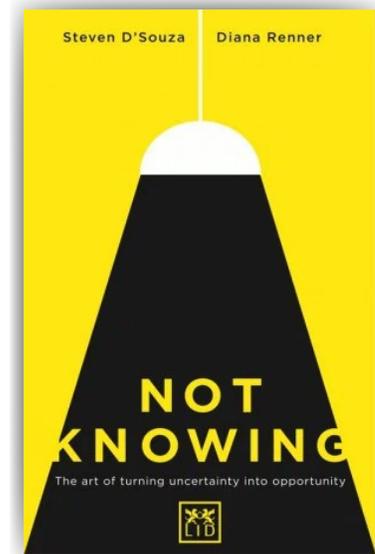


# Not Knowing

## *The Art of Turning Uncertainty Into Opportunity*

Steven D'Souza and Diana Renner

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## KEY CONCEPTS

- *Humans crave certainty.* Certainty inspires confidence and allows people to survive and thrive.
- *Experts do not have all the answers.* No one can know everything that needs to be known to solve a particular problem.
- *Expertise is often overvalued.* In the quest for certainty, people place an overreliance on experts, but experts are often unable to provide all the answers people need.
- *Deep knowledge can lead to narrow thinking.* The more people know, the greater their tendency is to invest in their knowledge rather than considering alternatives.
- *Not Knowing is the space between the known and the unknown.* There is a point individuals reach when their knowledge about the future ends and they must face the unknown. This point is referred to as *Not Knowing*.
- *Getting comfortable with Not Knowing leads to opportunities.* While individuals might look for ways to avoid Not Knowing, it is in Not Knowing that new knowledge and opportunities are revealed.

## SUMMARY

### INTRODUCTION

Life is full of uncertainty, which makes people anxious. To alleviate their anxiety, people look to experts who may not know the answers, try to manage circumstances over which they have no control, and search for answers that do not yet exist. In **Not Knowing**, Steven D'Souza and Diana Renner propose that the key to managing uncertainty is to embrace the state of *Not Knowing*—the edge between the known and the unknown, where the absence of knowledge can inspire new ideas, exciting opportunities, and positive change.

## **PART I: THE DANGERS OF KNOWLEDGE**

From childhood on, individuals learn the path to success involves acquiring knowledge and developing expertise. However, this quest for certainty can be limiting. While the saying “knowledge is powerful” is true, existing knowledge can interfere with individuals’ ability to learn and grow. As an example, for more than 1,400 years, the teaching of anatomy was based on antiquated knowledge. Lecturers would point to and describe a human heart as having three ventricles, although it was clear that there were four. This illustrates how humans often cling to existing knowledge, even when it is clearly incorrect.

*Confidence* is a valuable human characteristic that helps people thrive and survive. Confidence often comes from knowledge; however, *over-confidence*—an inflated perspective of one’s capabilities—can be detrimental. Over-confidence can lead to relying on experts who have closed their minds to new ideas and information, or who are unwilling to admit they do not have all the answers.

Specialized knowledge is highly valued in business and society, but it has drawbacks. *Anchoring bias* is the tendency to view new information within the context of existing knowledge. Because of anchoring bias, specialists are often not able to view a problem from a fresh perspective.

People can sometimes deliberately blind themselves to knowledge that makes them uncomfortable. For example, despite extremely high rates of asbestos-related disease among the population of Libby, Montana, and an established linkage between the illnesses and a local vermiculite mine, for decades the townspeople denied there was an issue. Relying on what they believed about their town being a good place to live and what respected experts were telling them, they ignored the reality—even when faced with undeniable truths.

### **Dependency on Experts and Leaders**

An overemphasis on knowledge can derail good leadership. When Anna Simioni, the former Chief Learning Officer of a European financial institution, was in high school, she was committed to the concept of embracing uncertainty. Yet in college and later in the business world, she learned that expertise was the path to success. She became driven to have the right answers and prized competence above all else, which became her downfall after acquiring a leadership role. Her commitment to being right alienated her staff, inhibited idea development, and caused her to put undue pressure on herself to always have the answers. Today’s society is knowledge based, which puts tremendous pressure on leaders. They must walk a fine line between being truthful about what they know and do not know all while meeting others’ expectations.

*From the very beginning, we are valued, appreciated, and rewarded for accumulating knowledge and mastery.*

From childhood, individuals develop a strong expectation that the people “in charge” know what they are doing. This expectation carries into the workplace and society as a whole. Those who are in positions of power feel a strong pressure to be competent and take action. This often leads to “quick fixes” that might not address real problems.

Because of this pressure to be knowledgeable, it is not uncommon for people to pretend to know things they do not know. While pretending to know can sometimes help an individual learn new things, it can also create problems when knowledge gaps are too wide.

### **Growth of the Unknown**

Today’s challenges are complex and ambiguous, and not easily addressed by existing knowledge. This condition makes relying on experts to predict future outcomes riskier than ever. Compounding this condition is that in the Internet era, there is more information available to more people than ever before, and the information is

changing constantly. In the search for certainty, humans continue to try to base decisions on existing information. When it comes to the knowledge explosion, the more people know, the more they do not know.

The *Cynefin framework* identifies four domains of knowns and unknowns, which can be applied to life today:

1. *Simple*: Familiar, certain knowns, such as recipes or routes.
2. *Complicated*: Known unknowns that are orderly and predictable and can be known by experts, such as organizational restructuring.
3. *Complex*: Unknown unknowns that are subject to flux, unpredictability, and opinion, such as global economic forecasts and product innovations.
4. *Chaotic*: Unknowable unknowns that are random, such as natural disasters.

Because today's issues are complex and chaotic, they are not easily resolved through expertise. When facing unknowns, many leaders have a tendency to look for simple solutions. This behavior provides only an illusion of control and often makes situations worse. What is needed to solve today's problems is a new way of approaching uncertainty.

*Our thirst for knowledge is continuously fed by organizations that put a premium on competence and expertise.*

## PART II: THE EDGE

### Finisterre

Cape Finisterre is a destination for soul-searching pilgrimages to St. James' shrine, which is located in Spain. *Finisterre* is a metaphor for the edge between the known and the unknown. People experience many Finisterres in their lives. Finisterres arise when individuals are outside their comfort zones—either in crisis, at major decision-making points, or in the midst of sudden changes. Finisterre represents a critical juncture in people's relationships with the unknown.

People tend to avoid the unknown. When faced with it, they default to what they do know—be that a structure, a process, or belief system—and look to experts for direction. When all else fails, people disengage completely. Underlying the fear of the unknown are feelings and associated risks of incompetence, such as the loss of influence, authority, or occupation. *Not Knowing*—or being at the edge between the known and the unknown—creates a sense of vulnerability. Vulnerability can bring forth feelings of shame and embarrassment. Individuals experience many typical reactions when they become vulnerable, including withdrawing, overanalyzing, marginalizing, and catastrophic thinking. These behaviors can, in turn, lead to missed opportunities.

Individuals may feel compelled to make life changes, but they may not be certain exactly what those changes should be. Feeling a *calling* puts people at the edge between the known and the unknown, provoking all the typical negative default reactions. By deliberately choosing to ignore these reactions and instead developing productive ways to manage being at the edge, individuals can open their lives to exciting new possibilities.

### Darkness Illuminates

Contemporary thinking tends to equate knowledge with *light* (which is good) and Not Knowing with *dark* (which is bad). However, if individuals can reframe their thinking to view darkness as a space for creativity and illumination, Not Knowing can become a positive source of opportunity.

## PART III: "NEGATIVE" CAPABILITIES

### Empty Your Cup

In Zen practice, Not Knowing is sometimes referred to as *developing a beginner's mind*—viewing the world with-

out preconceived notions, interpretations, or judgements. Only when an individual's mind is freed from his or her own thoughts and preconceptions can it open to new possibilities.

When facing losses in 2004, engineering company Energeticos' GM Peter King decided to take a novel organizational approach. He let go of strict hierarchical control and instead trusted in his employees to collaboratively develop systems and processes, including determining their own salaries. This decision eventually turned the company around.

Experts play an important role in developing a beginner's mind. When there is a crisis, people tend to expect those in charge to take over and "fix things." But not all things are fixable, even by experts. By letting go of this responsibility and admitting they do not have all the answers, experts pave the way for others to contribute to solutions. Not only that, individuals relinquish their own potential to achieve when they look to others for solutions. By letting go of the expectation that others will solve their problems, individuals can create new opportunities for themselves.

Crossing the threshold into Finisterre occurs when individuals admit they do not have all the answers. This is a liberating statement that opens the door to a collaborative, inquisitive approach to problem solving. Doubt and resistance can also help individuals move through to Finisterre. Those who never doubt themselves are those who rely on certainty, and absolute certainty is not attainable. Possessing a measure of doubt enhances an individual's credibility and opens the door to learning and creativity. Resistance in the face of uncertainty is natural. For example, writer Nick Williams questioned his own resistance and explored his fears before he decided to sign a book contract. Through that exploration, he realized he had a deep desire to write that his fears should not stand in the way of. He signed the contract and his book, *The Work We Were Born to Do*, soon became a best-seller.

Not Knowing envelops an individual's entire being. It is not only the mind that learns—the body learns as well. The best results are achieved when the mind and body work together. Physical practices such as dance and martial arts can attune the body and mind to one another, adding additional power to being in the moment and on the edge.

When faced with significant uncertainty and change, it is very helpful for leaders to ease the transition for their employees by creating a bridge between the past and the future. The leaders of the UK-based *Financial Times* were able to weather an industry storm through authentic communication with employees, honoring past accomplishments while letting past practices go, and creating a positive vision for the future.

### **Close Your Eyes to See**

Photographer Marco Antonio Martinez did not take artistic photographs until he became blind. Through his blindness, he learned an entirely new way of perceiving and sharing with the world. Embracing Not Knowing is very similar. People must turn off one area of perception in order to turn on another.

The impartial observation of a person's surroundings in the absence of thought or judgement grounds him or her in the present. This grounding can lead to insights that would be missed through ordinary thought processes. Through *being in the moment practices*, such as mindfulness, individuals can leverage the power of observation to gain new knowledge.

The act of *being silent* (quieting the mind and body) can rejuvenate and connect individuals with themselves and others. *Generative listening* is a deeply attentive form of listening to others in which the listener is fully present in the moment. It is the type of listening that can reveal insights and drive transformational results.

*The problem with knowledge is in the very fact that it is so useful. We cling to it even in situations when it has the potential to limit us—to paradoxically get in the way of new learning and growth.*

Assumptions get in the way of people seeing things as they truly are. By judiciously exercising doubt, individuals can challenge their assumptions to gain a better understanding of the world. Another technique is recognizing an assumption and suspending judgement in order to explore the truth of the situation. Simply because something has been accepted as being true does not make it true. Expertise is constantly changing as new information is revealed, and individuals should feel free to challenge authority and expertise in search of the truth.

*Despite the speed of change in the world generally, we often rely on our existing knowledge to understand it, even when that may not be useful or accurate.*

### **Leap in the Dark**

*Improvisation* is a key element in exploring the unknown. To improvise is to leap into the dark without a plan or direction and then apply one's capabilities to create direction and form. Many film directors and actors take an improvisational approach in order to create something new, spontaneous, and creative.

Considering numerous alternatives also opens the door to new insights. Fictional character Sherlock Holmes was known for creating and testing numerous divergent hypotheses in order to solve mysteries. Creating multiple hypotheses when problem solving can lead to new information and innovative solutions that are not reliant on preconceived notions.

The unknown embraces diversity. Bringing diverse voices into a dialogue allows for new ideas that might not have been explored otherwise. Bell Laboratories has been extremely successful in generating disruptive innovations in large part because it deliberately nurtures cross-disciplinary collaboration.

Exploring the unknown requires risk, but it yields great rewards. For example, when faced with writer's block, author Nick Thorpe decided it was time to let loose of his hold on certainty and throw himself into the unknown. He focused on meeting new people and embracing situations that were unfamiliar and sometimes risky, relying on his inherent capabilities to see him through. Through this exercise, he learned to trust himself and be present in the moment. Individuals enrich their lives when they step out of their comfort zones to learn and experience something new. They also discover how to overcome fear.

Many organizations are loath to experiment, often because they are highly focused on short-term gains and overly committed to established processes. However, research indicates a strong correlation between experimentation and higher levels of innovation and success.

### **Delight in the Unknown**

Apple founder Steve Jobs advised Stanford University graduates to "stay hungry, stay foolish." His advice, and his legacy, highlights the value of being willing to take leaps of faith and trust that the journey will be fruitful. While life-changing decisions are often serious matters, taking life too seriously can be self-limiting. The unknown should be explored with a sense of curiosity.

Fearlessness, compassion, and empathy are vital tools for getting comfortable at the edge. Boldly exposing one's vulnerability is an act of courage and a source of strength. It is often what is required to make meaningful change. Self-awareness inspires compassion and empathy for others who face the unknown. This compassion and empathy, in turn, leads to creativity and innovation. The edge can be a lonely and frightening place. Connecting with others facing similar challenges can help minimize loneliness and fear.

Exploring the dark is best accomplished with a sense of fluidity and an antifragility that delivers inspiring strength and guidance. *Antifragility* is the place beyond resilience where a tragedy becomes a source of inspiration.

Humans have a strong desire to know, which can be dangerous. While traversing the edge of Not Knowing can reveal new knowledge and experiences, there is also great value in simply being comfortable with Not Knowing.

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## FEATURES OF THE BOOK

**Estimated Reading Time: 4–5 hours, 224 pages**

In **Not Knowing**, Steven D'Souza and Diana Renner offer insight into productively dealing with the uncertainty all individuals face. The authors share the real-life stories of diverse individuals who have faced the unknown and learned how to grow from their experiences. **Not Knowing** is intended for a general audience and is best read cover to cover. The book closes with an appendix that provides questions and experiments to help individuals approach the unknown from a positive perspective.

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## FURTHER INFORMATION

Information about the authors and subject:

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Steven D'Souza** is the director of programs at the FTIE Corporate Learning Alliance. He is an international executive educator, coach, adviser, speaker, and bestselling author who has worked at the interface of the world's leading business schools and corporations to design transformational learning interventions for senior executives globally.

D'Souza became an executive fellow for IE Business School in 2008, consulting to them on the design, content, and experience of their international customized programs. He has orchestrated their Global Executive MBA as well as the Global Senior Management Programme, with Chicago Booth GSB. He has worked independently, from graduate to board level including CEO, with a range of firms such as Amex, Barclays, Credit Suisse, Eurostar, Financial Times, Goldman Sachs, and PwC. He has also delivered workshops or talks for the United Nations ILO, On Purpose, the Hub Connections, TEDx, and the Windsor Fellowship, among several other social enterprises and government organizations. He has spoken in places as diverse as Tbilisi, Singapore, Bucharest, Shanghai, London, and Sofia.

D'Souza has served on the guest faculty team of the Adaptive Leadership program at the Harvard Kennedy School and is part of the Duke CE Global Educator Network. He has been a visiting lecturer on several programs, including at London Business School's EMBA, the Masters in Organisations and Governance at the London School of Economics, and the IE Brown Executive MBA. D'Souza has a BA (Hons) in Theology, Philosophy, and Religious Studies with History and an MSc in Organisational Consulting from Ashridge Business School. He has also studied Adaptive Leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School; Appreciative Inquiry with its founder David Cooperrider at Case Western Reserve University; and Theory U with Dr. Otto Scharmer from MIT. In October 2015

D'Souza was named one of the top 30 influential people in HR globally by *HR Magazine* and was shortlisted by Thinkers 50 for the RADAR award, the world's premier ranking for management thinkers.

**Diana Renner** is director of Not Knowing Lab, an international consulting practice focused on building the capability of organizations and individuals to successfully navigate uncertainty and complexity. She consults to senior executives in a range of commercial, government, and community organizations around the world. She has taught a variety of leadership programs, and is collaborating with the Centre for Sustainability Leadership and The University of Adelaide to develop and deliver a range of public and customized leadership programs. She is co-author of *Not Knowing: The Art of Turning Uncertainty into Opportunity*, with Steven D'Souza.

Renner has spent most of her life moving from one state of Not Knowing to another—from fleeing her country of birth, Romania, to an unknown future in a new country; to a continuous process of professional reinvention covering the fields of law, strategy, communications, refugee advocacy, and leadership development.

Renner weaves together a range of disciplines including adaptive leadership, complexity theory, adult development, and process-oriented psychology to help people become better leaders and make a positive impact in the world around them. She is particularly interested in “sand box leadership”—creating experiential learning opportunities where people can play, experiment and reflect, and develop self-awareness, adaptability, and more comfort with ambiguity and uncertainty.

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