

An Excerpt From

***The Art of Insight***  
***How to Have More Aha! Moments***

by Charles Kiefer and Malcolm Constable  
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LEARNING  
EXPERIENCE  
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# The ART of INSIGHT



HOW TO HAVE  
MORE AHA! MOMENTS

CHARLES KIEFER • MALCOLM CONSTABLE

The ART of  
INSIGHT

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# The Art of Insight

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# Introduction: Aha Moments

*One insight can change your life, and the next can change your organization, or even the world.*

We are all born with the capacity for insight, a capacity that remains with us our entire lives. Insights are those “aha” moments when the clouds part and the solution to your problem arises right in front of you. They happen when fresh new light is spread on a subject you’ve considered for some time. With insight, we enjoy wisdom, balance, and perspective. We have all experienced these moments of deep understanding, even if we might not know what to call them or how to describe them. They occur while we’re showering, jogging, daydreaming, sleeping, or talking with someone about unrelated subjects. Suddenly, usually when we are not consciously thinking about the subject, an answer pops into our heads. The fog lifts. The issue is clarified. The confusion dissolves. And the situation becomes so simple and so obvious that we can’t imagine how we missed it before. Surprisingly, these moments can be made to occur with much greater regularity. With them, you

will find new paths of thought and new solutions that are permanent and easy to implement.

Think of a tricky problem that you have lived with for too long in either your work or your personal life. No doubt, you have had insights toward solving this problem. You experienced new thoughts on the subject that provoked a deeper understanding. Or you saw something fresh that lifted your spirits and washed away a low mood, clearing the space for a

Our goal is for you  
to generate insights  
quickly and easily.

new line of inquiry. As we explore the nature of insight, you'll see how these past experiences can help you reconnect with the principles and source of your insights.

Our goal is for you to generate insights quickly and easily so that with greater regularity, you can access them when you need them most.

Put simply, if you want more insights in your life, this book is for you. It is a concise guide to simple actions that can help anybody cultivate a habit of having more frequent and timely insights. With the appearance of more insights, you will make better decisions, find solutions to difficult problems, and offer fresh thinking on any subject.

Regrettably, for most of us, life trains us out of employing this natural thinking process, and we lose the habit of making insight a more regular and expedient occurrence. The approach and methods offered in this book will reconnect you with that ability and help you increase the frequency, strength, and value of the insights you experience each day.

If you feel like you make poor decisions, getting stuck in ruts of low-quality thinking; if you continually feel the need to

work hard to overcome resistance; if you would like to experience more confidence, more resilience, and a greater sense of peace; or if you simply want more insights, both big and small, in your life, then this book is for you.

Based on what people who have mastered the methods in this book report, you should experience the following benefits at work and at home:

- Your problems won't hang around and will often seem to solve themselves.
- You'll make decisions more quickly, with greater confidence, fewer mistakes, and better overall judgment.
- Your interactions with other people will improve.
- Your personal schedule will relax, and you will find time to live and work with ease.
- Energy will be freed for the things you care about.
- Meetings will be shorter and flow efficiently.
- Better decisions will be made.
- Solutions will emerge that are easily implemented.

All these phenomena are a result of an improved capacity for insight.

The applications for what we have termed The Art of Insight (TAOI) are limitless. Whether you want to make better decisions, solve intractable problems, understand others better, or gain a new perspective on anything, insights are the answer.

The applications for what we have termed The Art of Insight (TAOI) are limitless.

As you read further into this book, you are going to appreciate something that you have always suspected, if not known. There is no set recipe for how to have more insights. And, unlike the formulaic steps in many business and self-improvement books, the practice of Insight Thinking is more art than science. Insight is a form of thought, and of course, everyone thinks a bit differently, just as everyone paints or writes differently. Like any art, it can be developed. With practice and attention, we can foster this innate capacity and enjoy the many benefits of a more insightful life.

## This Book

We're going to give you a summary of what's in this book. First, we want to call your attention to the difference between what we term *intellectual learning* and *insight learning*. We hope you'll read and absorb this book with the latter.

Intellectual learning relies on accumulating facts, processing those facts, storing those facts in memory, and then connecting them in a very methodical and thoughtful way. Insight learning works differently: it's active in the sense that we are looking for insights, but it also occurs passively on its own through a subconscious reflective process that is more receptive than active. Often very diverse facts we already know are put together in a new way. Insight learning is all about *seeing something for yourself* and not just storing new information in your memory bank.

Both of these types of learning are very valuable, but while you are reading this book, we hope you will aim for insight learning.

## The Book in a Few Pages

We believe there are two reasons you are not having as many insights as you could. First, you may not realize you should be looking for insight. Our thinking is aimed mostly at interrogating our memory for solutions to problems. The operative assumption is that the answer lies in memory if we could only access it. But as you will soon see (and probably know already), an insight is a thought we've *never* had before. It's a *fresh thought*. If you want an insight, you don't want to replot what you already know yet another time; you want to look into the unknown. This is common sense: if you know what you are looking for, you are more apt to find it. So chapter 1 is aimed at helping you clarify what insights are for you. After you do so, we promise they will be easier to find.

Second, while the circumstances in which people have their insights are as varied as the individuals, everyone we have talked with has reported a common *state of mind*. It's an easy-going, unpressured, open, and ungripped state. The more often you reside in this state of mind, the more often you will have insights. Conversely, when you are agitated and bearing down with your thinking, insights become more elusive. While the Insight State of Mind is our natural, default state, we inadvertently think ourselves out of it. We simply need to regain our natural capacity to gravitate toward a good state of mind in order to have more insights, as outlined in chapter 2.

For all we know, insights are available all the time, but we just aren't hearing them. Maybe our thinking radio is tuned to a different channel; maybe our mental grinding acts like a nearby construction site, drowning out the insight channel

entirely. The remedy is learn to *listen for insight*, and this is the focus of chapter 3.

We have found that while you can take many of the actions we suggest in this book and consequently have more insights in your life, you run the risk of signing up for a lifetime of *unnecessary* work. In chapter 4 you will see that being insightful is a function of how you think, and as you daily deepen your appreciation and understanding of how thought works for you—having insight into your thinking—you will discover that insights will be brought to you in the course of life with no work on your part whatsoever.

Here are the four key elements of The Art of Insight:

- Understanding what insights are and actively looking for them
- Occupying a state of mind in which you're apt to have insights more frequently
- Learning how to listen in such a way that you hear insights in yourself and others
- Growing your understanding of how thought works in your life

In chapter 5 we offer practical illustrations of TAOI being used by individuals, and then in chapter 6 we illustrate how it is used in organizations.

The accounts in this book should be used to stimulate your own insights. Reflect on what resonates and strikes true for you. Even when you don't relate to something, it can still help you sharpen your own understanding. Remember, a state

of mind cannot be expressed fully with words. Our language can only point you in the right direction.

## Where This Book Came From

Over the course of our combined forty years of management consulting, we became increasingly fascinated by the observation that so many intelligent executives, although armed with pages upon pages of data, logic, and analysis, nonetheless ended up making boneheaded decisions. It wasn't a rare occurrence. And yet we saw exceptions. From time to time, clients on their own accord, or sometimes with our help, achieved a strategic insight—a simplifying aha moment that often radically redefined their business and the competitive space to their advantage. Once articulated, these strategic insights seemed like simple common sense to everyone. They were easily understood and acted upon. In fact, implementation usually occurred with far less effort than the forced march that often characterized strategy implementation.

Could that phenomenon become a more regular occurrence? Was there some sort of formula for it? How might we go about looking for it?

For more than fifteen years we have helped senior managers realize that the phenomenon of insight itself holds the key to these questions. As we explored these concepts with our clients, we found that it is indeed possible to increase the frequency, strength, and traction of insights, and by doing so, improve both thinking and decision making.

In the course of our explorations, we reviewed research on the subject, but what we found to be far more useful were the numerous conversations we had with professionals engaged in helping executives, managers, and their teams be more insightful. When given a few basic principles and methods, clients reported having more insights and exhibiting better judgment as a matter of course. They solved problems more quickly and identified and avoided potential mistakes with greater regularity. Moreover, the plans and strategies they developed were creative and enduring—significant departures from prevailing thought and straightforward and unfettered in their implementation. As you might expect, what we learned about insight is far more widely applicable than just for improving business performance. All the principles we've found apply equally well to the activities of daily living.

Imagine what it would be like to live a more insightful life. Through our shared experiences and with stories from our clients, colleagues, and friends, we hope you will join us on a quiet walk through our discoveries about practical insight, learning how you can increase the frequency and quality of your insights every day.

## How to Read This Book

We would like to encourage you to read this book in a slightly different manner than you might be used to. Below you will find some tips about how you can approach reading so that you can absorb the concepts in a deeper way than you might otherwise. In addition, we hope you will take advantage

of the Online Learning Experience that accompanies this book on our website TAOI Online Learning (see the link in “Online Learning Experience” in the back of the book).

## Developing Insight Is an Art and an Empirical Science

Earlier we observed that everyone has the innate capacity for insight. Developing it is an art, and in this field, everyone is an artist—latently, a very capable one. But like any art, it requires practice to develop fully.

Insight is a topic that has yet to be scientifically pinned down. We have great respect for the scientific method, and in this conversation, we are going to point toward empirical science as contrasted with theoretical science. Everything we posit should be and is testable in your everyday situations. So, you need not believe the concepts as you read them. In fact, it's better if you don't believe. Instead, simply allow yourself to make your own discoveries about insight and about how you think. Then, test your findings to see if they work for *you*. Use your own life as a laboratory. Here is an illustration.

Thirty years ago, Charlie read a transcript of a keynote speech by Willis Harman, professor emeritus of engineering at Stanford University and then-president of the Institute of Noetic Sciences. Willis spent the latter part of his career working on how to study consciousness scientifically. Addressing intuition, Willis observed that if we have an intelligence within us that is greater than rational thought alone, then it is reasonable to allow that intelligence to inform *all* our daily choices and actions. Charlie remembers the experience of reading that speech:

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I can't recall Willis's exact words, but they triggered a thought for me, and I resolved to test my realization with my own personal experiment. For the next twenty-four hours, as best I could, I based every action on my intuitive sense of what was right—unless a rational assessment showed it to be ill-advised. Instead of prioritizing activities, as I had been taught in time-management classes, and mechanically marching through my design of the day, I selected my first task on the basis of what intuitively felt right and continued this method as I completed each task. (I did make all my scheduled meetings, calls, and so forth, on time.) I remember being faced with a couple of choices of minor consequence. I made them on the basis of feeling and without analysis. Someone (I can't recall if it was a member of my staff or a client) came to me with a proposed course of action, along with a sound argument in favor, but it didn't feel right. We had a conversation, and a better alternative surfaced.

The outcome? I had a simply fabulous day! It was clear I should continue the experiment, in no small part to rule out any possibility of a fluke. The following day was equally terrific! I extended the experiment until the end of the week, and in a sense, I'm still going. Over the years, I haven't replaced rational thought, but my intuition developed as a legitimate and often-employed complement to reason. Typically, I revel in a thorough analysis and explore all known alternatives, crunching the numbers on a

spreadsheet—I can go on quite a tear. Then, I switch off the intellect entirely and check in with what I feel and what my intuition tells me.

While insight isn't exactly the same as intuition, we've included this story here to illustrate the value of running disciplined experiments. We hope you will try this sort of testing and self-assessment as you read this book.

Interest within the scientific community in insight, intuition, cognitive science, and the nature of thought has grown considerably in recent years. A great deal of research has been conducted, and much has been written on topics such as neuropsychology, neurophysiology, and consciousness. By contrast, the source material for this book is based on our experience and on the experiences of our clients. While the findings we share are generally consistent with the formal research we have come across, we have decided to focus on practical approaches that you can apply to your community, workplace, and life.

## What You “Hear” When You Read Is More Important Than What We Write

In the course of our explorations of insight, we attended many meetings and lectures on the subject. Charlie recalls how during one of these lectures, George Pransky, a prominent psychotherapist, spoke about insight, psychological well-being, and related ideas:

I listened quietly, as George instructed us, letting his words float through my head without thinking too much about them. Suddenly, a rush of energy hit me,

## The Art of Insight

and I had a flash of awareness—a new understanding of how the reality we experience is formed by our thoughts. Moments later, I had a second flash. A major part of my prior understanding was completely reversed! The simplicity of these realizations was, for me, awesome; issues that had intrigued me for thirty years now made sense in a new way.

After George's speech, I approached him, grateful and excited. "My God, George, that was great! I've been pondering these things for years. Now it's all clear to me: why things work the way they do, why life turns out the way it does." I repeated back to him what he had said, and George responded with the shy, sheepish grin I've come to know well: "I'm so pleased for you, but I don't think I said any of that. In fact, I don't think I was even talking about the things you now say you just discovered."

Taken aback, I thought, "What's going on here?" I somehow misunderstood what he was saying, yet I had had a life-changing insight. A few days later, I had still another realization: when it comes to insights, what *you hear* is more important than what *someone else says*.

### Remember What You Already Know

Here's something that you will find really comforting: if you want more insights in your life, you don't need to learn much more. All of us already hold all the knowledge and experience that we need.

Samuel Johnson is said to have observed that people need to be *reminded* more often than they need to be *instructed*. Most authors have a new idea they want you to learn, but since you already know all you need to about insight, simply explaining our ideas or those of our clients and colleagues won't suffice. Nor will extolling the value of insights—you already know this as well. What we *will* try to do is show you how to have *more* insights. Of course, we don't know how you think, so teaching you how to think differently could be quite a challenge. Luckily for you and us, we don't have to tackle this. Instead, we will focus on helping you find and reclaim that which you already know.

Think of this book as a conversation guiding you toward where to look for insight, not just advice on the specifics of what to do. Very little of our conversation may strike you as new, but fortunately, this means you have nothing to memorize. Even better, anything you rediscover automatically becomes more present in your life—with no further work on your part whatsoever.

As you read, don't be concerned with remembering facts or grasping the material with your intellect. Instead, let yourself capture the topics intuitively. Look for as many insights as you can. Later, we will examine why a bit of latitude or imprecision in language and analysis can help you find more insights. Once you experience an insight of some sort, ask yourself, "Does this really make sense?" Try it out over a few days. Just *notice* whether it's true. Don't worry about doing anything with it. Ultimately, everything true should be observable in some way.

By immersing yourself in our stories and examples of the principles of insight, you will begin to habitually access your

best thinking—to the point where insight and wisdom will occur with greater frequency in your life. However, our experience has shown us that the principles are not a “prescription” to be followed. Rather, the key is for you to look for your own insights about these principles. A few stories can’t prove a point, at least not a scientific point. Our examples show how you can find your way back to a nice, easygoing state of mind where fresh thoughts can occur.

An artist, Carolyn, once had a teacher who talked constantly during class about art, technique, and anything else that came to his mind while his students were painting. During the first few days of class, Carolyn found Michael’s chatter distracting, but she didn’t say anything since it was apparently his style and no one else seemed to have a problem with it. As time went on, she learned to tune out the prattle and immerse herself more deeply into her painting. One day, she explained (with a sense of pleasure) how the chattering had actually trained her to become more deeply immersed in her painting. It helped her attain an effortless focus where she was less conscious of the chatter of her internal mind. As she spoke to us about this, she had an insight: this must have been Michael’s intent all along—jabbering away to get his students “out of their heads” and into their art. Let our stories about insight serve the same function for you.

### Reading This Book for Insight

Psychologists have identified a state of mind that is most conducive to insights. Although more than a few of our clients say they get insights while reading, only a small percentage report

reading as their *primary* path to insight. Those who get insights while reading generally describe being in a quiet place, deeply engrossed in a subject, as opposed to skimming pages or rushing through an e-mail. Insights that occur during reading are often not about a concept the writer is addressing. Instead, they are often new understandings about something indirectly related, like Charlie experienced while listening to George Pransky. Sometimes, the insights are entirely unrelated.

Nevertheless, reading can be a very powerful tool. In 1977, reading an article by the management consultant Dave Berlew provided one of the most important insights of Charlie's professional career. In the article, Berlew described the power of what he termed Common Vision—an idea he and others employed in the Peace Corps—and the extraordinary results it produced. Connecting Berlew's ideas to his own understanding of the relationship between thought and reality, Charlie saw why Common Vision worked and founded Innovation Associates based on that insight.

How does one read for insight? We haven't discovered a universal answer, but we bet you have an answer that works for you. Pause for a moment and think of a time when you had an insight while reading. What was the setting? For the most part, you probably find it less effective to cram your reading into tiny slots during the middle of a crowded day. It's better to clear a block of time and allow for reflection as you read. What helps you get the most out of your reading? How would you be most apt to absorb something of significance? Consider our exploration of insight an invitation to know yourself more deeply.

You may notice that you like to do your reflective reading before you go to bed, when the time seems ripe to read contemplatively. You'll meet our colleague Ed later. His wife calls this *gazebo reading*, a time when she can let everything disappear for a while.

## Online Learning Experience

Reading about insight is one thing. Acting on what you read is quite another. This book is supplemented with web-based exercises and illustrations that are an important complement to this text. We have developed these exercises over the past fifteen years, and if you use them, you will connect with and absorb the methods in this book in a deeper and more permanent way. In any art, practice is all-important.

Finally, when we began our exploration for methods to increase insight and wisdom, one of our early challenges was that none of our clients had any sense of how often they currently had insights; they only knew that insights didn't come as frequently as they would like. We wanted to teach our clients some of the ideas we were discovering, but in the absence of a baseline, how could we clearly discern whether someone's "insight meter" had actually changed? In the section titled "Assessing Your Progress," you will find an exercise to gauge how your capacity for insight is changing. If you are interested in this, you may want to jump to it to create a baseline before you read much further.



If you put the insights and methods of this book to good use, you will become a more effective thinker. Fresh ideas will abound. You will make better decisions quickly and confidently. You will find solutions to long-standing problems. And you will ultimately enjoy a more effortless and engaging life.

The path to finding insights is simple, but simple things are sometimes not so easy. If you sharpen your image of what an insight is and reconnect with the clearheaded, calm, and receptive state of mind you dwell in when insight occurs, rest assured, you will have more insights. We aim to provide you with guidance and practical steps to increase the frequency, strength, and quality of the insights you experience each day. You will learn how to cultivate your own Insight State of Mind and practice Insight Listening while having more insights on the topics that matter to you most.

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## CHAPTER

# 1 What Is Insight?

If you know what you're looking for, you're more apt to find it. That's as true for finding insights as it is for tracking down a lost pair of socks.

Knowing that you want more insights gives clear direction for your unconscious mind to go to work and find an answer. The clearer you are about the specific insight you seek, the more regularly the insight will occur. It's just like when you are considering buying a new car and you suddenly notice more cars on the road like the one you want to buy. Pause for a moment to pick a problem or topic you'd like some insight into and set it aside for use in the coming chapters.

Let's begin with how insight differs from other types of thought. While what follows is what we have learned from others, what an insight means for us or them is not nearly as important as what an insight is *for you*. With this awareness in place, you can learn how to actively listen for insights and access the state of mind in which you are most apt to facilitate insights.

## Insights Are Thoughts

Insights are a specific type of thought. We may think we understand what thoughts are, but let's take a closer look anyway. For our purposes, we are going to adopt a loose definition. Thoughts are ideas, opinions, mental images, cognitive activities, or any internal activities of the mind.

Thoughts ebb and flow naturally all the time. If you were asked to think about an orange balloon, that image would appear in your mind for a moment, and then it would vanish.

Sometimes we create our thoughts by actively looking for them. The most common example of this is in problem solving. When our first thoughts don't yield a solution, we try to bring forth new thoughts. In some cases, thoughts appear unsolicited, and we simply notice their arrival.

We are not consciously aware of many types of thinking. For example, when driving a car, we may suddenly notice that we had been absorbed in thought and were not conscious of our driving. Of course, while our minds wandered at the wheel, we continued to have many subconscious thoughts telling us to slow down, accelerate, or bear right. Although rarely vocalized and never visible, these thoughts exist and are essential for driving. It is important to remember that while we may be aware of some thoughts, a great many more are constantly occurring without our noticing.

## Memory Thoughts Versus Fresh Thoughts

Thoughts are constantly occurring, even when we are asleep. We have already had most of the thoughts that occur to us in some form or another. We call these *memory thoughts*. Memory

thoughts often occur not just once or twice but many times, like a social security number or an ATM code. *Fresh thoughts*, on the other hand, are new thoughts that we have never had before. Fresh thoughts are new for you even if they are old for someone else.

The distinction between a fresh thought and a memory thought is useful when exploring the nature of insight. Insights are always fresh thoughts, but not all fresh thoughts are insights. You might say to yourself, “Wow, look at that flower” or “This dinner is one of the best in my life.” These are fresh thoughts, but we would not describe them as insights. And just because a thought or idea is fresh does not necessarily mean it is good. Fresh or not, any thought that proves wrong would not be termed an insight. In fact, fresh thoughts are frequently way off base. Nothing’s wrong with having fresh ideas that are useless, as long as they serve as part of your creative process and you don’t necessarily act on them.

Most of the answers we need every day lie in memory, and there is no reason to look for an insight if the solution is already known. If the solution is not

known, then memory thoughts are no longer sufficient, and fresh thoughts become essential. Memory thinking seems to have a self-reinforcing nature. With each use, we learn to depend

Insights are always fresh thoughts, but not all fresh thoughts are insights.

more and more on it to solve our problems to the point that a strong reliance is established. Our educational institutions reinforce this pattern by stressing the accumulation of facts and the application of logical reasoning and generally encouraging

us to become proficient memory thinkers. Thus, when faced with a question, our minds look first, and often exclusively, to our memories. When we get stuck in memory-based thinking, we are unconsciously disconnecting ourselves from our natural capacity for insight.

Fresh thoughts have a distinct, albeit often-unnoticed, feeling associated with them. A light, spacious sense of surprise or even joy accompanies a fresh thought. The presence of such a feeling can alert you that something novel has arrived. Even ideas that turn out to be poor can appear with a good feeling at the outset. Of course, some fresh thoughts carry an ugly feeling, like wanting revenge and suddenly seeing a new way to get it. Even though they are fresh, these hopefully rare cases would not be called insights.

### To Have More Insights, Have More Fresh Thoughts

Trying deliberately to have an insight in any given moment rarely works, as we will see in upcoming chapters. What you can and should do is be deliberate about having more fresh thoughts. You have to discipline yourself to look for something fresh. Sometimes your fresh thoughts will be good, and other times they will be bad. You can learn to discard the bad ones, and over time the increase in fresh thoughts will yield an increase in insights.

### You Need Both Kinds of Thoughts

Of course, you don't have to create everything completely from scratch. Memory, knowledge, and the thoughts that accompany them are essential. And you must grasp the basic fundamentals of what you are doing. For example, a lawyer needs

a strong understanding of case law, but the best attorneys are not those who just remember the most from law school. They also have the ability to come up with an original and persuasive approach to a case. The best doctors are knowledgeable about pathology and human physiology, but they are also skilled at applying that knowledge insightfully to a particular medical case or condition.

In the case of insight, we operate more effectively when memory thoughts are present in the background and fresh thoughts are out in front, but the right relationship between fresh and memory thoughts is not just about having one kind in the back and one kind in the front of the mind. A healthy interplay between the two must be active and ongoing. As your memory bank grows and expands, you accumulate more raw material for insights. If you are trying to become well versed in a subject, you must search for more information and more ideas outside your own and add them to your memory bank. Nobel laureate Linus Pauling believed memory of isolated facts lay at the core of creativity. Pauling's Caltech students were reported to complain bitterly at having to memorize facts they could easily look up. One of his students, Dr. Samuel E. George, paraphrased Professor Pauling's response:

It's what you have in your memory bank—what you can recall instantly—that's important. If you have to look it up, it's worthless for creative thinking.

[Pauling] proceeded to give an example. In the mid-1930s, he was riding a train from London to Oxford. To pass the time, he came across an article in the journal *Nature*, arguing that proteins were amorphous

globs whose 3D structure could never be deduced. He instantly saw the fallacy in the argument—because of one isolated stray fact in his memory bank—the key chemical bond in the protein backbone did not freely rotate. . . .

He began doodling, and by the time he reached Oxford, he had discovered the alpha helix [for which he later won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry].<sup>1</sup>

## Insights Deepen Understanding

All insights are fresh thoughts, but as we said before, only a few fresh thoughts turn out to be insights. So what distinguishes an insight from a fresh thought? The short answer is the quality of the thought. Insights are really high-quality fresh thoughts. They result in a dramatically improved understanding of a situation or problem such that we see things more deeply and more accurately than before.

In some cases, we have no prior understanding of the subject in question whatsoever, while in others, our understanding (seen from the postinsight perspective) is either limited or wrong. The bigger the difference between the new understanding and the old, the more dramatic the insight will seem to be.

Imagine for a moment that for some time you have been troubled by someone's behavior. You can't understand why he does the things he does. One evening, you are watching someone on public television explain how people's minds work. You comprehend what the speaker is saying, and if you were asked to take a test on the subject, you would pass based on your

intellectual understanding. Although the subject is interesting, it does not feel particularly relevant to you at the moment.

Suddenly, your experience is a flash of clarity. You see the big picture and you absorb abruptly and instinctively, in a personal and even visceral way, what that person on television was talking about. All the speaker's logic and facts fall into place, and you see how everything works together. In this same instant, you realize why the person who has been troubling you behaves the way that he does. You feel a combination of surprise, satisfaction, pleasure, and relief.

In this example (which could be about something completely different—from a scientific theory to a new way to keep leaves out of your gutters), two separate things are occurring.

The first is a realization and the second is an insight. When you discover or realize something, you understand it at face value, such as when you finally comprehend what someone is trying to explain to you *in the way she intends you to understand*.

Discoveries and realizations are typically characterized by the appearance of new mental maps where none existed before, and like insights, they can be accompanied by an aha experience.

Insight is a discovery or realization that goes *beyond face value*, beyond the obvious. It is a deeper, more universal understanding that is often very relevant to you.

Insight is often characterized by the upending of an existing concept. The difference between a discovery or realization and

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an insight is not a sharp line, nor does it need to be for our purposes. The more realizations and discoveries you experience, the more likely it is that you will have an insight.

While most thoughts that occur during arguments are taken personally, when a true insight arrives, the situation or problem becomes more clear and *less* personal. The insight broadens the point of discussion, takes it in a new direction, or dissolves the conflict altogether.

Don't forget the important distinction between intellectual understanding and insight. Insight includes an intellectual understanding but goes further with a deeper awareness. With insight, a new cognitive structure is formed that is different from the sum of its parts, and it usually calls for a different action. In other words, action A might have been appropriate at first, but after the insight, action B is clearly the better course.

## Insights Make Things Simple and Maybe Even Fine the Way They Are

Before we understand anything completely, we perceive it as complex. As soon as we understand the situation and the insight arrives, we wonder how we could not have seen it before. The new understanding connects existing elements in our thinking, rearranging what we know; the pieces were already in place—just not in the right place. Understanding connects the pieces and makes your understanding of reality more accurate. Sometimes our new understanding is universal, like the elegance and beauty scientists speak of when they arrive at a more fundamental appreciation of a phenomenon.

Often insights reveal that a situation we once deemed a serious issue is in fact not a problem at all—that things are actually fine the way they are. Or it may turn out that the issue is unchangeable, and the insight brings the realization that this is not such a bad thing and that there is something to be done in the face of that immutability. In these cases, insights dissolve the fear, frustration, and anxiety attached to the issue. They restore our equanimity and help us see the problem in a new light, providing new perspectives and new opportunities.

A few years back, Charlie and our colleague Robin Charbit were sharing their ideas about insight with the management team of a large organization. Over the past few years, this particular business unit had failed repeatedly to introduce new products into their marketplace, which was not only frustrating but a source of real fear for the management team. Charlie and Robin gave a brief overview of *The Art of Insight* and then proposed that the team spend an hour using the ideas to explore their problem.

About half an hour into their discussion, an insight hit: *every other company in their industry was having even more difficulty than they were on exactly the same issue.* Then another insight came shortly after that: the characteristics of the industry had so changed that simply rolling out new versions of existing products was no longer the path to success *for anyone.* The room filled with an enormous psychological sigh of relief. Immediately, the team discarded the track they had been on and devoted the remainder of their discussion to applying their resources into distinctly different areas. You can imagine the amount of money they saved by abandoning this dead-end course!

## Insights Result in Changed Perception

Following an insight, we see the world differently. Sometimes the difference is only slight, and other times it can be quite profound. One common experience where insights prove useful is struggling with the behavior of a friend or relative, particularly when we find ourselves chronically feeling defensive or angry. One day you may learn something about the person's history and realize why he is prone to behave a certain way. In that one instant, the negative feelings dissolve, often to be replaced by a sense of connection, empathy, and compassion.

One colleague, whom we will call Joan, describes hating her sister for fifteen years. It got to the point that not only did she not want to be around her, but when the sister's name came up in conversation, even in reference to someone completely different, Joan would tighten up. One day, while talking with a friend about her difficult upbringing, Joan realized her sister had created a unique way of insulating herself from their trying family situation. Although Joan and her friend weren't talking about the sister, the sister's behavior suddenly made sense. Joan knew she didn't want to live in the "alternative universe" her sister had created for herself, but she knew now why it existed—and all her negative feelings simply evaporated.

Joan's story about seeing her sister in a new light illustrates how in the moment of clarity that accompanies insight, compassion can transform anger and fear into understanding, appreciation, and even love. As with the case of Joan and her sister, insights into another person are particularly powerful

because not only do they change your view of that person going forward, but they are capable of rewriting the entire history of your relationship to the point that previously hard-to-swallow experiences and memories disappear entirely.

From the moment we are struck by an insight, what once looked natural and right may suddenly appear foreign and wrong. Lifelong smokers, even after years of accumulating reasons to stop, acquiring all the medical justification, and failing to break the habit time and time again, may simply toss out their last pack of cigarettes, never to pick it up again after experiencing an insight. In the wake of an insight, acting in new ways is easy and takes less energy than when we try to move our thinking in a new direction by force of will alone. Willpower alone is sustainable for only so long. Ultimately, it gives out.

## Having an Insight Is Not Necessarily the Same as Solving a Problem

While one of the most common applications for insight is in solving a problem, it is not necessary to reach an impasse before looking for an insight. Insights unrelated to specific problems happen all the time. It is common to have insights on topics we are simply curious about. While having an insight and solving a problem are related, they are not one and the same. You can have insights when you don't have a problem, and you can also solve problems without insight. Some problems can be answered using logic and facts already stored in our minds, but for others, an insight is essential.

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