



Book If It Ain't Broke...Break It!

And Other Unconventional Wisdom for a Changing Business World

Robert J. Kriegel and Louis Patler
Warner Books, 1992

Recommendation

Robert J. Kriegel takes his experience in performance psychology and deftly combines it with his and Louis Patler's expertise in leadership and business. They create an enjoyable and insightful look at how unconventional wisdom can propel a business to the top, especially when mixed with the willingness to be innovative and take risks. Devoid of cliches and useless filler, this book is solid and includes plenty of quotes from other experts. Kriegel and Patler weave business case histories effortlessly into the commentary. *BooksInShort* recommends this book to anyone involved in the destiny of any kind of business, as well as to people interested in contemporary culture.

Take-Aways

- Change is happening so quickly that it will shake the foundations of even the most secure businesses.
- The survival of every business depends upon its ability to innovate and change.
- Conventional Wisdom never worked and must be replaced by Unconventional Wisdom.
- Without passion, you've got nothing.
- Forget about the bottom line: that only leads to looking for reasons to shoot down new ideas.
- Always mess with success.
- Faster isn't always better.
- Believe in the process, not just the product, or you will stagnate.
- Use success not as a pedestal, but as a springboard.
- Always look for new ways of doing things, ways that have not been tried before.

Summary

Embrace the Unexpected

Change is happening so quickly that it will shake the foundations of even the most secure businesses. Very rapidly, “today’s innovations will become tomorrow’s antiques.”

The survival of every business depends upon its ability to do what most adults and most companies fear – change. The conventional wisdom that guided businesses in the past never worked that well in the first place, and is certainly outdated today.

Sticking to conventional wisdom will doom any business. The hallmarks of unconventional wisdom are the daunting concepts that keep a company adaptable and fresh, growing and innovative:

- Without passion, you’ve got nothing.
- Unless you dare, you’re doomed.
- Expect setbacks and learn to roll with them, not panic over them.
- Forces beyond your control will get in your way, so keep an eye on your environment.
- Move before it moves you.
- Don’t try to tackle everything yourself.
- Ride the wave of change.
- Put fire in your heart and don’t douse the fire in someone else.
- Look beyond numbers. The numbers may not be “lying”, but they rarely give the whole picture.
- Remember that it’s easy to persevere when you’ve got passion.
- Passion sets knowledge on fire; commitment takes you the distance.
- Forget about the bottom line: that only leads to looking for reasons to shoot down every new idea.
- You can teach an old dog new tricks, but only if he wants to learn. If he doesn’t, get a new dog.
- Some people prefer the “devil they know” to the devil they don’t, using that as an excuse to not try something new. Forget about devils altogether. New ideas aren’t devils. They are your only positive force.
- “Dreams are goals with wings.”
- Fast isn’t always better.

Always Mess With Success

Often, “if you don’t mess with success, someone else will.” Someone else will take advantage of your stagnation or complacency. If you don’t improve upon your product or service, another company will. Since everything is always changing, there’s really no such thing as a “finished product.”

“Competition encourages conformity, so break the rules and change the game.”

The Japanese have a word for this concept: kaizen means “continuous improvement.” This concept is the basis for the corporate culture at most successful Japanese companies. “The spirit of kaizen,” says international management consultant Kiyoshi Suzuki, “begins with the acceptance that the status quo is not perfect.”

“The time to change is when you don’t have to; when you’re on the crest of the wave, not when you’re in the trough.”

When you believe in the process, not just the product, you will not become stagnant as everything around you constantly changes. Your product must be able to grow as the environment grows. If you have already determined that your product itself shouldn’t change – as in the doomed experiment with a new kind of Coca-Cola – then the product’s marketing should adjust with the changing times instead.

Like great artists and great athletes who are never satisfied with their performances and always think they can do better next time, businesses must look forward to future improvements in every area. One of US professional basketball’s greatest players, Larry Bird, explained, “Once you’re labeled ‘the best’...you want to stay up there, and you can’t do it by loafing around. In basketball, the guys are getting bigger, stronger, and faster, the game is faster and more sophisticated...If I don’t keep changing, I’m history.”

“The rules for catching and riding a wave are fairly simple. The challenge is to turn them into action.”

Use success not as a pedestal, but as a springboard to keep you in motion and take you to even greater heights. “The best time to change is when you don’t have to.” You cannot do your best or clearest thinking when you have a “gun to your head,” whether it is a big deadline or a big decision. Changing under pressure is very difficult. Your morale is probably low and you’re distracted. Under these circumstances, you’re likely to make poor decisions. Instead, undertake change when you’re on top and your confidence is high. You’ll have more options that way and you’ll be able to think clearly and confidently.

“The thing that makes the difference between a good manager and an inspiring, dynamic leader goes beyond competence. It’s passion.”

As you change, look for innovation, ways of doing things that have not been done before. Don’t just change sideways; move forward, move differently. Playing it safe can actually be dangerous.

Conventional wisdom offers a lot of useless advice, and the idea of playing it safe is perhaps the most useless – and the one most likely to lead to failure. Nobody ever got anywhere without taking risks. When you play “not to lose,” you can never win. You’re too busy protecting yourself to get anywhere.

Many people play it safe because making decisions, especially big ones that involve innovation and change, is too scary. Out of fear of making the wrong decisions, people usually do just that – make the wrong decisions. When fear is your motivator, you cannot see anything clearly. Taking the conservative approach, leaning too much on market testing, insisting on consensus decision-making, and relying on an arbitrary budget will never put you on top or anywhere near it.

“True perseverance is not forced. People who are fired up don’t have to push themselves to persevere. It’s not something you have to do, it’s something you want to do. With passion as a base, perseverance comes naturally.”

“Reliance on the budget,” says Donald A. Curtis, a senior partner at Deloitte and Touche, a major US accounting firm, “is the fundamental flaw in American management.” That’s because managers wrongly assume that you can manage the business simply by managing the money. “Wrong,” Curtis says. “Just because a budget was not overspent doesn’t mean it was well spent.”

Change the Game

If you don’t like the market, change it. Define your own market and serve it. Create a new market, a new demand for your product or service that didn’t previously exist.

“The most common reaction to change is resistance.”

Don’t try to fit into the status quo. Instead of competing head-on with your competitors, make your product unique or serve a particular market that the other brands don’t reach. Competition only breeds conformity, it doesn’t encourage innovation or success.

“The only way to move into the future is to let go of the past.” Break the rules and you can fly. When you study some of the most successful and innovative companies in history, you’ll see that they did not use conventional wisdom, but rather some very unconventional wisdom.

“We survived because we have no rational business knowledge,” says Anita Roddick, the entrepreneur who founded the highly successful international chain of cosmetics and body products stores, The Body Shop, back in 1976. She broke most of the rules of succeeding in the cosmetics industry:

- In an industry that spends millions on marketing research, The Body Shop’s only research is a suggestion box in each store.
- In an industry where massive advertising and promotional campaigns are critical, The Body Shop relies only on word of mouth.
- In an industry that routinely sells packaging and image more than product and substance, The Body Shop uses refillable bottles that were originally designed for collecting urine specimens.
- In a manufacturing process that generates pounds of waste in order to produce a few ounces of cosmetics, The Body Shop has gone the environmentally friendly route instead. Many of their products use banana oil. Roddick and her staff didn’t want to throw away the thousands of banana skins left behind, so they set up a paper manufacturing facility in Nepal, wrote up contracts, and then turned the paper facility and the banana peels over to the local community.

Killing Sacred Cows

Sacred cows are those things we have always done a certain way, those “standard operating procedures” that people are so fearful of changing that they become essentially sacred to everyone. These are the fixed ideas, the things you have in mind when you say, “that’s the way it’s always been done.” Well, that doesn’t mean that it works well, or that it shouldn’t be changed. In fact, most sacred cows should be turned into hamburger.

“In an attempt to cling to the familiar and stay on safe ground, Maggie’s boss responded like a fireman hosing down a fire. He effectively ‘firehosed’ her, dousing her ideas, enthusiasm, and spirit.”

As MIT’s Commission on Industrial Productivity stated, corporations are suffering from “a deep reservoir of outmoded attitudes and policies.” Powerful forces that actually work against change, improvement, and innovation create sacred cows. Sacred cows lead you into routines and ruts. “You can’t move fast if you’re following a herd of sacred cows.” You can’t react to changes if you aren’t willing to disturb your sacred cows.

“Too often the fire in our hearts gets extinguished by overly rigid plans and short-term quotas and goals.”

Often you hear about a new company – such as The Body Shop when it began or the Internet companies that routinely make the news today – and its innovative, industry-changing ways of doing business that leave older companies in the dust. How do they do that? They are beginners, so they think like beginners. And, in some ways, that’s better than thinking like a seasoned corporate veteran.

A beginner has no ruts, routines, sacred cows, conventional wisdom, or “we’ve always done it this way” attitudes that get in the way of innovation. A beginner doesn’t know what is impossible, so a beginner’s mind isn’t full of limitations. Often, then, a beginner does what the veterans and experts thought was impossible.

“One of the biggest limits we impose on our own goals is believing that faster is better.”

When you look at the words you use, and redefine them, you can often get out of your thinking ruts. The biggest risk is not to risk anything. A risk isn’t the same as a chance. Take risks, not chances.

Don’t think of risk as a negative word, because it isn’t. A risk is an opportunity – a bold, daring, opportunity. Smart, successful risk-taking is actually calculated risk-taking. “If you don’t make waves, you’ll drown.” Gamble on new ideas. The word risk has too often been associated with the words “scary,” “foolish,” “dangerous,” and “failure.”

C.J. Silas, chairman and CEO of Phillips Petroleum, asked in a speech, “Where have all the risk-takers gone? We’ve exchanged free enterprise for frightened enterprise. The threshold of tolerable risk has now been set so low that the morbid aversion to risk calls into question how Americans envision the destiny of their country...I believe unless American business leaders are more fully convinced that risk is a necessary – and beneficial – element of doing business, we’ll continue to wander outside the gates of the global village. To think that we can create a business environment in a riskless vacuum is more than naïve, it’s bad business.”

Fear keeps people from turning their innovative ideas into action, from following their dreams, and from performing well under pressure. Fear also causes most of the stress people experience. “It is the greatest hindrance to successful risk taking.” To stay ahead of change and to successfully confront challenges, you must deal with fear. And that means taking action despite the fact that it may trigger your fears.

Fear is natural. To conquer it, simply don’t let it get in your way. Fear distorts your perceptions and builds upon itself. Do things despite your fears and the whole world will open up to you.

About the Authors

Robert J. Kriegel, Ph.D., is also the co-author of *The C Zone: Peak Performance Under Pressure* and of the best-selling *Inner*

Skiing. A former all-American athlete and a pioneer in the field of performance psychology, Kriegel has worked as a marketing and advertising executive with a major New York ad agency and taught at Stanford University’s Executive Management Program. **Louis Patler** is an award-winning author and speaker. The former editor of the *American Trend Report*, he is now president of the B.I.T. Group, an international training and consulting company based in Marin County, California.
