

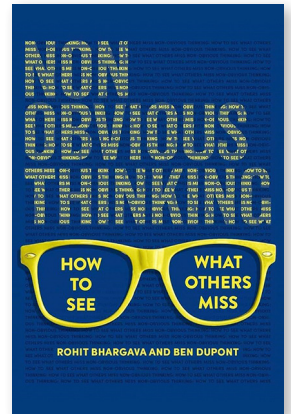


# Executive Book Summaries<sup>®</sup>

## Non-Obvious Thinking

How to See What Others Miss

by Rohit Bhargava and Ben duPont



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### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

The goal of this book is to teach you how to overcome blind spots and become a more original thinker. The authors call this “non-obvious thinking.” In *Non-Obvious Thinking: How To See What Others Miss*, the argument is made that often the best ideas come from unexpected voices, the non-experts who bring an outsider’s perspective.

At a time when social media algorithms fuel deep polarization in our society, our culture is desperate for more non-obvious thinkers. Old solutions for new problems rarely work. We need people who see what others don’t, ask questions, and push back against the obvious status quo—people who have the empathy to put themselves in other people’s shoes without dismissing alternate perspectives as misguided.

The world needs more non-obvious thinkers. Non-obvious thinkers are the instigators who come up with bold, original ideas that propel all of us forward—and have the courage and determination to turn them into reality. They are the ones who change things for the better. And every country on Earth is hungry for more of them. You can become one. This book will show you how.

### IN THIS EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARY:

- Discover how to create space for innovative thinking.
- Learn strategies to uncover hidden insights.
- Explore techniques to focus and sharpen your ideas.
- Transform your ideas by adding a unique twist and an unexpected approach.

### Part One: Create Space

Creating space goes beyond simply producing more time for contemplation. Sometimes it also involves creating the physical space to have new ideas. Or being more productive with the free time you do have so you can invest it in ways that can help you open your mind into unexplored directions and be more receptive to non-obvious insights.

Yes, having more time can help. But cultivating more mental agility to truly benefit from this additional space is the real cornerstone of non-obvious thinking, and it requires more than just reducing clutter or clearing your to-do list. In this section, you will learn proven techniques to create space, starting with something that you do every day but hardly ever think about.

#### Start With Breathing

For an instinctual human function fundamental to life, surprising new science suggests we have much to learn about what good breathing truly means. Without proper breathing, our thinking can remain constrained and obvious. Shallow breathing can often lead to shallow thinking too. Breathing may be something we do every day, but most of us have never learned how to do it “right.”

Breathing with purpose helps you do everything else with purpose too, which makes it the ideal first step to create the space required for non-obvious thinking to happen.

#### Ditch Your Prebuttals

A prebuttal is a counterargument to what someone might say before they ever say it. It is the equivalent of shouting your disagreement with an unspoken idea, effectively shutting down any chance for genuine dialogue.

Prebuttals declare to the world that instead of choosing to listen and think, those who employ them believe that their perspective is the only one that matters.

Prebuttals are a lazy coping mechanism that can lead anyone toward a more narrow-minded perspective.

Human interactions aren't meant to be battlegrounds where you argue until you win. They can be opportunities to understand and see things you might have otherwise missed ... if you let them.

#### Make Oasis Moments

An oasis moment offers refuge from the usual noise and chaos of the everyday, allowing for reflection and open-mindedness.

Taking a short break from a chaotic situation, even just for a few minutes, can help prevent overstimulation at the wrong moment. In her popular book *Quiet*, author Susan Cain explains that one key difference between introverts and extroverts is the amount of stimulation they deem comfortable. While each of us has different ideal levels of stimulation, we all reach a point when we must regroup and quiet ourselves to recharge.

Finding “oasis moments” where you can slow down and reflect for a few minutes is the ideal way to create space in unusually crowded or busy moments.

#### Embrace Danger

Embrace danger and invite friction into your life to heighten your awareness and build resilience.

When we bubble-wrap our world to make it ultra-safe or super-easy (or both), we risk losing the ability to learn from the mistakes we never make.

Embracing opportunities to take risks and make mistakes, on the other hand, opens you to push your own mental and physical boundaries. When we are in this heightened state of awareness from a hazardous situation, we are more likely to see things we otherwise would have ignored.

Taking more chances is not about recklessly careening ourselves down the equivalent of an icy road without a seat belt. Rather, it is about creating more space for experimentation and saying yes to more unfamiliar experiences.

#### Change Your Rituals

What you do first in the morning matters—which is why everyone seems to have an opinion about it. Although experts may offer different advice about morning rituals, they seem to align on one suggestion: For any of these daily habits to work, you must stick to them. Consistency is key. Or is it?

To avoid getting stuck in a mental rut, try something different in the first moments of your day. Rituals are often presented as going hand in hand with perseverance and dedication.

While morning rituals do have the potential to evolve into positive habits, they can also get us into a mental rut. As they harden into rigid routines, they can have the effect of setting our brains on autopilot. And when we are in this sort of instinctual mode, we stop thinking. If what we do first in the morning matters, starting every day in the same way can make non-obvious thinking much harder.

# Uncovering an insight can afford a new way to understand behaviors, habits, and perspectives.

Here's an alternative way to think about starting your day: What if you treated your morning rituals as a series of experiments? For a week, try drinking chai instead of coffee. Or charge your phone in a different location out of reach from where you sleep.

Instead of starting this morning in automatic mode, you can send a powerful signal to your mind that this is a day to be engaged and receptive to new perspectives and ideas.

## Allow Time Spaciousness

Practicing time spaciousness can help you avoid feeling constantly hurried or pressured by time constraints.

Perhaps the most widely read self-help book ever written, Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, only happened after a literary agent finally convinced a reluctant Carnegie to publish the book after years of persistence. By the time the book came out in 1936, Carnegie had been teaching his signature course on public speaking and human relations for 24 years.

When it debuted, it was an instant hit, going on to sell more than 30 million copies worldwide and becoming one of the bestselling books of all time.

Allowing for more time spaciousness, like being more patient, can be challenging because it demands that we ignore some of the pressure the world puts on our shoulders. Giving yourself more time starts with the mental permission to slow down without feeling that any self-imposed pause is a failure.

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## Part Two: Uncover Insights

An insight is a surprising truth that explains why things are the way they are.

Often, insights come from deep listening, research, or analysis. Occasionally they get illustrated in cleverly conceived and effective advertising stunts. But the common starting point for insights is observation.

Uncovering an insight can afford a new way to understand behaviors, habits, and perspectives. In this section, you'll

learn techniques to help you make and explore your own interesting observations and transform them into insights, starting with a better technique for listening that will evolve the way you approach any conversation.

## Ask Story Questions

If you could take a master class in asking questions, Jacqui Banaszynski might be the ideal person to lead it. Banaszynski has inspired aspiring journalists for decades with her methods.

One of the many techniques she teaches students is avoiding pre-scripted interview questions. Instead, she suggests a dynamic, circular technique that involves crafting each subsequent question of an interview based on the answer received to the previous question. The goal of this approach is to shift the focus away from looking for answers to eliciting stories instead.

Asking questions that elicit stories rather than answers leads to more interesting observations.

## Hone Your Nunchi

Understanding what others think and feel without asking them directly is a familiar skill in Korean culture. Known as nunchi, this 5,000-year-old form of emotional intelligence is essential to navigating social pressures and sensitive topics.

In Japan, there is a similar concept called *kuuki wo yomu*, which roughly translates to “reading the air” or being able to discern the unspoken meaning behind what people say and do.

Both philosophies operate on the principle that what is being said or done explicitly doesn't always reflect or match the actual meaning, deeper emotions, or intentions of others. The practice of reading body language is also based on this idea: our physical actions reveal cues about our feelings that our words do not. Similarly, police interrogators have also learned to detect signs of lying by looking for subconscious bodily cues. Unusual rises or falls in vocal tones, non-congruent gestures (like nodding yes while saying no), and covering one's mouth while speaking are all telltale signs someone could be lying.

Being able to gauge the unspoken thoughts, feelings, and intentions of others opens a window into layers of meaning

others often miss. In Western cultures, where directness is both expected and respected, learning to read the air and becoming better at reading body language can also supercharge your ability to uncover insights.

It is like having access to the emotional subtitles of a situation, offering you an understanding and perspective that others who are less attuned will miss.

Some neurodiverse individuals do have difficulty seeing these social cues for reasons outside their control, but even those who struggle to read social cues can improve their social skills through direct instruction.

This neurodiversity can also create perspectives that allow people to see or experience the world in entirely different and nuanced ways that most others are missing.

### Get Your Hands Dirty

When we immerse ourselves in tasks we typically don't do, we can gain a deeper understanding of the processes, intricacies, and challenges involved. We also build empathy for the people who are doing those tasks.

Doing something yourself offers invaluable lessons you may not learn through observation alone.

### Spot Natural Wisdom

Tapping into nature's wisdom can open the door to discovering new insights from unexpected sources around us.

Observing nature's patterns—such as the changing seasons or the life cycles of plants—can offer ideas for how we might deal with or manage change ourselves. Nature can be a profound source of insight and inspiration at every level and often has been in the past.

For example, seeing various animals and their methods of camouflage to hide from predators has inspired a wide range of gear for military uses and outdoor enthusiasts also looking to disguise themselves in the wild.

By cultivating a practice of mindful observation of the natural world, we can harness its wisdom and gain unexpected insights to help solve any challenge we are facing. The key is taking time to notice these easy-to-ignore clues that have been there all along.

### Find the Right Room

Sometimes the best way to uncover insights is to be part of the right room so you can be inspired by the right people.

How to do this? Attend think sessions - or host your own. Expand your professional development by joining a friend to attend an event about their passion which you know little about. Sometimes finding the right room just requires opening a nearby door instead of walking right past it.

### Step Into Others' Shoes

Magazines and immersive experiences offer a uniquely captivating glimpse into the passions of people different from you. Beyond print media, digital media can also offer similar and even more immersive ways to extend your understanding of others.

Virtual reality, in particular, has been lauded as an “empathy engine” thanks to its visceral ability to help users shift their perspective and take on someone else's. Today, users can don a headset to immerse themselves in a virtual experience that simulates being a refugee in a holding camp or a prisoner incarcerated in solitary confinement.

Media and experiences like these can help us understand the lives and circumstances of others in an intensely human and unforgettable way. They pave the way for feeling genuine empathy for their lived experience in a way that reading an article about them or watching a documentary may not.

Being able to step into unfamiliar shoes allows us to think beyond our assumptions, biases, and limitations, opening us up to see what we might miss otherwise.

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## Part Three: Focus Your Ideas

Focus also involves a similar process of distillation. Our favorite analogy to describe this is through a term that is usually associated with museums: curation. The art of curation is about discerning what is most meaningful.

In this section, we'll show you how to focus your ideas on what's most important so you can become a speed under-stander for yourself.

### Identify the Real Problem

Often, the path to non-obvious thinking starts with focusing on solving the right problem.

Building your skills to dig deeper to spot and spend your attention on those masked issues is a skill often associated with consultants. What they do is ask smart questions and learn from the answers to identify the real problem where they should spend their focus.

# Learning when to appreciate when an idea is good enough instead of always seeking more options can be the key to focus.

## Discover the Water

A cornerstone of the search for alien life is the “Goldilocks zone,” a term first coined more than fifty years ago to describe the theory that every star in the galaxy must have a region where conditions are neither too hot nor too cold—but just right—to sustain liquid water, which is still believed to be a prerequisite for all organic life (as we know it) to exist.

Pinpointing a common element among ideas can help you zero in on the bigger picture.

Seek that common element among your insights to focus on what really matters. That is how you find your water.

## Be A Satisficer

Barry Schwartz’s *The Paradox of Choice* stunned the business world by suggesting that too many choices can diminish happiness and cause anxiety. One of the main points of the book is that people are maximizers or satisficers, depending on the situation.

Maximizers “seek and accept only the best,” and they also score high on the regret scale. Even when they end up with a decision or outcome that is objectively better, they often struggle to be happy with their choices.

In contrast, satisficers “settle for something that is good enough and don’t worry about the possibility that there might be something better.” And, interestingly, satisficers are just as discriminating as maximizers.

Learning to appreciate when an idea is good enough instead of always seeking more options can be the key to focus.

Besides helping you avoid decision paralysis, a satisficer mindset allows you to focus on an idea without regrets and devote yourself to fully understanding and developing it - and perhaps seeing something in the process others have missed.

## See the Other Side

There is more than one way to see something; seeing it from a different perspective is the real challenge. In the famous “duck or rabbit” and “Magic Eye” optical illusions, the most important thing is not which side of the optical

illusion you see first or even how quickly you can find the hidden message in the Magic Eye, but if you even see it.

And whether you can appreciate the perspective of those who seem certain everyone is just pretending to see something and there is actually nothing there at all.

## Add Constraints

Constraints can force you to be more creative by pushing you to do more with less. As you turn your attention to curating your ideas, consider imposing a few creative constraints of your own. When you are forced to innovate with less, you can focus your thinking in new and interesting ways.

## Use Augmented Creativity

Seeking collaboration partners (human or technical) to enhance your creative output can help you focus. Today, there are many ways to automate creative augmentation using generative artificial intelligence tools (Gen AI).

As Gen AI continues to become a larger part of our daily lives, workplaces, and any new professional tasks, the challenge to integrate and benefit from it in productive and ethical ways will become more urgent.

Yet if you learn to do it well, you will find yourself able to harness a superpower that makes you more productive, creative, and prolific.

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## Part Four: Define the Twist

The final stage of our method, defining the twist, is about using your insights to create or imagine something new and original that no one else can or has before. Defining the twist is about taking your ideas in an unexpected direction. The twist is where the magic happens, where non-obvious thinking becomes concrete and actionable.

## Seek Flip Solutions

Flip the rules upside down to intentionally challenge conventional wisdom and do the opposite of what others do.

### Find Option C

Avoiding limited two-option thinking can help you arrive at nuanced, original third options that others are unable to imagine.

### Practice Enigmatology

Developing your ideas with a puzzle maker's mindset allows you to make the known unknown (and irresistible) again. Using enigmatology means drawing inspiration from what is already there and then applying a twist to make it unique and lasting.

### Think Un-Whatever

Defining your thinking and ideas as the opposite of the status quo can successfully offer a twist that sets them apart. Ask yourself, "what is the argument that no one else in my field would ever make?" The answer might lead you in a fascinating, non-obvious direction.

### Mind the Intersections

Examining the intersection of markets and industries might help you spot a non-obvious solution or idea. Seeking intersections can help you define a twist in your thinking and lead to a new combined direction that is better than its components.

### Create Your Argot

The words you use can help your ideas stand out as non-obvious or be dismissed as stale and obvious. Words often enter mainstream culture after starting as an argot - the lingo used by a particular group. Creating your own argot can be a powerful way to define an idea uniquely. This book and our philosophy are also examples of the power of an intentional argot.

Non-Obvious is the word and brand we chose to describe the sort of thinking we want to see more of in the world.

Non-obvious thinking often requires questioning the things we know so we can broaden and shift our perspective. Opening your mind to see other perspectives takes bravery. Choosing to engage with people unlike yourself or seeking information that is outside your usual media diet does too.

More than anything else, this book is about unlocking this sort of mental courage in yourself and using it to see the things that others miss. That's what non-obvious thinkers do, and the more of us there are in the world, the better the future will be.



Rohit Bhargava is on a mission to help the world be more open-minded by teaching others how to be non-obvious thinkers. He is the founder of the Non-Obvious Company and previously spent 15 years leading brand strategy for large global brands while at Leo Burnett and Ogilvy. Ben Dupont is co-Founder and Partner at Chartline Capital Partners venture capital fund that invests in B2B software companies. He co-founded yet2, an Open Innovation company in 1999.

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