

Here's a quick quiz you can take to give you a sense of what kind of learner you are (see [eBook Supplemental Material](#) for a downloadable PDF version):

**1. When you don't quite understand or remember something:**

- a. It doesn't ring a bell or resonate
- b. It seems hazy or unclear
- c. You can't get a handle on it or feel it

**2. You are about to give a friend directions to your home. Would you:**

- a. Draw a map on paper?
- b. Tell her the directions?
- c. Pick her up in your car?

**3. You are staying in a hotel and have a rental car. You would like to visit a friend whose address you do not know. Would you like them to:**

- a. Draw you a map?
- b. Tell you directions?
- c. Pick you up in their car?

**4. Learning technical material is easiest for you when:**

- a. Someone explains the ideas to you
- b. You visualize the concepts and see the whole picture
- c. You can learn by doing or get a feel for the ideas

**5. You are going to cook a dessert as a special treat for your family. Do you:**

- a. Cook something familiar?
- b. Look through a cookbook for ideas?
- c. Ask for the advice of others?

**6. You are about to purchase a new sound system. Other than the price, what would most influence your decision?**

- a. A friend speaking about it
- b. How it makes you feel
- c. Its distinctive look or appearance

**7. Recall a time in your life when you learned how to do something like playing a new board game. Try to avoid choosing a very physical skill like riding a bike. How did you learn best? By:**

- a. Looking at the directions, pictures, diagrams, or charts
- b. Listening to somebody explain it
- c. Doing it

**8. Which of these games to you prefer?**

- a. Pictionary
- b. 20 Questions
- c. Charades

**9. You are about to learn how to use a new program on a computer. Would you:**

- a. Read the instructions?
- b. Call a friend and ask questions about it?
- c. Turn it on and learn by experimentation?

**10. You most easily are aware of and notice:**

- a. The quality of music from a sound system
- b. If colors, shapes, or patterns clash
- c. If clothes feel uncomfortable

**11. You are not sure whether a word should be spelled “separate” or “seperate.” Do you:**

- a. See the word in your mind and choose the best way it looks?
- b. Sound it out?
- c. Write down both versions?

**12. A new movie has arrived in town. What would most influence your decision to go or not go?**

- a. Friends/family talking about it
- b. You have an intuition or sense about it
- c. You saw a preview of it

**13. You most easily remember directions when you:**

- a. Repeat them to yourself as you hear them
- b. Visualize them
- c. Intuitively sense how to get there

**14. Do you prefer a teacher or trainer who likes to use:**

- a. Handouts, flow diagrams, charts, and visuals?
- b. Field trips, experiments, and applications?
- c. Discussions, guest speakers, and conversations?

**15. Once you completely understand a new idea:**

- a. It is now concrete, or you have a feel for it
- b. You have it loud and clear
- c. You can envision it

**16. You make decisions best when you rely on:**



- a. Your gut instinct
- b. What looks clearest to you
- c. What sounds best to you

**17. At a party, you are most interested in people who**

- a. Are interesting and articulate speakers
- b. Convey a warm and relaxing feeling
- c. Radiate a visual beauty

Once you've written down your answers, use this key to see which type of learning comes most naturally to you:

**1:** a (A) b (V) c (K),  
**2:** a (V) b (A) c (K),  
**3:** a (V) b (A) c (K),  
**4:** a (A) b (V) c (K),  
**5:** a (K) b (V) c (A),  
**6:** a (A) b (K) c (V),  
**7:** a (V) b (A) c (K),  
**8:** a (V) b (A) c (K),  
**9:** a (V) b (A) c (K),  
**10:** a (A) b (V) c (K),  
**11:** a (V) b (A) c (K),  
**12:** a (A) b (K) c (V),  
**13:** a (A) b (V) c (K),  
**14:** a (V) b (K) c (A),  
**15:** a (K) b (A) c (V),  
**16:** a (K) b (V) c (A),  
**17:** a (A) b (K) c (V)

Your answers will give you a good sense of the kind of learner you are. In all likelihood, you'll be some mix of audio (A), visual (V), and kinesthetic (K). But you might see a real dominance in one of these, and that can prove to be extremely useful as you embark on unlimiting your thinking, as you can make a conscious effort to bring the others into the mix.

## MENTAL MODELS

Mental models are constructs for thinking that help us make



sense of the world around us. Think of them as shortcuts. For example, we've all heard of the economic mental model of supply and demand. You're probably familiar with the idea that supply is representative of the amount of something available within a market, whether that's a service, product, or commodity. When that is juxtaposed against the demand for that item, value is determined, and that often dictates the price of the item. This model is a quick way to understand what's happening in a market. It's not always accurate and doesn't explain every factor involved, but it serves as a simple way of evaluating the price or value of an item.

Mental models train your mind to think; after all, you don't rise to the level of your expectations, you fall to the level of your training. Models can act as shortcuts that save you valuable energy and time when you're evaluating an idea, making a decision, or problem-solving.

In the following pages, I'm including some of my favorite mental models for faster and sharper decision-making and for creative problem-solving.

### Decision-Making: The 40/70 Rule

One of the greatest barriers to quick decision-making is the ever-present feeling that we don't have enough information to make the "right" decision. Colin Powell, former secretary of state, addresses this with his 40/70 rule.<sup>6</sup> His rule is to never make a decision with less than 40 percent of the information you are likely to get, and to gather no more than 70 percent of the information available. According to Powell, anything less than 40 percent and you're just guessing. Anything more than 70 percent and you're

stalling over making the decision. Of course, this means you need to be comfortable with the possibility that you're going to be wrong, which is necessary in any case.

"When you have about seventy percent of all the information, you probably ought to decide, because you may lose an opportunity. My own experience is that you get as much information as you can and then you pay attention to your intuition, to your informed instinct. Sometimes what my analytical mind says to me is not what I'll do," Powell said.<sup>7</sup>

### Productivity: Create a Not-to-Do List

This one might seem counterintuitive, but sometimes it's just as important to know what *not* to do as what to do. This tactic is used best for directing your attention to the essentials and avoiding what doesn't matter in the moment.

Often at the beginning of a project, or even just a packed day, it can feel overwhelming to decide what to concentrate on. The power of the not-to-do list is that you decide from the very beginning what you will definitely put aside. When we write down our list of tasks for the day, we usually don't prioritize, nor do we assign a value to these tasks. It's easy for a conventional to-do list to become a catchall for all the things we know we have to do that day, instead of the things that must be done first, for the most value.

Lest you think that the not-to-do list is filled with things like participating in social media, let's work out exactly how you should compile this list:



- First, write down tasks that might be important but can't be done because of outside circumstances. Maybe you're waiting for an e-mail from someone else, or you're waiting for a colleague to finish their portion of a project.
- Next, include tasks that you think need to be done but that don't add value to your life; you might also think of these as busywork. You might ask yourself if you can delegate or hire someone else to do them. You can also ask if anyone but you will notice whether the task is left undone. The idea here is that your time is best spent on tasks that will move your life and goals forward.
- Then include current and ongoing tasks that don't benefit from additional attention. This might include systems that are already set up, such as making the kids' lunches or having a brief meeting with your team at the start of the work day. These are part of your routine and shouldn't be clogging your to-do list on a daily basis.
- Last, include urgent tasks that are often to-do lists given to us by other people, such as getting some background research on a project or making follow-up calls. These are tasks that might be necessary to do but perhaps don't need to be done by you.<sup>8</sup>

When you're finished with your don't-do list, it should read like an anti-menu, a list of items that aren't available for your time. You will then be able to easily identify what will actually move you forward and do those activities instead.

### KWIK START

Do this right now. Take a moment to create your *not-to-do* list for today. What are the things you need to avoid today to focus and achieve your goals? Be specific and check off that list by not doing it.

### Problem-Solving: Study Your Errors

When we take the time to study the mistakes we make, especially those that have a lasting effect on our lives, we turn every mistake into a learning opportunity. Use this model to evaluate what went wrong so you can get a better result next time.

- First, get clear on what did or didn't happen. Often, we confuse cause with correlation, so be sure you understand what happened and what led to the mistake or error.
- Next, ask yourself why those mistakes happened. Look for the deeper layers behind the incident. You might ask "why" until you've run out of layers to question.
- Then ask how you can best avoid the same mistakes in the future. If some of the factors that caused the error are out of your control, ask how you can prevent causes that can't be eliminated.
- Finally, using what you've gleaned from this exercise, determine how you can create the best conditions to support your desired outcomes in the future.<sup>9</sup>



To help illustrate this strategy, let's imagine this scenario: the fundraising project you orchestrated for your child's school greatly underperformed your expectations. First, you need to be clear on what happened. Did you and your team fail to inspire people to give, or did the donors fail to show up? In this case, let's assume that the donors were available, but they didn't give as much as you anticipated or sometimes didn't give at all.

Now, you need to ask yourself why. Did it have something to do with the way you presented the need? Did it have something to do with the time of year? Did it have something to do with the economy? Remember that your answer here might lead to additional questions. In the scenario we're playing out, let's determine that you decide that you might not have emphasized the importance of this campaign, because there'd been a fundraiser at the school only two months prior and you didn't want to appear pushy, and that your being overly polite caused potential donors to think the cause wasn't critical.

So, how do you avoid this in the future? You decide that the next time you run the campaign, you're going to do it earlier in the school year and, regardless of the proximity of any other fundraiser, you're going to go out of your way to stress the value and importance of this one and why donors need to open up their checkbooks. The upshot of this is that you realize that you need to improve the way you send out the message about your campaign, and you determine to take a class on this so you will be much better prepared when next year's campaign comes along.

### Strategy: Second-Order Thinking

Most of us think about the consequences of our actions, but

few of us think even two steps beyond the immediate effects our actions will have on our lives. Let's consider Ryan Holiday's book, *Conspiracy*, which describes how entrepreneur Peter Thiel planned and executed a takedown of one of America's most prolific (and disliked) online magazines, *Gawker*.<sup>10</sup> Thiel's desire to confront *Gawker* was born after the mag outed him as gay. But he did not act immediately. Over the course of 10 years, he and a team strategically made one move after the next based on a plan they had devised to destroy *Gawker* for good. Regardless of what you think about Thiel's actions, they were definitely not the product of impulsive thinking. This is an example of second-order thinking, the ability to think strategically through a series of events.

This model is simple and yet not always easy. To use second-order thinking when considering future actions:

- Always ask yourself, "And then what?"
- Think in increments of time. What do the consequences look like in five days? Five months? Five years?
- Draw out the possible courses of action you might take using columns to organize consequences.<sup>11</sup>

First-order thinking is easy, but it's second-order thinking that allows us to go deeper through time and consequences. Best of all, it allows us to see what others can't see.

## TAKING GIANT LEAPS

Moving forward incrementally is a significant sign of progress.



Every step you can take in the process of becoming limitless is a step in the right direction. But what if you could move your genius forward *exponentially*? After all, if we take 30 normal steps forward, we'll wind up somewhere down the street. But if we took 30 exponential steps, we'd circle the Earth more than two dozen times. That's the kind of thinking advocated by Naveen Jain, winner of the Albert Einstein Technology Medal and founder of some of the most innovative companies in the world, including Moon Express (the first private company to be authorized to land on the moon), World Innovation Institute, iNome, TalentWise, Intelius, and Infospace.

"Exponential thinking is when you start to see things from a different mindset," Jain told me. "It's not about thinking outside the box; it's about thinking in a completely different box."<sup>12</sup> This is where normal genius begins to border on limitless genius. As Jain explains, linear thinking (the kind of thinking most of us employ) causes us to look at a problem and seek a solution. We might come at the problem from a number of angles. We might put on different hats to address the problem in ways that stretch our thinking. And we might even come up with a solution that addresses the problem effectively and moves us forward. That's all meaningful progress.

But what if we looked at the root cause of the problem and solved that instead? This would lead to exponential progress, world-changing progress. Jain uses as an example the lack of fresh water in many parts of the world. One could attempt to tackle that problem from a number of viewpoints, including finding ways to improve filtration and creating systems for moving fresh water from places where it was abundant to places where

it was scarce. But what if instead you identified that, among the various causes for fresh-water scarcity, the biggest is that so much fresh water is being used for agriculture rather than drinking? You would attempt to solve the problem in an entirely different way. What if you could use significantly less water for agriculture, perhaps through some combination of aeroponics, aquaponics, or other techniques currently being experimented with or not yet invented? This would result in such an abundance of fresh water that the original problem would become eminently solvable. That's exponential thinking at work, and the value of it is obvious.

When Jain started his company Viome, his goal was to attack the pervasive nature of chronic illness, which he sees as underlying the world's health crisis. Understanding that every individual's immune system is different and therefore how each person processes the foods they consume can vary greatly, he and his team developed a tool for analyzing an individual's gut microbiome so a person can "Get to the bottom of what foods are right for your body and discover how optimizing the activity of your gut can dramatically improve the condition of your health."<sup>13</sup> As I write this, they're in the process of collecting information from a huge number of users, data that will lead to powerful recommendations for every individual who employs the tool.

Naveen Jain operates at the grandest of scales. He's a successful entrepreneur who has never started two companies in the same industry, and one of his operating principles is that creating a billion-dollar company is *simply* a matter of solving a \$10-billion problem. Now, most of us don't think on such a massive scale, but you can still use exponential thinking to exercise your mind and



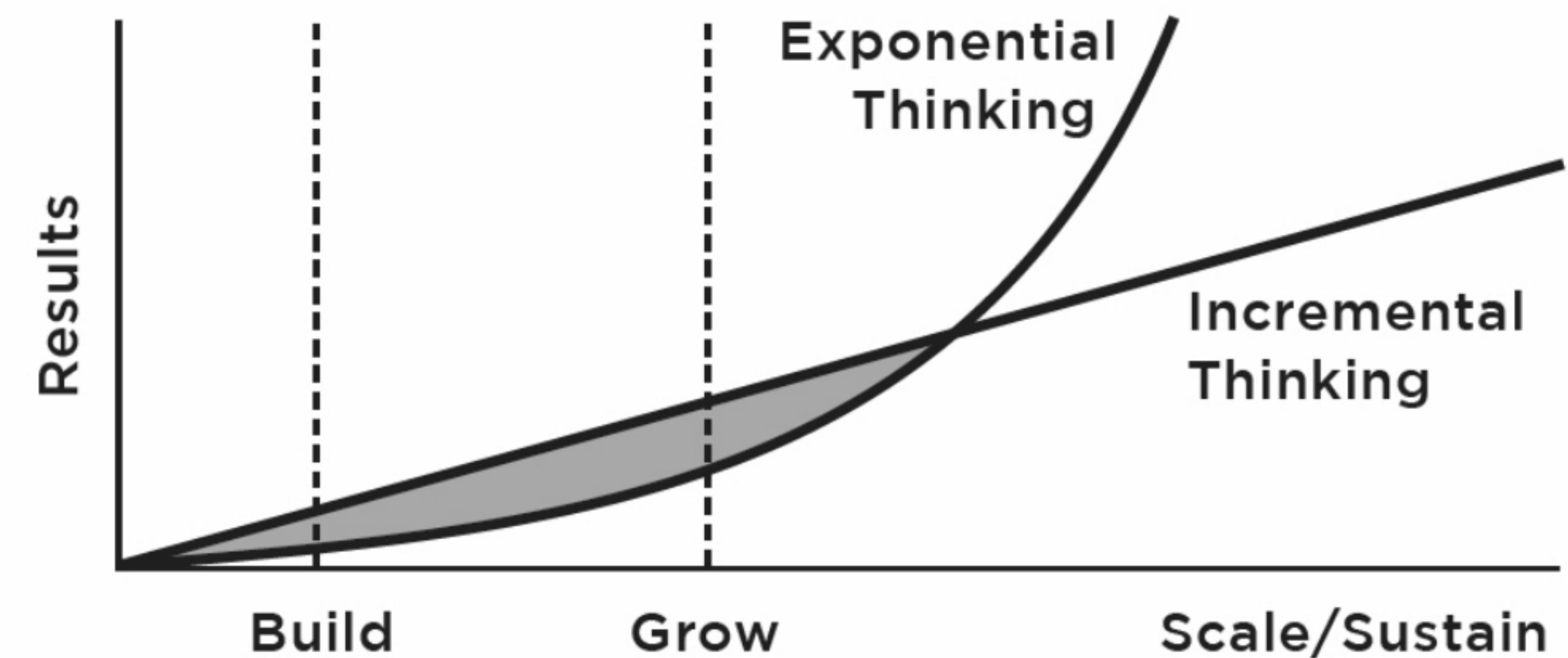
unlimit your personal genius. To learn more about Viome and watch my interview with Naveen Jain, visit [www.JimKwik.com/Viome](http://www.JimKwik.com/Viome).

## THINKING EXPONENTIALLY

So, how does an individual think exponentially? Maybe your goal isn't to solve all the world's problems, invent a new technology, or start a billion-dollar company, but you can see how applying exponential thinking might make a real difference to your school, your business, or your personal growth. How can thinking less linearly and more exponentially make dramatic changes in your life?

The first step is having a good understanding of what the exponential mindset looks like. In a piece for the *Harvard Business Review*, Mark Bonchek, founder and chief epiphany officer of Shift Thinking, describes the linear mindset as a line appearing on a graph that rises gradually over time. He then juxtaposes this with a second line that curves upward, slowly at first, and then shooting over the other line before heading far off the graph. This is his visual depiction of the exponential mindset.

### Phase of a Business



“The incremental mindset focuses on making something *better*, while the exponential mindset is focused on making something *different*,” he notes. “Incremental is satisfied with 10 percent. Exponential is out for 10X.”<sup>14</sup>

“The incremental mindset draws a straight line from the present to the future,” Bonchek continues. “A ‘good’ incremental business plan enables you to see exactly how you will get from here to there. But exponential models are not straight. They are like a bend in the road that prevents you from seeing around the corner, except in this case the curve goes up.”

Bonchek is speaking specifically about applying exponential thinking to business, but the same perception can be brought to bear on thinking in other parts of life. Imagine, for example, that you were trying to figure out how to have everyone in your family at the dinner table at least three times a week. A linear mindset would involve looking at everyone's work schedules, school schedules, activities schedules, and social schedules to try to find



a way to clear out some space. But an exponential mindset would take the approach of turning your family's harried schedules into something different.

Maybe "dinner" isn't the goal at all, but rather finding key moments during the week when everyone can be in the same place and focus exclusively on each other. Maybe the issue isn't your schedules at all but how each of you has chosen to commit their time. Progress might not seem much like progress (three months later, you're barely better off than when you started), but then the changes you've been developing start to take shape, and suddenly you have lots more time together.

If you want to fire up your exponential thinking ability—and take a huge step toward unlimiting your genius—consider these four steps the next time you contemplate a problem or task in need of a solution:

### **Step 1: Get to the Underlying Problem**

As Naveen Jain illustrated when addressing the world's water problem, the core issue might not be the surface issue at all. As Jain noted, the underlying problem behind the shortage of fresh water isn't the availability of the water, but rather that so much fresh water is being used for agricultural purposes. Solving the underlying problem allows for a much more workable solution to the surface problem.

Let's go back to our dinner scenario. The surface problem is that the family rarely eats dinner together because everyone's schedules are too busy. The underlying problem might be that your schedules are so busy because your spouse feels compelled to work long hours at work, your daughter feels compelled to be

an elite athlete, your son feels compelled to get perfect academic scores so he can attend a college with a 3 percent acceptance rate, and you feel compelled to sit on three nonprofit boards. But maybe even that is not the true underlying problem.

Maybe what's really at issue is that you each feel the pressures you feel not because you personally aspire to these goals but rather because you live in a community that looks down on people who don't have goals of this sort.

### **Step 2: Posit a New Approach**

One of the keys to exponential thinking is filling your thoughts with what-if statements. Evie Mackie of the Innovation Hub at the John Lewis Partnership says that "'What If' statements come into play to bring unruly scenarios into the picture. For example, 'What if the human race needed to adapt and live in a world which was 90 percent underwater' or 'What if we could no longer touch things with our hands to interact.' This helps conceptualize a WHOLE different array of things we may never have thought of otherwise and allows us to imagine what we would need to survive in a future world, which could be a very different place."<sup>15</sup>

In our example, if you've realized the underlying problem is that the prevailing notions in your community have forced you into filling your daily lives with activities that take far too much of your time, you might ask yourselves, "What if we didn't care what everyone else thought?" Or maybe you'd ask, "What if there were only 18 hours in the day instead of 24?" Or you might even ask, "What if we lived somewhere else?"



### Step 3: Read about It

As you already know, I am an extremely strong advocate for reading as much as you possibly can. Reading liberates your brain more than virtually any other activity. Reading is especially important when it comes to exponential thinking. You can't make huge cognitive leaps if you don't have a well-rounded view of a subject.

So, now that you've gone through the what-if exercise, read up on alternatives. Maybe your spouse reads a number of books about the connection between corporate success and happiness. Maybe your daughter connects with bloggers and influencers on both the odds of becoming an elite athlete and the lives of elite athletes. Maybe your son reads a number of studies that look at graduation from ultra-competitive universities and occupational and emotional success afterward. Maybe you read books about the causes you're championing via your nonprofits and reconsider how important these causes are to you.

### Step 4: Extrapolate

You've now identified the underlying problem, posed questions that allow you to imagine a world without the problem, and done your research. Now, it's time to try out a scenario. Let's play one out here: You're convinced that you've filled your lives with activities because you need these to maintain your status in your community. You've asked the question, "What if we lived somewhere else?" and found that everyone in your family is intrigued by this notion. You've done your reading and discovered that you could be happier and more satisfied if your job/sports/school/philan-

thropic goals were revised and reconceived.

So, what would happen if you moved a hundred miles away, across the country, or even to a different country? You know that doing something this dramatic might not immediately seem like progress. You've seen the straight line and the curved line, and you realize that it might even seem you've taken a huge step backward because of all the adjustments you'd need to make. But say the four of you play out the scenarios and decide that making a move is the right thing to do. Two years later, the family is thriving—and you have dinner together nearly every night.

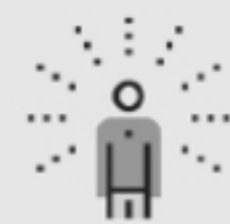
## BEFORE WE MOVE ON

This is the last of the method chapters, and I'm sure you're itching to put everything you've learned in this book to use. Before we end, I'm going to give you a vision of how this might work for you and a 10-day plan to jump-start applying what you've learned to your life. But before we get to that, let's try a few things:

- Review Howard Gardner's eight forms of intelligence starting on [HOW ARE YOU SMART?](#). Which forms on this list align most closely with your own intelligence?
- Now that you know what your learning style is, what can you do to incorporate the other styles into your thinking?
- Try on all six thinking hats during a test case. Give yourself a relatively simple task, and approach it using Edward de Bono's method.



“We shall not cease  
from exploration  
And the end of all  
our exploring  
Will be to arrive  
where we started  
And know the place  
for the first time.”



—T. S. ELIOT