



Book Raise the Bar

Creative Strategies to Take Your Business And Personal Life to the Next Level

Mike Vance and Diane Deacon
Career Press, 1999

Recommendation

Mike Vance (who worked closely with Walt Disney, one of the world’s greatest innovators) and Diane Deacon clearly know their stuff when it comes to raising the bar, thinking outside the box and other somewhat clichéd approaches to business and personal performance. But, paradoxically, their book fails to raise its own bar. The writing is simplistic, lacks personality and reads like a formulaic presentation absent nuance, wit, intellect or style. Nonetheless, the book’s content is worthy of your attention, especially if you’re stuck in a rut, fearful of innovating or locked into a corporate climate that discourages creativity. BooksInShort recommends this book’s message to those who need a reminder that unless they innovate and ratchet up their achievement level, they will stagnate. As for the authors - do as they say, not as they write.

Take-Aways

- Raising the bar is about raising your level of innovation and performance on an on-going basis.
- Raising the bar requires letting go of fear.
- Raising the bar requires a corporate culture that supports independent, creative thinking.
- Eight strategies help you to raise the bar.
- Raising the bar includes inspiring and encouraging others.
- Pathfinders raise the bar in all areas of life.
- Studying and emulating pathfinders can help you raise the bar.
- Pathfinders don’t follow the crowd.
- Once you’ve raised the bar, set your sights on raising it even further.
- To achieve breakthrough solutions, tackle impossible missions.

Summary

A Master Stimulates Others

In everything he did, Walt Disney creatively moved himself and his company up to the "next level." He found ways to stimulate others by getting them to focus on new challenges and examine long-standing problems with fresh eyes. When his employees were working on a project, or making a presentation to him, he tossed in his thoughts, adding innovative twists that made their solutions better, prompting creative thinking from everyone around him. His employees often said, "If only we all could learn to stimulate others like Walt did."

“Do we sanction incompetence by ignoring it?”

Disney truly knew how to "raise the bar" for himself and everyone else. Raising the bar isn't about getting everyone excited, or about prompting short-term positive changes. Raising the bar requires developing the habit of raising the level of performance on a regular basis and "in such a dramatic, exciting and powerful way that no one ever wants to go back to the old ways of doing things."

“You can never achieve the lofty dreams you have if you're a perfectionist.” [Walt Disney]

When you raise the bar, you take what's being done now and make it better. Use innovation and creativity to enhance quality and uniqueness. Constantly create new standards for the way you do things, putting each standard at a higher level than the previous one. Increasingly higher standards become exciting creative challenges, not scary expectations. Raising the bar means constantly taking creative risks and implementing new ideas that improve your work and your life. Doing this requires a free environment that encourages and rewards free thinking.

“Experimentation penetrates the shell of conformity.”

You can employ eight strategies to help you raise the bar.

Strategy #1: Build a Strong Foundation

To weather the seasons, a business' foundation must be solid and deep-rooted. Even though its roots are deeply embedded, they still need to grow. That requires flexibility. All of these aspects of the foundation must be in place to support raising the bar. Begin by asking these foundational questions:

- What are things really like?
- Why are they the way they are?
- How will change be implemented?
- Is the plan realistic and deliverable?
- Is everyone genuinely change-oriented?
- Is incompetence sanctioned?
- Have ideas been formed into a vision?
- Are there people on the team with ability?
- Is everyone prepared to see the project through to the end?

Strategy #2: Think out of the Box

You've probably heard this phrase many times and there's a reason for that. To be innovative, you must not be contained. To get into a creative zone, to flex and strengthen your creative muscle and to raise the bar, you must be released from the cultures of conformity that so often plague organizations and the very societies in which they operate. This requires three major steps: 1) Eliminate boundaries by changing the workplace; 2) Change how you inform others and share plenty of information and 3) Create something based on inspiration or challenge.

Strategy #3: Create a Master Detailed Plan

When constructing your master plan, the following elements should play key roles: technology, needs, trends, timing, visualizing ideas, a cause that drives innovation, teams with the skills and qualifications needed, and overcoming the fear of the unknown.

Strategy #4: Develop Pathfinders

Buckminster Fuller, inventor of the geodesic dome and all-around genius, once said, "We humans in the universe are designed for complete success. All we need is a revival." By that he meant a rebirth and resurgence of your best values, talents and motives - a true renaissance of the spirit. Fuller loved and celebrated human potential and creative power and said that society needs to revive its belief in what one single individual can accomplish. Consider the incredible power of a single person by remembering the activities and influence of these contrasting pairs: Da Vinci and Napoleon; Gandhi and Hitler; Lincoln and Stalin, and Disney and Dahmner.

“You don’t have to have flat sales in order to do something to grow the business. You don’t need to have a catastrophe in order to move your business to the next level.”

Society needs a revival of long-range thinkers - pathfinders - and a decline in the short-range opportunities we’ve had too much of for too long. Pathfinders are people who are visionary, who dream and plan, who know how to break out of the crowd. They allow people the freedom to explore and experiment even in the face of opposition. A pathfinder takes the first step, tests ideas and limits, breaks new records, shows others the way, creates the model and keeps raising the bar.

Strategy #5: Breaking into the Creative Zone

Fear of innovative thinking keeps many people in the box in the first place because it just hasn’t been rewarded in the workplace. In fact, it’s often frowned upon. You’re just supposed to do what you’re told. Deviate from that and you could find yourself out of a job. Few workplaces encourage or reward creative thinking, though they might claim that they do. In essence, people are trained not to think, not to create, not to experiment - just to sit inside their boxes. The few that venture out to become pathfinders often find themselves misunderstood or even punished.

“There are many businesspeople and entrepreneurs out there who don’t complete the race because they fail to commit themselves to creative thinking and habits of continuous improvement. Their lives and businesses often flounder hopelessly.”

To encourage employees to break out of the box and enter the "creative zone," identify where they are making creative breakthroughs in your organization and encourage more of that in every area of the company. Forget excuses about being too busy to create. Failure to devote time to creative thinking is extremely shortsighted and ultimately produces an absence of innovation, which jeopardizes a business. Many critical needs, opportunities and problems cry out for breakthrough solutions.

“Today, far too many of us are playing it safe by relying on corporate consultants and support groups to run our lives and businesses.”

Society and culture - including business - will stagnate and die without innovation. However, creative thinking will not take care of itself; leaders must encourage it. Put your business in the creative zone with these ideas:

- Don’t solve this year’s problems with last year’s solutions.
- Encourage and reward those with great ideas.
- Believe that nothing is impossible.
- Take plenty of time to think and let your mind wander.
- Bring your ideas up to a higher plane of excellence.
- Make your ideas bigger than life.
- Think with all five senses and experiment.
- Let go of fear so you can see ideas and potential.

Strategy #6: Communicate and Organize

Good communication and organizational skills are essential foundations of sharing your creativity. Get the right information out to the right people at the right time and allow others to give input, suggestions and ideas. Plan how you will communicate and organize ideas and projects. Above all, be sensitive when you communicate with others.

Strategy #7: Roll Out and Implement

Lots of solid projects don't get off the ground because nobody developed a good implementation plan. Many good plans don't make it in the marketplace because little or no attention was paid to implementation. Your master plan must include a launch plan. Different departments need to create, communicate and agree upon plans before a launch. Draw up contingency plans to deal with problems that might affect the launch. Have troubleshooters ready to deal with all roadblocks. As you raise the bar and launch new ideas, continue to focus ample people and resources on maintaining the current business. You must have people "covering third base and home plate as you are hitting a home run."

Strategy #8: Keep the Creative Spirit Alive and Growing

This last strategy is the most strategic of all because it provides the passion, inspiration and vision to keep going, in part by offering examples of others who also raised the bar. Choose your personal and corporate heroes, pathfinders who can serve as models. Pathfinders establish a vision, and they go for it. They follow the internal excitement that leads them to make their dreams a reality. You can model yourself on any of these three pathfinder types:

“Managers should improve the process rather than protect their turf.”

1) Champion - They actively take up the cause to the end. 2) Heroes - They are recognized and honored for being pathfinders. 3) Models - They exemplify the way; they inspire and train others to follow.

Pathfinders don't follow the crowd, they aren't afraid to step out and do things differently. They don't just react; they think and create. Make a list of pathfinders and heroes you admire. Study and learn from their example. Don't think that because they're famous and you're not that you can't be a pathfinder. After all, their fame came from their ideas and actions, not before.

“Innovation is the result of intelligence, sensitivity, curiosity and experimentation, invoking growth between the head and the heart.”

Mahatma Gandhi was a pathfinder. He raised the bar for social justice higher and higher, and he inspired others to do the same. He wrote a list he called the "Seven Blunders," enumerating societal actions that cause violence. These blunders also keep your organization from raising the bar. Gandhi's grandson, Arun, added the eighth blunder. The blunders are:

1. Wealth without work.
2. Pleasure without conscience.
3. Knowledge without character.
4. Commerce without morality.
5. Science without humanity.
6. Worship without sacrifice.
7. Politics without principles.
8. Rights without responsibilities.

Principles for Raising the Bar

Follow these guidelines as you raise the bar higher and higher:

- Create projects that will set the bar higher.
- Identify pathfinders and create pathfinder development plans and programs.
- Cultivate your company culture to support raising the bar.
- Avoid the eight blunders in your organization.
- Learn from heroes, champions and models.
- Have a formula and plan on how you will raise the bar.
- Select people who know how to inspire others.

About the Authors

Mike Vance, the former head of Disney University, lectures and consults on creative ideas and breakthrough solutions. **Diane Deacon** is president of the Creative Thinking Association of America and of Intellectual Equities, a products, seminar and consulting company providing creative services. She is an authority in idea development and innovative problem solving. Vance and Deacon also co-authored *Think Out of the Box* and *Break Out of the Box*.
