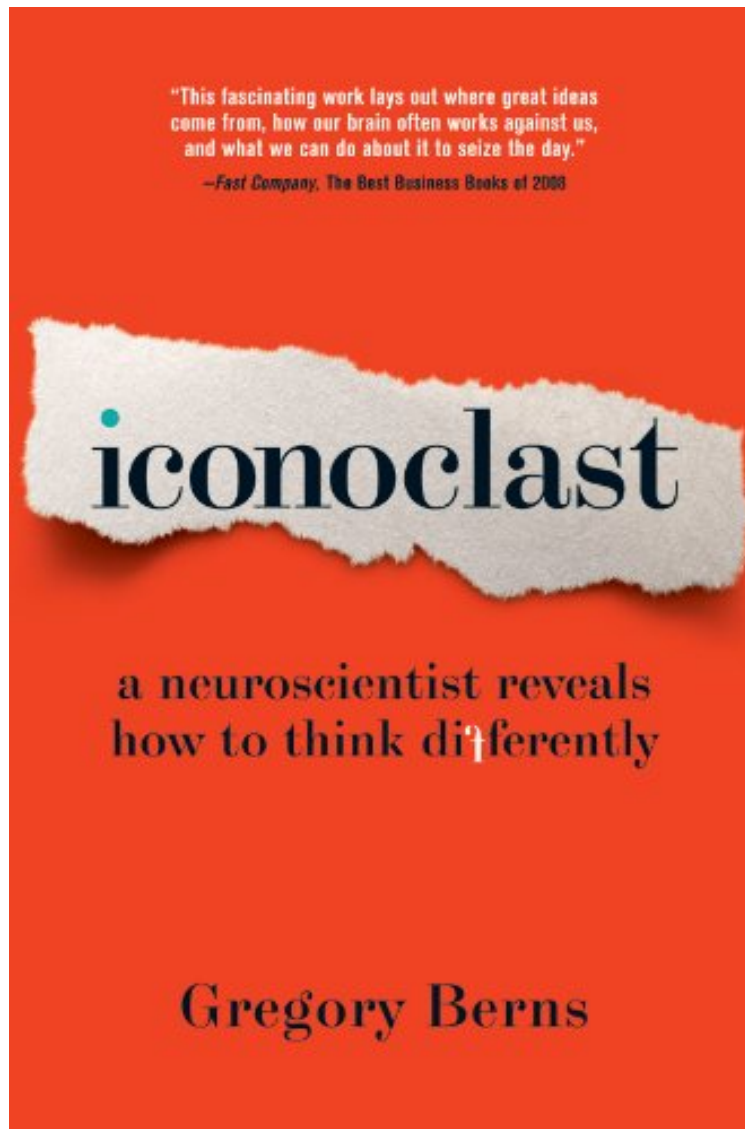


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Iconoclast: A Neuroscientist Reveals How to Think Differently

Gregory Berns

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Gregory Berns : Iconoclast: A Neuroscientist Reveals How to Think Differently before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Iconoclast: A Neuroscientist Reveals How to Think Differently:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Lesson in neuroscience and history, not in thinking differently By Elyse Watkins Overview This book is great at describing the neural basis of what makes an iconoclast, someone who does something that apparently can't be done, and why the general population will likely never be iconoclasts. It gives relevant examples of iconoclasts across a variety of disciplines, and how they have differed from the majority. It does

not, however, give the majority insight into how to become iconoclasts. This could be because Berns argues that, in general, an iconoclast is either born an iconoclast or made an iconoclast because of a life-changing event. Whatever the reason, I would have liked to see a greater emphasis on how the average person can work to overcome the three barriers to iconoclasm (the only real solution he gives is in the final chapter "The Iconoclast's Pharmacopoeia"). In general, I would recommend this book to anyone who is interested in learning about the brain, interesting research studies, and some of the most influential people in history. If you are looking for a prescription on how to be innovative and think like an iconoclast, look elsewhere. "The average iconoclast possesses a perceptual system that can see things differently than other people. He conquers his fear of the unknown, and possesses enough social intelligence to sell his idea to other people." Perception According to Berns, an iconoclast differs from the average person not by how he sees, but by how he perceives. When we see something, our brains give us the most likely explanation of what is occurring. It is difficult to innovate in a familiar surrounding, because the brain tries to take shortcuts in order to save energy, and in doing so leads to "perception based on past experiences." Berns suggests that because of the brain's tendency to assume what will be next, this stifles creative thinking. He suggests that in order to think like an iconoclast, we have to constantly "confront the perceptual system with people, places, and things it hasn't seen before." We need new environments and experiences in order to have imagination. This section was probably the best at presenting ways in which we can overcome the first "barrier" to iconoclasm. However, aside from his suggesting that we put ourselves in environments that our brain has not yet experienced, Berns does not go much further. I appreciated his explanation of the neuroscience behind why our brains have evolved to virtually inhibit innovation. His examples of Walt Disney and the artist Chihuly were interesting in that these iconoclasts were made, not born, through distinct experiences that changed their perception of the world. Additionally, I appreciated Berns's use of optical illusions to demonstrate that the brain sees what it wants to see. Fear Berns argues that fear, and its corresponding stress response, is "the second great hurdle to becoming an iconoclast." When the body is presented with a stressor, the sympathetic nervous system kicks in. This is characterized by heightened blood pressure, dilated pupils, fast heart rate, and slowed digestion, to name a few. In prehistoric times, this fear response was activated to be able to prepare the body for "fight or flight", such as when confronted with a predator on the African savannah. Berns cites many studies in psychology that prove that when someone faces the challenge of conforming or not conforming to a group decision, the amygdala, a small structure in the brain known to be involved in the "flight or flight" response, is activated. Furthermore, when an individual participates in a task wherein he or she can fail, this same region is activated. What is different in iconoclasts, says Berns, is that they are not afraid of nonconformity or failure, which allows them to take risks. This section was the best at explaining the biology behind the fear response, but the worst at describing how we can overcome that response. This section was particularly interesting because it is very relevant to daily life. Everyone has experienced the fear of nonconformance, such as when going against a common decision made by colleagues, the fear of failure, fear of public speaking, fear of taking risks - the list goes on. This section gives a biological reason to why these fears are so common, and how they inhibit us from innovation. Berns does not, unfortunately, provide any advice as to how we can overcome these fears. This section uses fewer examples of iconoclasts throughout history who have overcome fear, possibly because it is hard to quantify. It does, however, give many examples of research studies that support his argument. Social Intelligence Social intelligence is based on many factors, but the two most important are familiarity and reputation. "Iconoclasts, by definition, are foreign to most people," which is why this section seem almost contradictory. Berns makes the distinction, however, that social intelligence is not necessary to make an iconoclast, but it is necessary to make a successful one. When iconoclasts come up with ideas, many of them are foreign and completely go against what is accepted and familiar. When something is unfamiliar, it activates the amygdala, which from the previous section we know is responsible for the fear response. Thus, in order for the general public to accept the innovation (or the iconoclast him/herself), it must appear to be familiar. This is where social intelligence comes into play. "The ultimate goal, through familiarity and reputation, is for the world to shrink his world like Picasso. Don't be a Van Gogh." This was, in my opinion, the most interesting section. It was replete with examples throughout history of iconoclasts who have both succeeded and failed due to their social intelligence. It is useless to have a great idea if the idea is not marketable and accepted by the general population. Although again, Berns does not suggest how to increase social intelligence, he does show pretty decisively the correlation between social intelligence and success. Presumably, the readers of this book are looking to think differently to create something new and exciting, and using the examples of iconoclasts who have done so in the past, and have succeeded, could be useful. Style In general, Berns usually starts his chapters with examples, followed by explanations of the neuroscience, studies that provide support for these explanations, and how iconoclasts differ from this. Although at some points Berns writes with technical language, I do not by any means think that should deter someone without knowledge of neuroscience from reading this book. He explains very well the different structures and functions of the brain and makes it simple for the average reader to understand. Berns keeps the reader interested by using relevant examples. The structure of the book, with its three distinct sections, makes it clear to follow his thought process. Admittedly, the last chapter, "The Iconoclast's Pharmacopoeia" seems a bit out of place with the rest of the book; however, it was still quite interesting. Recommendation I would recommend this book as a good and interesting read. As stated previously, I

believe its value is in the examples it provides of iconoclasts throughout history and its brief explanations about the brain. I do not think this is a valuable tool for learning how to think differently. 5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Now I understand the science that underpins my teaching. By JI have finally found a book that explains the science underpinning what I have been involved in for a lifetime: the world of creativity, originality and innovation. I teach an MBA course at South Africa's Gordon Institute of Business Science: "Imagination for the business mind- thinking differently." From personal experience I have devised a course where I use the arts (mainly the visual arts) to expose the students to material that is foreign to them, even weird and outrageous. Taking them to a world where they might never have been before, or might have visited only occasionally, I reasoned, scrambles the mind, breaks down presuppositions and prejudices and creates an environment where fresh thinking may evolve. Perceiving differently will lead to thinking differently was my assumption. The assumption and the process are both vindicated by Berns' book. The thesis, in a nutshell, is that perception is a construct of the mind. There are two reasons for them mind involuntarily choosing the conventional option: 1. The mind needs to be energy efficient. It will therefore balk at options that require it to spend more energy. The result: the mind puts perceptions into already acquired boxes (categories). Therefore the known will almost always win against the novel. We are therefore programmed to fear the novel. This fear acts as a powerful switch to let the mind use the lower energy option that goes with the conventional. 2. We are also programmed to fear the opprobrium of others. We don't want to stand alone. Berns cites laboratory experiments of others and his own to establish this point sufficiently. He also describes in detail, and in an engaging way how the brain processes visual stimuli and transforms it into perception and understanding. So, what's to be done? Expose yourself to novel visual environments. Make it almost impossible for the brain to process the wealth of new stimuli within its conventional categories. Train yourself to overcome your fear of novelty. And finally, to be a fresh thinker that accomplishes something in the real world, you have to balance your ability to take a stand against the group or team with the patience and the ability to persuade others to your view. Berns has persuaded me to prune some of the linguistic material in favour of more material from the visual arts. I also now have a proper scientific foundation for what I do to offer the students. Finally it is a vindication for including courses such as the one I am offering within an MBA curriculum, because you offer students a "safe" environment to overcome their fear of the novel and test the waters of iconoclasm tentatively, if not bravely! 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Would be innovators, beware, its not for everyone. By Greg Chalik An excellent study invaluable in understanding the innovator mindset required for 'doing' innovation. It shows that innovation is not for everyone, which is I suppose a surprise for many management consultants that think they can just 'change culture' and make innovators out of people that are not mentally predisposed towards that path.

No organization can survive without iconoclasts -- innovators who single-handedly upturn conventional wisdom and manage to achieve what so many others deem impossible. Though indispensable, true iconoclasts are few and far between. In *Iconoclast*, neuroscientist Gregory Berns explains why. He explores the constraints the human brain places on innovative thinking, including fear of failure, the urge to conform, and the tendency to interpret sensory information in familiar ways. Through vivid accounts of successful innovators ranging from glass artist Dale Chihuly to physicist Richard Feynman to country/rock trio the Dixie Chicks, Berns reveals the inner workings of the iconoclast's mind with remarkable clarity. Each engaging chapter goes on to describe practical actions we can each take to understand and unleash our own potential to think differently -- such as seeking out new environments, novel experiences, and first-time acquaintances. Packed with engaging stories, science-based insights, potent practices, and examples from a startling array of disciplines, this engaging book will help you understand how iconoclasts think and equip you to begin thinking more like an iconoclast yourself.

From Publishers Weekly Psychiatry professor Berns (*Satisfaction: The Science of Finding True Fulfillment*) describes an iconoclast as "a person who does something that others say can't be done." Though keeping his promise to reveal the "biological basis" for the ability to think outside the box, Berns keeps technical explanation to a minimum, instead using themes like perception, fear and networking to profile a number of famous free-thinkers. While the ordinary person perceives the world based on his past experience and "what other people say," the iconoclast is both willing and able to risk seeing things differently; in the case of glass sculptor Dale Chihuly, his creative breakthrough (departing from symmetry in his ice-sculptures) came after a car crash blinded him in one eye, literally changing his view of the world. The will to take risks is also paramount; Cardinals baseball coach Branch Rickey and his controversial hire Jackie Robinson, the first black man in the Majors, provide models of imagination and fearlessness. Berns also looks at iconoclasts like Steve Jobs, Martin Luther King Jr., Henry Ford, the Dixie Chicks, Warren Buffett and Picasso, relating in lucid terms the mindsets that set them apart. Copyright copy; Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. This fascinating work lays out where great ideas come from, how our brain often works against us, and what we can do about it to seize the day. --Fast Company, Best Business Books of 2008 About the Author Gregory Berns, MD, PhD, is professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Emory University. He has written for numerous science publications and has been interviewed on National Public Radio, CNN, and ABC's

Primetime. He has been profiled frequently in the Wall Street Journal, New York Times, and other media.