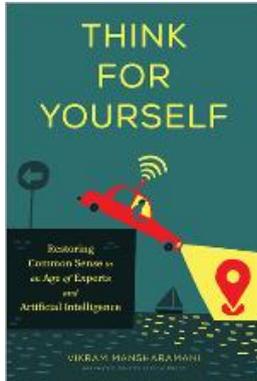


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## PM WORLD BOOK REVIEW



Book Title: ***Think for Yourself: Restoring Common Sense in an Age of Experts and Artificial Intelligence***

Author: **Vikram Mansharamani**

Publisher: Harvard Business Review Press

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Reviewer: **John L. Shea III**

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### Introduction

We are so absorbed about missing the right tidbit of information that will help us decide, we lose focus on what we need. We are bombarded with details through which we must sift to find answers. Experts (and Artificial Intelligence) use this FOMO (fear of missing out) to take away our decision-making power. And it's getting worse. We no longer think for ourselves and let others do it for us. Vikram Mansharamani demonstrates our reliance on others and then offers a way out with an emphasis on context and a generalist philosophy.

### Overview of Book's Structure

There are four parts to this book: Losing Control (2 chapters), The Ramifications (3 chapters), Reclaiming Autonomy (5 chapters), and lastly A Path Forward (2 chapters).

In each part and chapter Mansharamani builds his case with many examples to illustrate why we have become non-thinkers, relying on siloed experts. Tunnel-vision focus on problems leads to lack of perspective. Depth is more favored than breadth. However, the author offers a solution to this predicament.

### Highlights

In Part One (Losing Control), we are drowning in information. (Sturgeon's Law still applies). It takes more people, with more education and focus, to produce a new invention. We are aware of how many options we have and it's getting harder to make a decision. The cost of making the right decision often outweighs the possible benefits. Do you get the feeling that it's appearance over experience taking over? We outsource our decision making to those who claim they can guide us through the deluge.

In Part Two (The Ramifications), the more we focus, the more we ignore and we become blind to more. Intensity compounds the problems. We blindly follow protocols by leaders in all types of organizations, and these leaders operate in only their area of focus. When we outsource decision making, we give up framing the key decisions, of putting them in our perspectives. Focus on one thing and we lose awareness and become less effective with unexpected developments. When we don't consider the risks, we recklessly push the envelope of our safety and security. Dependence need not lead to blind obedience.

In Part Three (Reclaiming Autonomy), zooming out helps us understand what policies drive our behaviors. We need a strategy, a statement of mission, to achieve our objectives and not be distracted by the battles along the way. We should empower our leaders to think for themselves and align with the ultimate objective. Self-reliance comes from thinking independently. Approach problems by starting from scratch. Revisit the first principles to find the idea; strategy for our objective.

Ask yourself if the expert is helpful with your specific situation. Find independent second opinions (vs. second first opinions.) Using existing conclusions to start out is not thinking for yourself. Adopt a generalist approach and seek multiple perspectives to triangulate unique insights. Constantly question underlying assumptions. Have a premortem to avoid a painful postmortem. Experts are the least successful predictors in times of massive uncertainty. (Sound familiar in the age of COVID-19?) Any good leader will make it possible for people to voice their thoughts so the decision maker can make an informed decision. Checklists handle only slivers of information. We can never find the right answer, only the right question. Experts only see a portion of the entire picture. Their incomplete perspective needs to have a collaborative relationship with their clients instead of dictating a process.

In Part Four (A Path Forward), the author urges us to embrace ambiguity and ignorance as being a positive to help us identify opportunities. Our addiction to experts leads us to their addiction to their certainties, their assuredness, their definitiveness, and thus we cede our responsibility, our intelligence and intellect for their supposed wisdom. Being accurate about the future is not the only criterion to evaluate the future. Usefulness is a better standard. Allow fuzziness when we prepare contingencies. If we are too focused in preparation, we may not be able to respond well. Systems thinking is valuable to understand relationships in dynamic situations.

For those planning their careers, Mansharamani advises looking in the different functions or geographies of their organizations. Put yourself in unfamiliar roles through which you can learn what you don't know. Feedback will improve your intellectual self-awareness. To think for ourselves, we must reclaim our faith in ourselves and trust our instincts. Reintroduce a greater focus on breadth. Stop seeing the bark of the tree. Step back and see the forest and the landscape beyond. See the system and know problems have hidden, indirect causes. The relationship among the parts matters the

most, not just the part itself. Empathy helps us understand what another is going through before we form our own conclusions. Balance expertise with a broader perspective. Connect the dots and think for yourself.

### **Highlights: What I liked!**

Mansharamani uses a plethora of examples from his life, his interactions with others, and recent news events and anecdotes to promote his generalist perspective. You'll read about healthcare, diet, systems thinking, crises citations and some resolutions among his many illustrations.

A broader perspective is definitely needed as each expert focuses their spotlight for their profession. We miss what's in the shadows.

### **Who might benefit from the Book?**

Risk mitigators, stakeholders from all departments, analysts who focus on only a few processes might need a high-level view to see where their portions fit in. Managers can guide new recruits to see the bigger picture where the newbies only see their specific concentration of study. To succeed in life, you need to branch out, especially when it centers on a person's health and financial well-being.

### **Conclusion**

Thinking for ourselves. What a novel idea! We are so focused on what we do, we let others take care of our other responsibilities, from teaching our kids, to planning our financial activity, from even determining our health options. Always ask questions to get your expert to see where you are coming from, out of fear or just wanting to know what to do next. The internet collects all that we do and nudges us to what some corporations think we'll do next. For example, self-driving cars in the near future will take away our choices as we cede safety and security and our insurance company's terms of agreement take over.

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For more about this book, go to: <https://store.hbr.org/product/think-for-yourself-restoring-common-sense-in-an-age-of-experts-and-artificial-intelligence/10366>

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## About the Reviewer



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Mr. Shea has worn many hats throughout his career: technical writer, editor, instructional designer, and recently, E2E process analyst & project manager, mostly for the telecommunications industry. Ever the communicator, in his spare time he enjoys writing screenplays, short stories, and novels. He lives with his schoolteacher wife and three dogs of varying age and disposition.