1. The Anatomy of Default Thinking

The 'default' is defined as an option that is selected automatically unless a viable alternative is specified.[1] It's influenced by the sum of our experiences, and is usually the option that requires the least effort (or least angst/uncertainty/discomfort) for the most short-term gain.

'*But from whence does the default come?*' I hear you ask. Well, linguistically, 'default' stems from the Old French word 'defaut', which in turn stems from 'defaillir' or 'to fail' (from 'fallere'—a Latin word meaning 'disappoint' and 'deceive').

Failure, disappointment or deception, eh? Fun. This connotation of default typically applies to not meeting a loan repayment—but there's an important message for leadership in this, too. Rely solely on default thinking, and you're going to encounter disappointment.

But, enough of that! Don't tempt me with further discussions of linguistics and semantics—I hold a doctorate in philosophy, which makes me quite inclined to engage in confusing and somewhat-irrelevant tangential pursuits of linguistic and philosophical whimsy. **sets cognac aside**

Now, in practical terms, the default comes from our ability to recognise, match and leverage *patterns*.

1| Ah, so… how do you generate viable, alternative options to consider? A splendid question! And also the main thesis of this book.

This is what Daniel Kahneman — Nobel Prize winner and author of *Thinking, Fast and Slow* — might describe as 'system 1 thinking'.[2] This type of thinking is fast, automatic, frequent, emotional, stereotypic and subconscious. The opposite to default thinking would be what Kahneman might describe as 'system 2 thinking'. This type of thinking happens consciously and is, by contrast, slow, effortful, infrequent, logical and calculating.

A lot of my work involves helping leadership teams engage in more 'slow thinking'. It's critically important, and it's how we lead and progress worthy quests. But, in my experience, the framing of a dichotomy of 'fast versus slow' does slow thinking a disservice. Thanks to the Curse of Efficiency (see chapter 2), selling the importance of slow thinking in a world that wants fast results is … tricky.

And so, I've replaced 'slow' with 'thorough'. Thus, our options are to think fast, and leverage our default thinking, or we can think more thoroughly — challenging our default assumptions by exploring diverse perspectives and generating alternative options. But the detail on that comes later.

First, let's return to the anatomy of our fast, default thinking.

PATTERNS

From the moment we are born, we start to recognise patterns — those discrete, discernible and repeatable experiences. Every such experience we observe is encoded to inform our model of how the world works.

Indeed, the linguistic roots of the word 'pattern' come from the Old French word 'patron' — the idea being that this patron serves as a model or example to be copied. I love linguistics.

The more frequently we experience or observe particular phenomena, the stronger this encoding becomes. It's why we train for sport, and practise mathematics, music and language. Without this incredible ability to recognise patterns, we would never learn anything. We wouldn't

2| Of course, he would describe it in much greater depth and with more elegance than I have here. If you're unfamiliar with his work, I highly recommend you explore it.

even know how to communicate. In fact, our ability to recognise and codify patterns to form our own model of the world could arguably be a cornerstone of our existence. #profound

And all this pattern recognition is automatic: by just observing and experiencing the world around you, you are codifying new patterns or reinforcing existing ones.

From a very young age, for example, we're picking up objects and then dropping them. We observe a repeatable pattern, learn it, and are eventually given a label for it — 'gravity'. Likewise, we learn about our preferences through our experiences. I commonly order my default coffee preference at a cafe, without even thinking about it. Sure, some fancy new single origin may be on the menu, but I'd need to be aware and mindful to look for it first.

Many of us experience the phenomena of pattern recognition and default thinking when driving (or riding) home from work. If you've had a particularly tiring or busy day, or if you have a lot on your mind, the well-encoded pattern of your usual route could have you arriving home without you even truly realising it. Another example is musicians learning new music by studying patterns of input. It's clunky to start with, but with enough repetition (practice), the pattern becomes embedded, and the music can be played without having to actively think about it. Much like riding a bike.

Think about a software developer writing code for a program. If they have diverse experience, chances are, when confronted with new challenges, they can quickly call upon a rich database of potential solutions. On the other hand, a less experienced coder would need to invest more time to experiment with and explore the efficacy of new patterns, in order to find a solution.

Our memory is a database for such patterns. It stores patterns contextually, and is optimised for speed. This speed allows us to take the cognitive shortcuts that enable us to draw conclusions quickly. And the more experience we've had — the more patterns we have observed — the more cognitive shortcuts we have at hand.

But this speed comes at a cost — accuracy. Despite what we may think, our memory is often an inaccurate source of information, influenced as it is by myriad factors — such as our emotional (psychophysiological) state,

time elapsed since we recognised the pattern and our current context.[3] This means that many of the patterns we call upon to inform our default thinking may be inaccurate in any given context or moment — or even no longer valid or relevant in this new context. Thus, without challenging our own default thinking, we may be proceeding with flawed assumptions.

Default thinking is not the result of consideration or any form of reasoned, intuitive or active thought. It takes effort to draw awareness to the potential inaccuracies or inherent biases within our thinking. Such effort is confronting, and slows down the cognitive process and decision-making, running counter to the efficiency and productivity we need for most of our work.[4]

Of course, it would simply be infeasible to engage in slow, deep and thorough thinking for every facet of business — we'd get nothing done. It'd be silly to go back to the drawing board when attempting any new task.

And so systems are created to help us to manage increasingly complex patterns of work.

SYSTEMS

Most organisations today simply would not function without clever systems. Systems keep entropy at bay.[5]

3| Not to mention a swag of cognitive biases (see chapter 14).

4| You may have already suspected this, but I'm setting up 'default thinking' to take a fall. Don't get me wrong — it is utterly brilliant for 80 per cent of our work.* If you're looking to replicate existing work more efficiently, to simply tick boxes, be productive, get shit done and progress formulaic processes with predictable outcomes, your ability to recognise patterns, take cognitive shortcuts, leverage past experience and run with default thinking is an absolute asset. But — and it's a big but — if you're looking to venture beyond the default, to truly innovate and pioneer into uncharted territory, you need to 'ware the perils of our default thinking, lest we meet the Inevitable Kraken of Doom.

* Where did I get this figure from? Not research. It just seems 'about right' — I essentially defaulted to the Praeto principle, which states that (for most events) roughly 80 per cent of the effects come from 20 per cent of the causes. And why did I do this? Because it serves as a good reference point. And that's what default thinking can be, if we can heighten ourselves to see it: a reference point for decision-making. But not the only reference point.

5| Or, at least, they attempt to — but entropy relates to increasing disorder (the higher the entropy, the greater the disorder) and disorder will always win, in the end.

Whenever we've got multiple, interconnected patterns happening, we have the opportunity to create systems to increase our efficiency and avoid wasted effort.

I use, and love, a heap of systems — one being the software I'm writing this book with, and the operating system that nests it. These complex systems were developed by very intelligent teams. Short of an ecosystem or the human body, few systems are quite as complex.

But not all systems are of such a high order.

Take the typical sales sequence, for example. I've chosen 'sales' because it is a fairly universal function within any business or organisation — even if your organisation or business unit doesn't sell products or services for money, value is still generated and a currency of exchange is still at play.

The typical sequence looks like this:

1. First, a business needs to generate leads ('leads' being code for 'potential opportunities'). Assuming you are doing something of value, generating leads could look like advertising, marketing, public relations or networking. In my world, leads are generated as a consequence of doing great work with clients (which generates referrals), sharing fresh research and insights (via my 'making clever happen' museletter), speaking at conferences, running our own events, and publishing research and books like this. Each of these activities is also a collection of patterns — but they form part of this bigger sales sequence.

2. Once leads are generated, they need to be qualified. If your organisation trades entirely online, your situation may be that the customer is self-qualifying, and your focus is on enhancing conversion. But if your organisation is service-based, or you engage in business-to-business sales, you likely need to qualify your leads. This means sorting out the valuable opportunities from the dead ends. In my world, we scare the tyre kickers away with our fee guide.

3. Next comes the nurturing. Some sales cycles are incredibly short, and as such, minimal client nurturing

is required. A sales rep might know the typical questions that prospects have about a product, and be able to easily call upon the right answers for these questions. Other sales cycles are incredibly long, and require a lot of client nurturing. An example might be a large organisation adopting a new piece of software for tens of thousands of their employees—it's a big decision. Eventually, with enough nurturing prompts and the right frequency of positive interactions, clients are ready to consider investing in the work.

4. Then comes the pretty proposal. Once prospective clients are primed and ready to buy, some sort of proposal or agreement is required. This may be something automatically generated, like a software license agreement, with pricing structures that scale in proportion to the number of users. Or it could be manually generated. I used to spend a heap of time on these (mainly on design and layout), but over time we had developed enough confidence and experience to be able to recognise patterns and present proposals that frame our methodology and value (without getting bogged down in detail).

5. Then comes doing the work. And providing the value (although of course, you'd want to be providing value before any proposal is submitted). This nests a whole heap of systems and patterns too. Patterns, patterns everywhere! But sometimes we have good systems to corral them into something manageable.

And that's kind of how we make sales happen. Each step nests its own level of complexity but, not to worry—we have a system to manage this complexity. If you're a small business, your system might look like a spreadsheet that lists the current status of particular opportunities. If you're a bit more advanced, you might be using customer relationship management and/or sales pipeline software as your sales system. Thanks to these systems, we can track where various opportunities are at, and can ensure we are investing the right effort in the right folks at the right time.

But this is an incredibly simple example of a very small and agile thought-leadership practice. As things scale up, things get much more complex.

Multinational corporations live on the other side of this spectrum, and need to embrace a broader mix of systems in order to coordinate efforts on a global scale. These may include systems for performance reviews and compliance, inductions and on-boarding, communications, professional development, succession, distribution, legal considerations and disputes, and so on.

And these systems work too — 80 per cent of the time. Until the world changes and they become irrelevant.[6] In these cases, fortune favours those who are able to adapt to new systems. But this only happens if we have viable alternative options beyond the default.

Hey, here's another element of default thinking — and something found within many systems — *templates*.[7]

TEMPLATES

'I'm glad you love Jason's doodle'. This statement came from a virtual assistant I once employed, in response to a senior HR director's email.

The response created a mighty awkward situation, but let me explain the details.

The HR director had just written to express their gratitude for a closing keynote I had recently delivered at their annual conference. In this keynote, I shared some of my visual notes from the event — 'doodles', one might call them. The plural is important.

Around the same time, I had developed some systems to guide my virtual assistant through the complexity of my business. Virtual assistants were all the rage back then, and my business hadn't matured to the wonderful point it is at now where I have a closer and more experienced local team (in real life, not just virtually).

But yes, I'd read Tim Ferriss's fabulous book — *The 4-Hour Work Week* — and I was set to live the dream. I thought that, once I had a virtual assistant, everything would get easier. It didn't. It required me to establish some really good systems, and unpack my default thinking into a whole heap of default templates to live within these systems. These

6| Or, in some cases, organisations and their leaders grip onto systems that no longer serve the business model — which is akin to gripping the railings of a sinking ship.

7| Let's just pause and reflect on how bad that segue was.

templates included simple things like email responses—including what to do if someone important emailed while I was out of the office or overseas:

Acknowledge their email [as in, say something nice about something they've mentioned] and then explain that I'm out of the office until [specify day and date]. Offer to be of assistance if there is anything they need urgently.

And so back to my doodles. After my presentation, the client mentioned via email something to the effect of, 'the audience loved Jason's doodles'. But alas! My template did not capture the nuances of such things as the distinction between one's doodle and the doodles one sends through after graphically recording an event.[8]

Anyhoo, I thought this was a good template for a fairly repeatable task. Templates are the physical bits that make up a system and, when they work, they save us a heap of time by minimising any unnecessary duplication of effort.

For example, beyond some basic html, I don't know how to code. I wish I did, but I don't just yet. But, thankfully, website templates exist—which means I don't need to bear the cognitive burden of learning to code. I can use a template and save a heap of time and mental angst.

In an organisational context, performance reviews are a fairly common phenomena. The common intent behind performance reviews is to periodically assess an individual's productivity and efficacy in relation to a set of pre-established criteria and organisational objectives (defaults). Additionally, the process may be an opportunity to review the employee's aspirations, goals, strengths, weaknesses, learning opportunities and behaviours.

But what tends to happen is that everyone is busy, and these performance reviews become simple box-ticking activities that do little to improve things. Whole industries are designed to provide box-ticking solutions for performance reviews. In these industries, instead of having meaningful conversations, managers can simply generate a specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound goal, and employees can then proceed to show incremental progress towards that goal. Again, this is fine for formulaic work with predictable outcomes—but it's horrendously limiting for any organisation or leader looking to do something new.

8| I'm sure I could add some pun using the word 'graphic', but I'll resist.

And so, the cracks in default thinking begin to show.

Templates and systems serve our default thinking. They're the instructions and guideposts we turn to when we're uncertain about what to do. And, because we are so primed to recognise patterns and minimise cognitive strain (that is, the burden of thought required to process what to do), defaulting to the assumptions, systems, templates and structures we have already established is an incredibly alluring proposition.

Reverting to the default saves you time, thereby enhancing your productivity and efficiency. But it costs you accuracy, empathy, relevance and meaningful progress.

NORMS

'Erm, that's just not the done thing around here.'

Norms are cultural products (including values, customs and rituals) that represent our understanding of what others do, and what others think that we should do. Norms occur in many contexts, not only at the team level, the organisation level and the industry level, but also across countries, age demographics, cities, suburbs, and so on. For example, I'm writing this book at a cafe in Fitzroy, an inner-city suburb in Melbourne that, according to a 2015 article published in London's *Telegraph*, ranks in the top three of the most hipster neighbourhoods in the world. As such, good coffee, ironic tattoos, beards, skateboards, pop-up stores, ripped skinny jeans, thick-rimmed glasses, craft beer (and so on) all contribute to the norms of this area. I get no comments on my flaming red beard or coffee snobbery in Fitzroy—but very much do when I travel abroad.

Norms influence our defaults. When at a loss as to what to do, our brain will scan for a default. If we identify a pattern we haven't experienced yet, one of the reference points that will influence our decision on how to behave is the established norms. '*What would others do? What would they think I should do?*' The answer to these types of questions is usually something that's predictable and safe.[9]

9| Remember—default thinking favours the minimisation of angst in return for the greatest short-term gain.

As a leader, understanding the values that influence your behaviour, the values that drive your colleagues' behaviours, and the company values[10] that influence the collective behaviour of your organisation is really important.

Norms are powerful. They are frequently repeated and reinforced by the people who surround you. Deviance from the established norms is often frowned upon, and viewed with mistrust. If one strays too far from the established norms, one may be cast as a pariah or deviant.[11] This is unfortunate, because most norms are established in precedence (the past), and are self-validating and reinforcing.

PRECEDENTS

Because our default thinking relies so heavily on pattern-matching, it can be hard for folks to explore or accept new ideas that lack an established precedent. Leading folks through unprecedented territory, towards a future not yet realised, can be even harder.

Part of leading such a quest is the process of *creating precedents*. This is where we gather evidence to serve as a reference point for decisions (covered in more detail in chapter 4).

Naturally, the psychology of what informs our thinking is much more complex than the brief tour I've provided. We haven't even ventured into the territory of the identity you form within given social constructs, and how you manage cognitive dissonance in reference to that.

Suffice to say, our default thinking is a comforting, complex thing that favours efficiency and the status quo. Whenever we believe the world makes sense, it's due to our profound ability to ignore our own ignorance.

10| I'm not talking here about understanding the standard mix of integrity, innovation, collaboration, safety, diversity, community, and other 'default' values. Unless, of course, you've actually done the work of translating what these values mean in terms of keystone behaviours.

11| Which is why the hero's journey is so challenging, and why it's incredibly important that leaders invest in culture change to ensure the folk they work with are part of the journey too—it's a lonely journey, otherwise. Pioneering strategy requires pioneering leadership, but it also requires a cultural norm that supports it—even if it's a bimodal culture to begin with (see chapter 16).

And so ends our lukewarm homage to Default Thinking.[12]

It's good, fast and often useful. It forms the basis of our 'system 1' (fast) thinking. And a heap of leadership, strategy and motivation books out there support a collection of comfortingly familiar thinking around this.

Keep in mind default thinking is primarily formed through pattern matching — the more experience we get, the more patterns we recognise. This, in turn, gives us more codified patterns to call upon, and access to more cognitive shortcuts.[13] For formulaic work with predictable outcomes, this is quite a boon — it's what allows us to enhance our mastery of musical instruments, or to accurately predict the outcome of things.

Clever systems exist for more complex phenomena, and handy templates exist for more repeatable phenomena. Both of these constructs serve to guide us through complexity and reduce cognitive burden — instead of having to think too hard, we have a system or template to guide us.

With all of this clever, time-saving stuff, one would think that we would have *more* time to work on the important stuff — like strategy, progress, and the threats and opportunities that lie on the horizon.

In fact, in an ideal world, we'd invest roughly 80 per cent of our time doing the core work that needs to be done — the default, productive, operational 'business as usual' work that Ought To Be Got Done, and that only requires fast thinking.

But then everyone would also ensure that a good 20 per cent of their time was engaged in more thoughtful work, and deeper, more thorough thinking. We'd reflect upon our assumptions and the decisions we make. We'd feed our hunches (see chapter 4) and nurture the exploration of new possibilities and options.

This might happen, if we weren't *cursed with efficiency.*

12| My intention with this opening chapter was actually to be all jolly-like, pointing out the many merits of default thinking. But I fear my disdain for unquestioned thought might have crept in. Oh well! Stay tuned…

13| Assuming we've had diverse experience. If this isn't the case and we've only had more experience doing the same thing, our default thinking may just be that much more ingrained and harder to challenge or budge — hence the need for diversity in leadership. This also highlights the effect that fresh eyes can have — without having a database of patterns to call upon, less experienced folks can often ask good questions, or see things others cannot. At least, until the point at which they become 'normalised'.