

Steven D'Souza

Diana Renner

# NOT KNOWING

The art of turning uncertainty into opportunity



## PRAISE FOR *NOT KNOWING*

“Knowledge was power; now curiosity is power. To be curious, we must fundamentally accept that we don’t know everything and be open to exploring the myriad of information sources that we now have at our finger tips. I love this book because it not only encourages us, but it compels us to be comfortable with Not Knowing and helps us realise that a new and exciting path can be created when we do. A must read for anyone who wants to be successful in the 21st Century and beyond.”

*Rebecca Miller, Head of Future Capability at National Australia Bank*

“This is an important and significant book. It is well written and lucid, using a wealth of examples and stories to develop arguments in a compelling way. Its message is critical in these difficult times. It should be required reading for rationalists everywhere.”

*Gareth Jones, Visiting Professor IE Business School and bestselling Author of Why Should Anyone Be Led By You?*

“Not Knowing is being comfortable with curiosity, loving it, as we create the future we all want to be a part of. The craft of entrepreneurs is to demystify the unknown. Master storytellers Steven and Diana help us explore this fascinating world, in an erudite and engaging manner, in which we all become a part of the stories behind the people driving change.”

*Sherry Coutu CBE, Entrepreneur, Non-Exec Director, Investor and Advisor to companies, universities and charities*

“A fascinating, insightful, reassuring and practical exploration of a critical stage that will unnerve even the most productive person. This book demystifies what all of us experience, worry about, try to avoid and yet live with. It is a must have for any person facing the unknown, dancing at the edge of discovery, wanting to break out of their existing mould. It will be recommended reading for all my leadership programmes.”

*Magdalena Bak-Maier PhD, Talent Coach, Leadership Development Specialist and Author of Get Productive!*

“Despite our brains being programmed to search for certainty, a commonly cited proverb states that the only certain things in life is death and taxes! D’Souza and Renner’s book is a vigorous, lucid and illustrative tour on the meaning of uncertainty and its implications for our private and professional lives. Destined to become a reference book for managers who aim to improve their strategic vision, the book offers valuable insights and advice on how to find equilibrium in a constantly changing and uncertain world.”

*Santiago Iniguez de Onzono, Dean of IE Business School*

“This book is a critical guide for current and future leaders. We need our leaders of today and tomorrow to navigate and embrace the unknown in order to successfully respond to that which awaits us. Embrace the stories that are told within this work- they are powerful. Then ask yourself what is your story and your ability to lead in such a time.”

*Kate Harris, Chief Executive Officer at the Centre for Sustainability Leadership*

“*Not Knowing* is brilliant. Renner and D’Souza condition us to accept what we know and to lean in to what we don’t. Who knew *Not Knowing* was such a smart thing to do? I’m not vulnerable if I don’t know what I or others think I need to know. Rather, “not knowing” is a gateway to more progress. This book is a helpful mix of theory and practice. It’s grounded and well researched. Well done! The book helped me and I’ll recommend it to others.”

*Ed O’Malley, President and CEO of Kansas Leadership Center*

“In an interconnected world, dealing with complexity distinguishes the great leader from the adequate manager. Future shock and tipping points lead us to “Finisterre”: the edge of knowledge. Our daily life in the planet human system requires new approaches. Renner and D’Souza’s work provides new insights and practical tools to guide us.”

*Richard Dent OAM, CEO of Leadership Victoria*

“The premise that D’Souza and Renner offer is intuitively obvious, but rarely recognized and they do a terrific job of bringing it to our consciousness. It is certainly they argue against; the arrogance of believing somehow that knowledge is finite and waiting as a bride in the vestibule for us to merely get our cognitive tuxedo on. Yet all of us - even the brilliant and successful - realize it is the Unknowing that provides the inspiration for all that we do. It is so seductive to be right, even as that prospect strips our world of wonder. To read and practice what this work suggests is to shrug off habits and attitudes that keep us from the true joy of living and creating. I will keep it next to my bed.”

*Terry Pearce, author of Leading Out Loud and Clicks and Mortar, Founder and President of Leadership Communication*

“We all need the safe and familiar but your relationship with the unknown plays a big part in determining the quality of your life. When you see the unknown as full of possibility and potential, you will allow yourself to be excited, inspired, curious, empowered and courageous. Steven and Diana’s book is an invitation to your enquiry with the unknown and an opportunity to develop a new relationship with the unknown. Read and be curious.”

*Nick Williams, author of eight books including The Work We Were Born To Do*

“We’re most comfortable and confident as leaders when the issues we face are within our level of competence; we are much less so in the uncharted waters beyond the edge of our competence. The complex and chaotic nature of our lives and work suggest that leaders will increasingly face more ‘unknowns’ than ‘knowns.’ Indeed, the capacity to engage one’s self and others in addressing these unknowns may be *the* critical leadership success factor for the coming decade. This book is your valuable guide for that journey.”

*Dr Barry Bales, Assistant Dean at the Lyndon B Johnson School of Public Affairs, The University of Texas*

“To a degree, certainty has always been a delusion, but no more so than today. Humans are wired to rush to solve instead of rush to discover. Paradoxically, if we are to solve the 21st Century’s wicked problems, we need to embrace the unknown, to be comfortable with and appreciate it, even immerse ourselves in it, at the edges of the known. This is how we will gain insights, see opportunities, create innovations and develop relationships that lead us to the solutions. The stories in this book will give you the confidence to thrive in not knowing by learning how others have managed it. Perhaps you can add your story at the end.”

*Deborah Mills-Scofield LLC, Brown University  
Visiting Scholar and Partner at Glengary LLP*

“The well written wisdom you will find here is hard to come by in our information obsessed world. Learn from the older tradition, and learn from D’Souza and Renner who could only say it so well because they both experienced it and also learned from it.”

*Richard Rohr, OFM at the Center for Action and Contemplation,  
Albuquerque, New Mexico*

“This is a rare book that moves beyond oversimplifying the complexity and ambiguity facing organisations and surfaces an instinctive but dangerous truth; it is human not to know. Renner and D’Souza encourage us to work against our hardwiring to embrace Not Knowing as a way to thrive in uncertainty rather than retreat to the false security of easy answers.”

*Andrew Stevens, Director, Executive Education  
at The University of Adelaide*

“The future belongs to the learners, not the knowers. Steven and Diana are master storytellers, taking us on a journey to the edge of curiosity – Not Knowing. The people you meet in this book will become your companions and inspiration along the way.”

*Richard Leider, international bestselling author of The Power  
of Purpose, Repacking Your Bags, & Life Reimagined*

“Being comfortable with leaning into your own Not Knowing is at the heart of all great leadership work today. The essence of leadership is about sensing, leaning into, and actualizing emerging future possibilities. D’Souza and Renner’s book gives you a highly fascinating account on the frontline of this new leadership work.”

*Dr C Otto Scharmer, Senior Lecturer at MIT, author of Theory U and Founding Chair of the Presencing Institute*

“Not Knowing is a critical skill needed by leaders to tackle the complex problems in society. D’Souza and Renner’s book gives readers the confidence to face the edges of their own expertise and to create new value by venturing into new territory.”

*Carsten Sudhoff, Former Chief HR Officer at the World Economic Forum and Founder and CEO of Circular Society*

“We yearn for certainty, but certainty can make us blind. Not Knowing reminds us that our knowledge may be illusion. This fascinating book is both reassuring (you don’t have to know everything to be effective) and challenging (the effective use of not knowing is a hard-won skill). But most of all, the vivid stories, so well chosen and told, offer inspiring examples of the unexpected ways Not Knowing can deepen our lives and even lead us where we need to go next.”

*Betty Sue Flowers, Co-author of Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future and Professor Emeritus, University of Texas at Austin*

“Several decades ago, Nobel laureate Werner Heisenberg reminded us that physics does not describe nature, but our current knowledge of nature. Yet, we often assume that our knowledge of the world and the world are the same. It is a dangerous assumption, as the recent financial crisis has shown. This book is a timely reminder that the map is not the territory and that all knowledge is partial and therefore provisional. We should learn to live with the uncertainty of “Not Knowing,” and act accordingly.”

*Martin Gargiulo, Professor of Organizational Behaviour at INSEAD*

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## INTRODUCTION

Imagine that the person you are secretly in love with gives you a present. “Here it is,” they say with a smile on their face, as they hand you a large, oddly shaped box, carefully wrapped. You’re surprised and about to open it when they remark: “But you have to wait three days to open it.” “Three days?” you reply. What’s in it, you wonder? The box feels heavy, but with its odd shape it could be anything. You shake it gently, but there is no sound or clue to its contents. Could it be the statement of love you’ve been yearning for, or perhaps something more mundane? You don’t get much sleep that night. Your curiosity becomes insatiable and you feel you cannot wait another day – you want to know. Would you open the box before the three days were up?

When we want to know something, not knowing is tough. Most people’s natural reaction to not knowing is to shun it. Yet to be human is not to know. We naturally turn to those who promise answers: the experts, the leaders and those who appear to know. We hold on to the knowledge we already have, we are afraid to let it go. We are neurologically hard-wired to avoid the unexpected and prefer certainty. Situations that are ambiguous or uncertain can make us feel incompetent, embarrassed and ashamed.

Yet we live in a world of uncertainty, complexity and volatility. We are unable to define the most complex challenges we face, let alone solve them. When we reach the edge of our knowledge, our default responses include clinging to our existing

knowledge, attempting quick-fix solutions, or avoiding the situation altogether.

This book is about the problems that arise from our usual approach to the unknown, and it proposes a more fruitful relationship with not knowing. At the edge between the known and the unknown there is a fertile place, full of possibility. Playing at the edge can lead us to experience fresh new learning, creativity, joy and wonder. The edge is the place where something new can emerge. We call this Not Knowing. When we talk about Not Knowing (capitalized as a proper noun – “ing”) we are suggesting a verb, a process, not a thing.

Books are traditionally vehicles for expertise and knowledge. As soon as we began work on this book, we were struck by the irony of writing about Not Knowing. How could we even imagine that we could write something knowledgeable about a topic that is, by its very nature, mysterious and unknown, even unknowable?

This book is not a “how-to” guide, and it does not provide easy answers either. Instead, it invites you to explore your own relationship with Not Knowing through the stories and experiences of others. The stories explore Not Knowing through a variety of lenses, such as art, science, literature, psychology, entrepreneurship, spirituality and the wisdom traditions. In researching this book we have curated a rich collection of diverse stories from all over the world. We meet people who have struggled with the unknown and, at the edge, discovered something that was not possible before, as well as people who are comfortable living and working at the edge.

A few of the stories are taken from history, but most are of recent or contemporary events, from people we have interviewed personally. We had the privilege of listening to their tales of Not Knowing, which were often shared with great honesty and vulnerability. With this in mind we have changed some names to respect anonymity. Although this book is primarily written

for those in the world of work, we hope you can apply it to a range of situations in your personal and professional life. As authors, we have written this book with one collective voice, for clarity. Where we also share our own individual stories, we have highlighted this.

Our interest in writing about Not Knowing comes from our own experiences of being in the unknown. We both have a long history of fighting, resisting and, on many occasions, simply hating it.

*Diana: I was born in Craiova, a town in the middle of rolling fields in the province of Oltenia in south-western Romania. My parents were respected artists – my father a stage and film actor and my mother a concert harpist. I remember a happy childhood overall, summers visiting the family farm and winters sledding down the hill near our house with my brother Stefan. Yet we lived with a constant uncertainty – that at any moment a neighbour could alert the secret police to a rebellious activity in thought or action.*

*With state-controlled media, it was common not to know about what was happening in the wider world. To fight the propaganda, my father would regularly listen to Radio Free Europe, which was broadcast from West Germany in defiance of communist censorship. Being caught listening to that crackly station meant interrogation by the secret police. The sounds of Radio Free Europe form a backdrop to my memories of childhood. I can still hear the main theme song in my head and the familiar murmur of voices.*

*I learned the day-to-day oppression of having knowledge denied and the power of knowing the truth.*

*I remember one balmy summer afternoon falling asleep at my grandmother's house in the countryside, and waking up to the news. The journalist was accusing former Romanian President Ceausescu of murdering children. It was the story the whole world found out about with horror after the Revolution in 1987. Chil-*

*dren were being kept like animals in orphanages without the basic necessities and adequate love and support.*

*I was only 12 years old and I still remember the shock of hearing that story. Not just the horrific details, but also the fact that I was now privy to secret knowledge that might place my family in danger.*

*In 1987 my father said “enough is enough” and we escaped Romania to Austria. That period in Austria was a time of utter Not Knowing – where we would live, what would happen to us, how it would all turn out. One year later we moved to Australia, where we were granted permanent residency as refugees. Another transition, another stage of Not Knowing - living in a new culture, learning a new language, starting a new school... From a childhood in a land of manipulated truth, to a time of uncertainty and change, I have lived and wrestled with Not Knowing.*

**Steven:** *In 2000 I was struggling to get out of bed and was losing weight, with a dry cough and pain in my lungs. As a stoical and stubborn man, I brushed off the symptoms until they became so painful that one morning I could not even tie my shoelaces. When I finally decided to go to the doctor, I was diagnosed with tuberculosis, which was drug-resistant and I was immediately sent to hospital. It meant an operation, many months of taking strong antibiotics and, at one point, as my condition was failing to respond I did not know if I was going to get well again.*

*I bought my first home in London at the height of the property market in 2006, just before the financial crash. Being cautious, I did a full survey before making the purchase and yet when I was just about to sell it I received a letter from the council saying that the render, windows, boundary fence and extension were all illegal. The previous owner had not acquired the necessary planning permissions and my solicitor had not picked this up. I was given a 30-day notice to remove the extension, which contained the only*

*toilet, kitchen and bathroom in the small cottage – so this would mean literally knocking down half the house. I appealed, but lived for over a year not knowing if I would have a home to come home to.*

*At that time I worked in an investment bank - feeling secure and enjoying my job. One morning I got a call from a colleague saying that the name of our firm had changed. Overnight we had been bought out, to save the firm from financial collapse - a danger we knew nothing about, even the evening before. Projects were put on hold and every day we would see new emails wishing people well in their new endeavours as they were made redundant. After six months of constant uncertainty I was called into my manager's office with an HR representative and was made redundant in a phone call. Even though I was expecting it, it did not make it any easier and I was uncertain about what the future now held professionally and how I was going to pay my mortgage.*

*In life choices I always seemed to be in a bind about making important decisions. Should I take this option or should I take the other? When thinking about most decisions about the future and how to respond, I would paralyse myself, vacillating between options that became constant dilemmas in my mind. A friend said to me, "Steven, you seem to embody hard decisions." It was painful and I hated the tyranny of choice and of not knowing what to do. I joked with them that I had a PhD in uncertainty! Life for me has been a constant struggle with Not Knowing, not only the more dramatic events I have described above, but the everyday choices I had to make. I only knew that there had to be a better way of being with the unknown."*

Like you, we came to this book struggling with the unknown. The journey of researching and writing has helped us to develop a fresh relationship with Not Knowing. We are less eager to rely on our existing knowledge, more sceptical about those who proclaim certainty, and more comfortable with being in a state of Not Knowing. We hope that you will experience this too.

At the end of the book we offer questions for reflection and experiments to play with to support you in developing your inquiry further.

As you commence your journey in this book, we invite you to bring along an exploratory mindset and to be open to the twists, turns and discoveries that you may make along the way. As the Spanish writer Antonio Machado said: “*Traveller, there is no path, the path is made by walking.*”



## CHAPTER 1

The background features a dark grey gradient. A prominent white diagonal line runs from the bottom left towards the top right. In the upper right quadrant, there are several vertical stripes of varying shades of grey, creating a layered, architectural effect.

THE DANGERS OF KNOWLEDGE

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## 1.

# KNOWLEDGE IS POWERFUL

A child takes her first faltering steps and her parents grin with delight and gather her up in their arms for cuddles. She says her first words, performs a new song, or makes the final of the school spelling bee – and she gains praise and respect. From the very beginning, we are valued, appreciated and rewarded for accumulating knowledge and mastery.

Sir Francis Bacon’s iconic phrase “knowledge is power” is so obvious that it doesn’t bear mentioning. We know from school, work and life that expertise – being seen to know – determines our status and provides us with influence, power and reputation. The mere appearance of knowledge confers dignity and demands our attention.

In the past few decades, developed and developing economies have continued to shift inexorably towards services and away from agriculture and manufacturing. An increasing number of us are now in professions where we “think for a living.” In many countries the attainment of a certain level of formal education increases average incomes through access to opportunities in employment. Higher levels of education are directly related to better health outcomes, lower fertility and longer lives.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond the practical benefits, the rank and power that we can draw from our knowledge and expertise can make us feel more important and more worthy. In turn this gives us more confidence. It may fuel our ambition as we seek to grow the status that comes with success.

Author and philosopher Nassim Nicholas Taleb tells us that we tend to treat our knowledge as “*personal property to be protected and defended. It is an ornament that allows us to rise in the pecking order. We take what we know quite seriously.*”<sup>2</sup> Our thirst for knowledge is continuously fed by organizations that put a premium on competence and expertise. Performance according to specific criteria is evaluated and linked to promotions, remuneration, bonuses and other rewards. These reinforce the belief that the more competent we are, the more successful we will become, the higher up we will go, and the more we will get paid.

The rewards we acquire from knowledge, from certainty, are not only external – they are hard-wired into our brains. Recent studies in the field of neuroscience have shown that certainty is one of the key conditions we need to learn to function optimally and neuroscientist David Rock even argues that threats to our certainty can be neurologically as painful as a physical attack.<sup>3</sup> This is supported by other research on the effect of uncertainty on the brain that shows that even a small amount of uncertainty generates an “error” response in the brain. It is debilitating to live with significant uncertainties, such as not knowing our boss’s expectations or having to wait for medical results to find out if we have a serious illness. Our brain is always searching for the answer.

Neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga, from the University of California, has researched this rationalization by studying those who have had hemispheres of their brains severed as a treatment for severe epilepsy. Applying the same experiment to each half separately, Gazzaniga was able to conclude that in the left hemisphere of the brain there is a neural network he calls “the Interpreter.” The left hemisphere’s capacity of continual interpretation means that it is “*always looking for order and reason, even when they don’t exist.*”<sup>4</sup>

It is little wonder we voraciously pursue knowledge in all its forms because knowledge is a wonderful thing. It promises that we will be rewarded, respected, promoted, and become wealthier, healthier and more confident.

Yet perhaps a little caution is in order. When was the last time someone tried to sell you something with many benefits, but no downsides? The problem with knowledge is in the very fact that it is so useful. We cling to it even in situations when it has the potential to limit us – to paradoxically get in the way of new learning and growth.

## 2.

# THE ALLURE OF THE KNOWN

Padua 1537. Andreas Vesalius, a young Flemish anatomist, enters the city gates heading for the university, with a few belongings and a burning desire to understand the human body. He'd arrived in the right place, at the right time. The Renaissance city of Padua, lying 35km west of Venice, was quickly becoming an international hot bed for the development of the arts and sciences. Vesalius joined what was considered at the time to be the most distinguished school of medicine and anatomy in Europe, founded more than 200 years earlier.<sup>5</sup>

Born in Brussels in 1514, the son of a court apothecary, as a child Vesalius became fascinated by the body. He was often found with dismembered dogs, cats and mice that he'd caught in the neighbourhood to dissect,<sup>6</sup> and would later steal a corpse from the gallows to obtain a complete human skeleton,<sup>7</sup> at great risk to himself and his family. At 18 his passion for learning about the body took him to Paris, where he commenced his medical studies. It was there that he first came across the seminal anatomy work of Galen of Pergamon, a Greek physician, surgeon and philosopher.

Galen was an influential figure in the world of medicine. His writings had been informed by his extensive experience treating the injuries of gladiators, serving as a physician to three Roman emperors. What had made his work so useful was that he had explained not just the structure of the human body, but the intricacies of the body's workings. For example, he demonstrated that the larynx generates the voice and was the first to recognize that there were distinct differences between venous (dark) and arterial (bright) blood. His work was slavishly followed by doctors over the centuries, who unequivocally believed in the

accuracy of his claims. So although more than 1,400 years old, Galen's studies of the human body had remained the key references for anatomists and physicians and formed much of the basis for medical training in Europe during the Renaissance.

Like many students before him, Vesalius was fascinated by Galen's findings, which he initially found to be clear and persuasive. However, as he immersed himself in anatomical studies and read the Galenic texts more critically, Vesalius started noticing discrepancies and small mistakes. His doubts about some of Galen's claims were further reinforced by his experience attending many private and public lectures at the university.

In those days dissections were a grand affair, carried out before large audiences of students and invited guest scholars. These were highly ritualized and controlled events, bound in tradition and rigid rules set down by the university. A professor of anatomy would preside from a large, raised chair, removed from the actual proceedings. His only role was to read from Galen's anatomical texts while a surgeon would perform the actual dissection and a demonstrator would point out the specific parts of the body that were being examined. Even though these dissections were carried out by experienced scholars, it seemed to Vesalius that the work served to reinforce the old Galenic texts, rather than acting as an opportunity for new learning. This blind obedience to Galen was so strong that even when the surgeon held a human heart he would comment on three ventricles as outlined in Galen, in spite of him seeing that there were four. As Vesalius commented in a book a few years later, contradicting the authority of Galen was unthinkable, "*almost as if I were secretly to doubt the immortality of the soul.*"<sup>78</sup>

Galen's book represented the state of knowledge, the known certainties, the place of comfort. And although Roman anatomy might seem quaint today, we still make similar errors in relying on the certainty of our existing knowledge.





# 1. BEGINNER'S MIND

A young manager who was very confident in his abilities and who had been promoted to a Vice President role in his company within a year of joining, had an appointment with his Managing Director (MD). He wanted to find out from the MD what it took to rise to the next grade. He was very keen to be promoted again, and soon.

The MD welcomed him into his office and offered the young manager a cup of coffee. Quickly accepting, the young manager started to describe all his achievements and what he knew about the business. He wanted to impress. As the young manager offered his cup to be filled with coffee, the MD kept on pouring into the cup until it overflowed and started spilling onto the carpet.

Startled, the young manager asked: *“What are you doing? Why do you keep on pouring when my cup is already full?”* The MD replied: *“It is because your cup is already full that you are learning nothing from this meeting.”*

Not Knowing is emphasized in Zen practice where it is sometimes called “beginner’s mind.” An expert may think they know a subject deeply, yet be blinded to new possibilities by his or her preconceived ideas. In contrast, a beginner may see with fresh, unbiased eyes. The practice of beginner’s mind is to cultivate an ability to meet life without holding on to preconceived ideas, interpretations or judgements.

When we are full of our own thoughts we have no ability to take on new learning and respond to reality as it presents itself in the actual moment. It is not about getting rid of our experience and

wisdom, but rather not letting it get in the way of seeing things from a fresh perspective.

The more successful we are, the more tempting it is to believe that we already know what to do. Every project, every problem is different, so approaching a new challenge as if we've seen it all before, and applying already known and tested solutions, can lead to making errors. For example, some large consulting firms are sometimes perceived as making any problem fit their existing model. This is cost-effective because the firm will have already invested time developing its proprietary process that can be scaled and applied to many diverse client problems. A colleague remembers once meeting a very senior manager who was renowned in corporate America. He spent a lot of time telling her how interesting his life was and then he said: *"You know, I've seen it all. I've had a long career and there isn't any issue that I have not been through before."* She was shocked by his arrogance. *"It was clearly nonsense that he had seen it all. Even if he had been involved in 100 mergers, the 101st was not simply a cut and paste of one of the previous 99."*

At the One Young World Summit in 2012, Mohammad Yunus spoke about the way he started the Grameen Bank. Grameen is now a Nobel Peace Prize-winning microfinance organization and community development bank. Yunus said that the best thing that happened to him was that he didn't know anything about banking. In fact, if he'd known anything about banking he wouldn't have embarked on the micro-credit project in the first place.<sup>66</sup> *"Not knowing something can be a blessing sometimes. You are open, you can do things in your way without worrying about the rules and procedures. [...] Every time I needed a rule or a procedure I had to look at what conventional banks do, and once I learned what they did, I did the opposite. Conventional banks go to the rich, I go to the poor. Conventional banks go to men, I go to the women. Conventional banks are owned by rich people, Grameen Bank is owned by poor people. **I could try because I didn't know anything.**"* His advice to young entrepre-

neurs is: *“Don’t be scared if you don’t know something, don’t feel you have to be very smart to do something, stupid people like us do something and it works out.”*<sup>67</sup>

According to Christian Busch, Associate Director at the London School of Economics Innovation Lab and Co-Founder of the Sandbox Network, modern micro-credit, mobile banking and micro-saving are all intriguing innovations that have come out of contexts where there was no real infrastructure in place before. So there was no need to institutionally unlearn; there was no pre-existing conception of “how things are done.” For Christian these examples illustrate how a “don’t know mindset” can trigger innovation without the baggage of history or existing path dependencies.

Christian points out that many interesting recent innovations have come out of resource-constrained environments, where there might either not be a pre-conception of a product/ service/ business model, or where the pre-conception is so far out of reach (e.g. cost-wise) that it is only peripherally taken into account. He gives the example of mobile banking in Kenya, where the process of people transferring airtime to their friends and families established an alternative to traditional banking services.

*“In a country where banks are either difficult to access or rarely affordable, one does not necessarily limit one’s thinking to how to design a better cash machine. Rather, the challenge is tackled from a different angle: 1) We have mobile phones; 2) We have value that needs to be transferred (first airtime, then money); 3) We establish a platform for money-transactions that makes many of the institutionalized banking practices redundant. Whether ‘not knowing’ or ‘not having access to’, these innovations come out of environments where pre-conditions (such as institutions) are either not available, or not accessible.”*

Radisson Blu Hotels (formerly Radisson Edwardian) in the UK during the 1990s made the then radical decision to take their

General Managers out of their hotels and make them responsible for different areas across the hotel chain, such as food and beverages or room service. Every two or three years they would get the opportunity to change their expert domains and become a beginner again. This way they could apply their knowledge to a new area in the business while bringing fresh perspectives and looking for interconnections between seemingly separate disciplines.

It is said that Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of the martial art Aikido, asked before he died at the age of 85 that he be buried wearing a white belt, the lowest in the belt rankings. Similarly, the most senior Aikido Masters choose to teach the basics of Aikido, a conscious choice to inhabit the “beginner” space. We too can make beginner’s mind a conscious choice and open up the space for new learning and growth.

### **Don’t Know mindset**

“Don’t Know mindset” is a central concept in the Eastern traditions. It simply means not prejudging a situation. In martial arts it means not assuming we will lose or win on the basis of knowing our opponent. Whether they seem stronger or weaker than us, we acknowledge that our judgement may be wrong, so we suspend it and keep an open mind. “Anything can happen” is a much better position to be in than expecting that we will win, then finding ourselves thrown on the mat.

In terms of competitive strategy, just because an organization looks weaker or smaller or seems to have worse products, we can’t prejudge who will win in a competitive market. With this lens, we need to have a strategy that allows for the competitor to be in a winning position as well as a weaker position vis-à-vis our organization. People in business are much more likely to be comfortable relying on analysis that tells them whether a competitor is likely to win or not. However, the “don’t know mindset,” or we could call it “don’t know strategy,” admits the possibility of winning or losing at the same time. This

approach prepares for both possibilities and manages the benefits and risks of both. It doesn't close off the possibility that the competitor could beat or even destroy the company's business. Also it acknowledges that our competitor may not even be on our radar. For example, 10 years ago we may not have predicted that supermarkets would be competitors to banks, providing personal finance products.

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