Brief Summary of
Liminal thinking
Create the change you want by changing the way you think
Dave Gray

- The word liminal comes from the Latin word "limen" which means "threshold".
- Liminal thinking is the art of creating change by understanding, shaping and reframing beliefs.
- It is the *in-between* space that defines two things while at the same time being neither one nor the other.
- Change happens at the boundaries of things – the boundary between the known and the unknown, the familiar and the different, between the old way and the new way, the past and the future.

Principles of Liminal thinking

1. Beliefs are models

- Beliefs seem like perfect representations of the world but in fact are imperfect models for navigating a complex, multidimensional, unknowable reality
- We all can grasp some fragments of reality, but none of us can have a grasp on reality as a whole.
- Beliefs are not reality. They are not facts. They are constructions. You construct your beliefs, even though for most people this is an unconscious process.
- Buddha said his teachings were like a finger pointing at the moon – the finger is helpful if you want to see the moon, but you should not mistake the finger for the moon.

2. Beliefs are created

- Beliefs are constructed hierarchically using theories and judgements, which are based on selected facts and personal, subjective experiences.
- We construct beliefs slowly, layer by layer, over time, using the "Pyramid of belief". It is based loosely on the Ladder of Inference by Chris Argyris.
- The baseline is *reality* which none of us can really completely understand – this is the ground that the pyramid is built on.
- One is also limited by what he/she pays attention to. In any given moment, the more you focus on one aspect of your *experience*, the less you notice everything else – in other words, you can only focus on one thing at a time.
- *Attention* is a thin sliver of your overall experience, like a needle on a record player.
- Based on things you notice, you will form *theories* and make *judgements*.

- Experiences, attention, theories and judgements form a foundation that reduces the unknowable to a kind of map or model that is simple enough to understand and use in daily life.
- The space between the baseline of reality and "the obvious" is liminal space. Learning how to navigate this "below the obvious" construction zone is one of the core skills of liminal thinking

3. Beliefs create a shared world

- Beliefs are the psychological material we use to co-create a shared world, so we can live, work and do things together. Changing a shared world together requires changing its underlying beliefs.
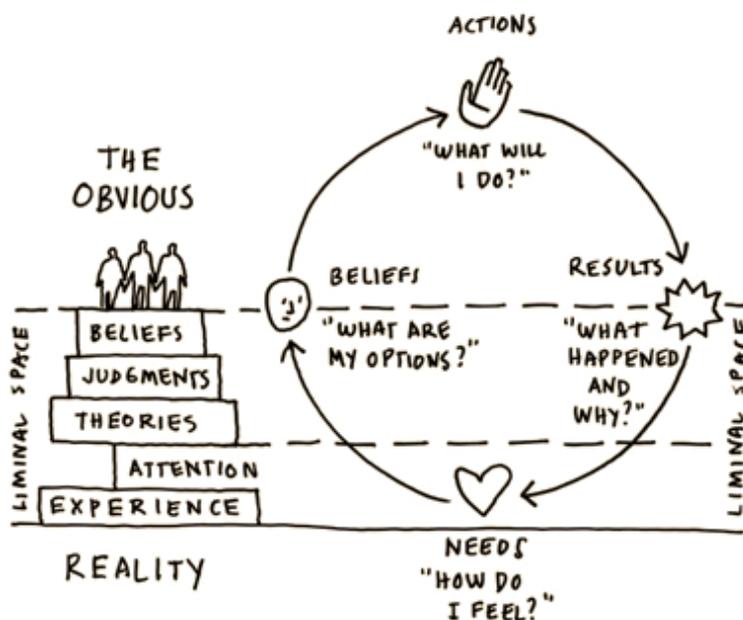
- Learning loop is a continuous feedback cycle of needs, thinking and action. Over time, the learning loop feedback cycle creates habits of belief and behavior.
- When learning loops go wrong, it creates a vicious cycle called Doom loop.
- A delight loop is a self-reinforcing pattern of positive belief and behavior.

4. Beliefs create blind spots

- Beliefs are tools for thinking and provide tools for action, but they can also create artificial constraints that blind you to valid possibilities
- Limiting beliefs narrows the range of possibilities.
- There are opportunities around you all the time, every day, and in many cases, you are unable to see them, because limiting beliefs blind you to real possibilities.

- Liminal thinking is away to identify limiting beliefs and open yourself to hitherto unseen possibilities that can open new doors.
- We create a bubble of belief that reinforces and protects our existing beliefs by denying that alternate beliefs are within the realm of possibility. It is a kind of collective delusion or dream that we co-create in order to maintain a group map that we use to navigate the world – self-sealing logic as per Argyris.
- New information from outside the bubble of belief is discounted, or distorted because it conflicts with the version of reality that exists inside the bubble.

5. Beliefs defend themselves

- Beliefs are unconsciously defended by a bubble of self-sealing logic which maintains them even when they are invalid, to protect personal identify and self-worth.
- There are two ways people make sense of new ideas
  - Is it internally coherent?   Does it make sense given what I already know, and can it be integrated with all of my other beliefs? Or does it make sense from within my bubble?
  - Is it externally valid? Can I test it? If I try, does it work?
- People rarely test ideas for external validity when they don't have internal coherence.
- Liminal thinking requires a willingness to test and validate new ideas, even when they seem absurd, crazy or wrong.

6. Beliefs are tied to identity

- Governing beliefs which forms the basis for other beliefs are the most difficult to change, because they are tied to personal identity and feelings of self-worth. You cannot change your governing beliefs without changing yourself.
- A belief that is deeply tied to identity and feelings of self-worth is called a *governing belief*.
- Superficial surface beliefs are relatively easy to change. Beliefs that are deeply connected with yourself, your identity - these beliefs that are most deep rooted and hard to change them because to change them would mean how you see yourself.
- Governing beliefs form the foundation of your version of reality. They generate feelings of self-worth, group identity and social stability. Questioning your governing beliefs can lead to profound change
- A truly significant change to your world, will almost always require some kind of corresponding change to yourself.

Liminal Thinking practices

1. Assume that you are not objective

- If you are part of the system, you want to change, you are part of the problem
- The Johari window is a great tool for liminal thinking.
- It is very easy to see problems and logical inconsistencies in other people. It is very hard to see them in yourself.
- Your biggest blind spot is yourself. If you are not willing to look at your own contributions and inputs to the situation as part of the problem, you won't be able to see it clearly. Your understanding will be distorted and so will be your beliefs.

2. Empty your cup

- You cannot learn new things without letting go of old things. Stop, look and listen. Suspend judgement.
- In order to learn anything truly new, you must empty your cup – so your existing knowledge, theories, assumptions, and preconceptions do not get in the way. In Zen practice this is called the "*Beginner's mind*".
- You take on an attitude of openness, curiosity eagerness to learn and have an open mind, willingness to feel dumb, to be vulnerable, is the essence of liminal thinking

3. Create a Safe Space

- if you don't understand the underlying need, nothing else matters. People will not share their innermost needs unless they feel safe, respected, and accepted for who they are.
- Actions and results are observable, beliefs are not. Needs are not only invisible, they are often intentionally hidden, because exposing them makes people feel vulnerable.
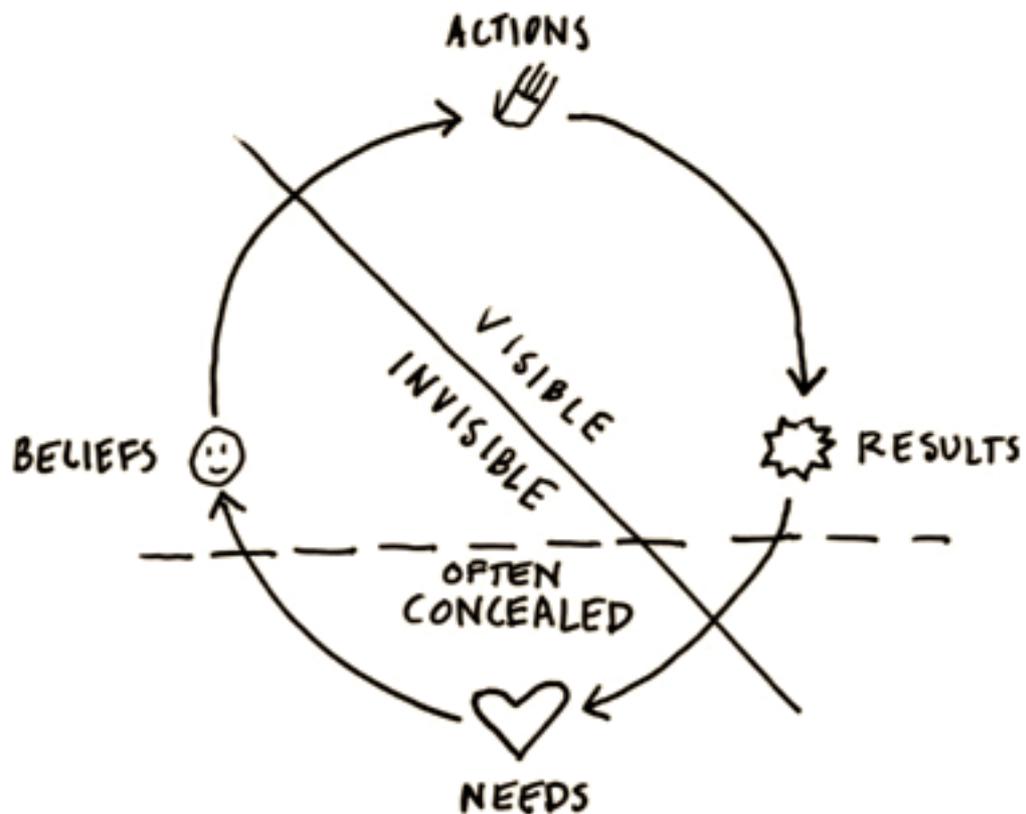
- David Rock of Neuro Leadership Institute has developed a brain science based model for thinking about emotional needs – called the **SCARF Model**.

  - ✓ Status – Does this person feel important, recognized, or needed by others?
  - ✓ Certainty – Does this person feel confident that they know what's ahead, and they can predict the future with reasonable certainty?
  - ✓ Autonomy – Does this person feel like they have control of their life, their work and their destiny?
  - ✓ Relatedness – Does this person feel like they belong? Do they feel a sense of relatedness? Do they trust the group to look after them?
  - ✓ Fairness – Does this person feel like they are being treated fairly? Do they feel that the "rules of the game" give them a fair chance?
- When people's basic emotional needs are met, they do better work. When they feel valued and important, they perform at much higher levels. When they have a sense of control, they will take initiative. When they feel a sense of belonging they contribute more. When they feel, they are being treated fairly, they will go the extra mile.
- Liminal thinking involves an awareness of the important role that emotional needs play in the formation of beliefs, how believes then become habits of action, and how through those actions we create the world we live in.

- The only way that you can really understand what people's motivated are is to create a space that is safe enough for them to come out of their self-sealing logic bubble, to cultivate curiosity and openness, and to give them a feeling of safety.

4. Triangulate and validate

- Look at situations from as many points of view as possible. Consider the possibility that seemingly different or contradictory beliefs may be valid. If something does not make sense to you, then you are missing something
- Cultivate as many theories as you can, including some that seem odd, counter intuitive or even mutually counterintuitive – and hold onto them loosely. Don't get attached to any one of them.
- Then you can start asking questions and seek valid information to help you understand what is really going on.
- The way to seek understand is to empty your cup, step up and give people your full attention, suspend your beliefs and judgements and listen carefully.

5. Ask questions, make connections

- Try to understand people's hopes, dreams and frustrations. Explore the social system and make connections to create new opportunities.
- By asking people for their hopes, dreams, fears and frustrations can reveal the latent needs and goals of the people in the system – a kind of ecosystem of needs and solutions.
- By asking questions, one finds liminal, in between spaces that people may not have seen or considered. Then by finding possible intersections between the needs and solutions and forming new connections, he creates new opportunities, that were already latent in the system, waiting to be discovered.

6. Disrupt routines

- Many beliefs are embedded in habitual routines that run on autopilot. If a routine is a problem, disrupt the routine to create new possibilities.
- Whenever you find yourself stuck in any kind of recurring pattern, try something random. Anything you can do that throws the train off the rails will create new openings and might help you to see the whole situation in a new way - by just doing something different.

7. Act as if in the here and now

- You can test beliefs even if you don't believe they are true. All you need is to act as if they were true and see what happens. If you find something that works, do more of it.
- Single loop learning builds on your existing experiences, refining, honing and polishing your existing beliefs. But there are times when a belief no longer works, or isn't enough.

- Double loop learning is a way to break out of a rut by challenging your beliefs and trying on new ones. In case of double loop learning, you don't have to believe a hypothesis in order to test it. All you have to do is to act if it were true and see what happens.
- Change is only possible in the here and now - and the way to create change is by acting in the here and how as if a different world existed – e.g. the world you want to create is already there.
- Double loop learning is a powerful tool because it give you a way to test new ideas that you would otherwise ignore or discount because they are coming from outside your existing bubble.

8. Make sense with stories.

- If you give people facts without a story, they will explain it within their existing belief system. The best way to promote a new or different belief, is not with facts, but with a story.
- Facts alone may provide information – but a story gives you context that connects those facts to people, situations and events.
- Stories are learning tools – it is the best way to share an experience so that others could learn from it.
- A good way to elicit stories from people is through the use of something called story prompt. Story prompts are questions about people's experiences and how they made meaning out of them e.g.
  - Think of the best team you have ever been part of. What happened that made you feel that way
  - What is the most scared you have ever been. What happened?
  - What was your best/worst day at work?
- If you have beliefs that you want to share, beliefs that you think may change the world for the better, the way to help those beliefs to take flight is to share them as stories.

9. Evolve yourself

- If you can be open about how change affects you personally, you have a better chance of achieving your aims.
- To change the world, you must be willing to change yourself.
- Liminal thinking is a way to intentionally disrupting your existing models by introducing more muddles. Mucking about with muddles can lead to new and interesting models that may work better than earlier models.
- Liminal thinking is a way of navigating change by opening the door to ambiguity and uncertainty, recognizing that there can be no real creation without some destruction, kind of urban renewal program for the mind.

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