though the customer journey is [nonlinear](#).

We need to unlearn the push model of marketing and explore alternative models. For example, instead of using relationships to drive transactions, we could be building [brand orbits](#) and embedding transactions in relationships. Instead of customers being consumers, we could have [relationships](#) with them in a variety of roles and social facets. Beyond delivering a value proposition, we could be fulfilling a shared purpose.

In the area of organizational design, we are seeing an evolution from formal hierarchies to fluid networks. But this requires a substantial amount of unlearning. Our instincts are to think of an organization as an org chart. We automatically escalate decisions to the boss. I often hear executives talk about being “more networked,” but what they really mean is collaborating across the silos. To truly become a networked organization, you need [decision principles](#) that create both alignment and autonomy. But this requires unlearning in the areas of management, leadership, and governance.

The process of unlearning has three parts.

- **First, you have to recognize that the old mental model is no longer relevant or effective.** This is a challenge because we are usually unconscious of our mental models. They are the proverbial water to the fish. In addition, we might be afraid to admit that the existing model is growing outdated. We have built our reputations and careers on the mastery of these old models. Letting go can seem like starting over and losing our status, authority, or sense of self.
- **Second, you need to find or create a new model that can better achieve your goals.** At first, you will probably see this new model through the lens of the old. Many companies are ineffective in their use of social media because they still think of it as a channel for distributing a message. They haven’t made the mental shift from one-to-many to many-to-many. Social is best thought of as a context rather than a channel.
- **Third, you need to ingrain the new mental habits.** This process is no different from creating a new behavioral habit, like your diet or golf swing. The tendency will be to fall back into the old way of thinking and therefore the old way of doing. It’s useful to create triggers that alert you to which model you are working from. For example, when you are talking about your customers, catch yourself when you call them “consumers” — this corresponds to a transactional mindset. Find a word that reflects a more collaborative relationship. The shift in language helps to reinforce the shift in mindset.

The good news is that practicing unlearning will make it easier and quicker to make the shifts as your brain adapts. (It’s a process called neuroplasticity.) You can see this process at work in an experiment by [Destin Sandler and his “backwards bicycle.”](#) Toward the end of the video you can see the unlearning process at work. One thing to look for is how the process itself is exponential. One moment he can’t ride the bike, and then the next moment he can. So as you begin unlearning, be patient with yourself — it’s not a [linear process](#). Albert Einstein once said, “We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.” In this time of transformative change, we need to be conscious of our mental models and ambidextrous in our thinking. Sometimes the incremental models of barriers to entry, linear campaigns, and hierarchical controls will be the right ones. But we need to unlearn these models and replace them with exponential models based on network effects, [brand orbits](#), and distributed networks. The place to start is by unlearning how we think about learning.

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