

# SOUNDVIEW Featured Book Review

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## Re-Envision Your Organization and Your Life

by Chris Lauer

### THE ART OF POSSIBILITY

by Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander

© 2002, Penguin Books, 210 pages, \$15.00, ISBN 978-0-14-200110-3

Every individual's unique perspective of the world influences everything he or she sees, says and does. While that might seem simple enough, much can be gained by recognizing that a single perspective might also be a limiting factor. It can shut out the possibilities available if that perspective were to be transformed. Shifting perspectives to new angles is what Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander intended when they wrote *The Art of Possibility* in 2000. Since then, their work has continued to elevate the perspectives of thousands of readers and organizational leaders by providing them with a multitude of guided insights. The ideas are culled from visionaries who have worked with talented people and organizations for decades, creating limitless possibilities for better work and life.

While many business books are self-help books disguised as organization-help books, *The Art of Possibility* makes no bones about its intended reader: When you change your own perspective, your organization stands a better chance. When you rethink your basic assumptions and perceptions with a better view of the possibilities, the decisions you make for yourself and your organization improve.

Innovation and creativity — two fundamental tools of organizational growth — rely on a deep capacity

for taking risks and thinking outside the box. Offering business leaders a series of principles for developing the ability to see the powerful possibilities that lurk all around us, the authors of *The Art of Possibility* describe how different views of the events, people and things around us can be illuminated so anyone can draw them out.

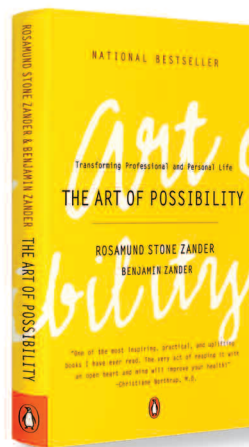
#### A Different Approach

The authors are a husband-and-wife team of intelligent professionals with many impressive credentials to back up the lessons and perspectives they advocate.

Rosamund Stone Zander is an executive coach and family systems therapist who has spent many years developing models for leadership, relationships and effective action. Her theory of human development that permeates *The Art of Possibility* promotes creativity as an essential adult capacity. She has conducted workshops for the British Civil Service, the Aspen Institute, National Public Radio, the World Economic Forum and many others, introducing leaders around the world to her ideas and programs.

#### The Corporate Conductor

The concepts found throughout *The Art of Possibility* also spring from the experiences of Benjamin Zander, who has been the conductor of the Boston Philharmonic since it was formed in 1979. For more than three decades, Zander has shared his ideas and musical philosophies as a guest conductor with many of the world's top orchestras. He also gives regular performances with the Philharmonia Orchestra of



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London, with whom he recently recorded the complete cycles of Beethoven and Mahler symphonies.

Benjamin has also been speaking to major organizations about leadership and creativity for the past 10 years. In 1999, he was honored with the Crystal Award at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, for his outstanding contribution to cross-cultural understanding. Part of that understanding is his deep belief in the art of possibility.

### A Different Lens

In *The Art of Possibility*, the Zanders describe how they are continually striving to see the world through a wider lens that focuses beyond scarcity and survival to a world of abundance and passion. Constantly polishing that lens to remove the things that block a clearer perspective of possibility can help anyone see what others miss. It can also help people at all levels get more from their lives than they would if they remained blind to the many options hiding beneath the surface of everyday life.

The Zanders aim to help others see what Michelangelo saw when he looked at a block of marble or stone. A rock in the master artist's eyes was not merely a rock. It was a beautiful statue just waiting to be revealed once the excess material had been removed. That's the type of perspective on life that comes from practicing the art of possibility that the Zanders describe. Life and everything in it can be simply viewed as products of nature and nurture, or they can be seen for all of the greatness that is possible when better, often hidden, ideas and observations are focused into more creative actions and behaviors.

The authors write that we can all change how we think, but we usually need a little help tapping into the possibilities of the moment when faced with difficult demands. To help readers recall the lessons within *The Art of Possibility*, the Zanders have created a series of catchphrases that can guide readers back to the ideas and perspectives that have been presented. A dozen of these catchphrases and the cleverly prepared life lessons to which they are attached fill *The Art of Possibility*. The phrases capture not only a dozen principles behind the art of possibility, but 12 simple ways to recall them when they are needed most.

### 'It's All Invented'

For example, the Zanders' launch into their journey through the universe of possibility with the insight, "It's all invented." What they mean is that everything that we take for granted is often merely an assumption. When we discard these assumptions and get past an obsolete survival mentality or scarcity mentality, we can find a better and more flexible life. We can also create better organizations where people take smarter risks, roll with the punches and emerge

stronger and better able to maximize their potential. The lesson the Zanders present can best be described as thinking outside the box while knowing that the box was just an imaginary construction that we invented in our own minds. When we get outside of that box, and we imagine the possibilities beyond artificial constraints and find ways to ask better questions when faced with uncertainty, we make better decisions that are not bogged down by obstacles that might have once helped us stay safe but are no longer needed.

Insightful stories from the realms of physical science, anthropology, biology, art and the authors' personal experiences decorate the ideas that are presented throughout the Zanders' book. Vignettes from the lives of many legendary men and women illustrate how great minds from the past and present have been able to make valuable breakthroughs. These innovations have changed how we think by cultivating better ways of seeing what was once taken for granted.

### Seeing Beyond Assumptions

It is easy to believe that everything that can be seen is visible with our human eyes. The proof is right in front of us, much like the many other assumptions we make about our lives and organizations every day. But what about the things that other creatures can see? Bees see patterns in the ultraviolet light reflected by flowers. Owls can see in the dark. Frogs are able to see and catch insects better than humans. Likewise, many other types of things flit past our senses and perceptions. That's why it is important to always remember that there are other ways to view what we think is so obvious. If we are missing so much information that is out there but beyond our view, perhaps it

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makes perfect sense that we might also be missing other facts and possibilities because of our assumptions in other areas.

By remembering and practicing the mantra “It’s all invented,” the Zanders’ write, we can better invent the spaces in our lives where we can build even better organizations and personal relationships.

That lesson is just one of the 12 practices that is offered in *The Art of Possibility*. The other principles go even deeper into the world of possibility. One way to see the difference between our usual way of thinking and the other way described by the authors is to see the difference between what they call “the world of measurement,” which is based on competition, grades and comparisons, and another realm where more and better possibilities are available because it is open to the unlimited resources of our imagination.

### **The Power of a Fallible Maestro**

One of the highlights of *The Art of Possibility* is the inside look it offers into the lives of its co-authors, especially Benjamin Zander’s life as a world-class conductor. Since the genre was first developed, business books have compared the relationship between a conductor and his or her orchestra to the relationship between a business leader and his or her organization. This is because both rely on the leader’s ability to motivate all of his or her people to move in the right direction to create harmonious accomplishments. This is only possible when everyone is doing his or her individual job correctly. This is how the different parts of a huge orchestra combine to create a single, beautiful accomplishment. Zander recognizes this fact, but he also takes the metaphor of conductor-as-business-leader in a different direction by pointing out that few jobs are as totalitarian as the conductor’s role in an orchestra.

Many conductors throughout history have seen themselves as flawless maestros who will only accept fawning questions rather than true critical assessments from their musicians. Zander writes that it was not until 20 years into his career that he had a revelation. He realized that his power as a conductor was less derived from his ability to make himself better as a conductor and interpreter of a composer’s music than it was about how well he could engage and invigorate his musicians. Once he started seeing his leadership role in this new light, he recalls, his attention shifted to enabling his musicians rather than pleasing his audience and critics.

When he began to recognize his new role as a mentor to the musicians he conducted, he began to con-

nect with the members of his orchestra better than ever before, which helped him improve his skills as their leader. To the surprise of the musicians he was conducting in the Philharmonia Orchestra of London, he broke with the tradition that painted conductors as infallible. Instead, he began to readily admit his mistakes to those he was leading. Leaders in any type of organization can learn from the personal experiences at the podium that he relates. Breaking free from the traditionally hierarchical confines of a conductor is what the Zanders mean when they propose their principle “Lead from any chair.” In other words, the leader/follower dynamic can often waste much of the talent that is available if it leads to only one-way, top-down communication. The old hierarchy creates intimidated employees who are too afraid to confront a leader with apparent mistakes.

### **How to Improve Give-and-Take**

To facilitate a better give-and-take between an organization’s people and the person who stands at the top, Benjamin Zander explains that he has initiated a practice within his orchestra that helps to create valuable coaching that moves up and down all levels of the group. Zander puts a blank sheet of paper on the stand of every member of his orchestra and invites the musicians to give him whatever feedback each one feels can help him “empower them to play the music more beautifully.”

Although he was prepared to face vast criticism from his players, instead he generated a level of trust that he had never seen before. Comments on these “white sheets” moved from basic practical issues about the connection between the musicians’ parts and the music they were performing to deeper insights that helped him better understand his role and methods.

Zander writes that some of the comments he receives on these white sheets are so insightful about his interpretation of the music that he takes them to the podium when he is conducting. By spreading this unique practice to all of the orchestras that he conducts, he is better able to tap into the brilliance of the exceptional artists in these organizations. To connect what he has learned with the person who initiated a change in tempo or the restructuring of a song, for example, Zander writes that he makes eye contact with that person at the moment the change occurs during the performance. This simple action, he explains, provides a sense of pride and delight among his musicians that would have been impossible if old-fashioned conducting styles and relationships were still in place.

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Another way that the conductor empowers his people while also learning from them is to ask one of his orchestra's musicians to conduct a passage or a piece while he listens from the back of the room. The result is more than just another perspective from which he can hear the music, but a sometimes life-changing experience for the musician who might have never had a similar chance to see, hear and feel the piece from the perspective of the conductor.

### Lighting a Spark

Another principle that highlights the Zanders' collection of provocations toward the joy and importance of looking at the world through the lens of possibility is the concept of "lighting a spark." Everyone can benefit by looking past the usual choices and igniting the future with the "spark of possibility," the co-authors write. The active ingredient in the formula for creating better possibilities is the fire of passion and the best way to extinguish that flame is with fear.

One way to bypass that fear and ignite the passion and possibilities in others, the authors explain, is through the practice of enrollment. Rather than pressuring people into seeing things your way, or fighting with them to do what you want them to do, enrolling them "is the art and practice of generating a spark of possibility for others to share," the Zanders write. To demonstrate the power of enrollment, Benjamin tells the story of how he was able to get the world's greatest cellist to play a solo during a performance by the New England Conservatory orchestra. By enrolling him through their mutual love of the piece's composer and the close connection Zander made with the cellist when he flew from Boston to Washington to meet him in person, the possibility of

a great performance was turned into reality.

Spreading the spark of possibility to others through your own passion is what enrollment is all about. The steps, according to the authors, can help anyone do this by imagining that other people are already prepared to get enrolled.

Your next step is to present yourself as a willing participant who is available for whatever inspiration emerges. Making a passionate offer comes next, followed by the belief that other people are just as excited about the possibility as you are. When persuasion and instigation are not working for you, the co-authors explain, simply remember to "light a spark." By aligning your interests with those of others and enrolling other people into your

passion, you can capture the power of possibility and create stronger relationships along the way.

### Groundbreaking Ideas

Filled with simple yet profound ideas such as these, along with a passionate look at the wonderful power of possibilities, *The Art of Possibility* captures the potential of people and their organizations like few other books can. It is no wonder that it is a *New York Times* bestseller that has sold more than 500,000 copies worldwide since it was first published in 2000 by Harvard Business School Press. Filled with the wonder and excitement found during the professional and personal lives of both a world-class conductor and an innovative psychotherapist, *The Art of Possibility* captures some of the most important yet overlooked concepts that leaders can use to improve themselves and their organizations. The practices the Zanders describe are not simply rules for fixing specific things, they are valuable tools for transforming anything through the power of infinite possibility. ●

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**The authors:** Rosamund Stone Zander is a pioneer in the field of leadership and relationships. As a family therapist and an executive coach, she develops models for leadership and effective action. She has designed programs and workshops for global corporations as well as government agencies, including Hampton/Hilton Inns, IBM, Whirlpool, The Bureau of Public Debt, Harvard Medical School and Carnegie Mellon University.

Benjamin Zander has been on the faculty of the New England Conservatory in Boston for 35 years. He is also the artistic director of the music program at the Walnut Hill School, a boarding high school for highly accomplished young performing artists. He teaches master classes all over the world, including a class for conductors as part of the London Master Classes at the Royal Academy in London.

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