

Upstream



Book Club Guide

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Made To Stick and *Switch*

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Chapter 1: Going Upstream

1. “So often in life, we get stuck in a cycle of response. We put out fires. We deal with emergencies. We handle one problem after another, but we never get around to fixing the systems that caused the problems.” Does this quote ring true for you? Talk about the situations where you feel like you’re stuck reacting to problems instead of fixing them.
2. Heath discusses how a crime could have been prevented, from seconds before (a loud alarm) to decades before (by supporting pregnant women who are at risk). What was your reaction to this spectrum? If you were a mayor with the power to spend large amounts of money, where would you invest on the downstream-to-upstream spectrum?
3. The U.S. health care system is more downstream than other countries, Heath argues. Does your experience with the health care system mirror this point or contradict it? Can you think of situations (perhaps with your family members) where an upstream investment might have prevented a downstream health problem?
4. “I don’t have to be at the mercy of these forces—I can control them. I can shape my world. And in that declaration are the seeds of both heroism and hubris.” Smallpox was cited as a heroic example; some military interventions (e.g., the U.S. interventions into Iraq and Libya) might qualify as negative examples. What other examples come to mind that show off either the promise—or the perils—of upstream interventions?

5. One theme in the book is society's neglect of the "invisible hero." The people who prevent problems aren't recognized in the same way as people who save the day. A lifeguard who rescues a drowning swimmer is an instant hero, while a swim coach who taught 100 four-year-olds how to swim—and thus helped to prevent accidents—is just someone who was doing her job. Who were the invisible heroes in your life? Looking back, were there people whose influence helped prevent problems in your life?

Chapter 2-4: The Three Barriers To Upstream Thinking

1. The Chicago Public Schools story captures many of the book's themes. Talk about what stood out to you about the district's work to reduce the dropout rate.

2. Problem blindness is the belief that negative outcomes are natural or inevitable. The Patriots had problem blindness about hamstring injuries: *It's a dangerous game; of course players will get hurt.* The CPS leaders had problem blindness about dropouts: *It's regrettable, but there's nothing we can do about it.* Do you think your organization suffers from problem blindness? If so, in what areas?

3. "Every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets," said Paul Batalden. Does that idea resonate with you? What examples do you see in your organization or in society?

4. In the 1960s and 1970s, the workplace's blindness to sexual harassment was so complete that Helen Gurley Brown (Cosmo editor) basically encouraged women to roll with it. It's a shocking quote by modern standards. (The quote is on page 31 if you want to review it.) When people reflect on our society 50 years from now, what do you think they'll be shocked by? In what areas do you think we're suffering from problem blindness?

5. "What's odd about upstream work is that, despite the enormous stakes, it's often optional." (page 41) Why? Why do downstream activities seem mandatory while upstream interventions are often voluntary?

6. In Chapter 3, Heath tells the stories of Ray Anderson at Interface, who vowed to create a zero-impact business, and Dr. Bob Sanders in Tennessee, who led efforts to make car seats mandatory in the state. Both leaders voluntarily took ownership of a major problem. Have you ever been part of a group that took ownership of a problem that you hadn't created? How did that sense of "owning" the problem change the way you approached it?

7. Jeannie Forrest resolved her staffers' dispute by asking them to "tell the story of this situation as though you're the only one in the world responsible for where we are." How did that idea strike you? Did any situations come to mind that might benefit from that kind of find-your-accountability approach?
8. At the beginning of Chapter 4, Heath shares small personal upstream victories: his own second power cord, the windowsill/glaucoma-drops strategy, and Rich Marisa's timer switch for the hallway light. Can you think of a recurring irritant in your life that you eliminated, forever, with the right upstream solution? Or one you'd love to eliminate going forward?
9. The study of nurses' behavior highlighted their tunneling behavior: They're so accustomed to reacting to problems—and working around them—that they never get around to fixing them. Surely we can all relate to this. Why do you think tunneling is such a powerful trap? Why isn't it more natural to step out of the tunnel and engage in systems thinking?
10. "There are only two areas of concern that seem to reliably trigger our upstream instincts: our kids and our teeth." (page 64) Did you agree or disagree with that comment? Would you suggest other areas to add to that short list?
11. The three key barriers to upstream thinking, Heath writes, are problem blindness (*I don't see the problem*), lack of ownership (*That problem is not mine to fix*), and tunneling (*I can't deal with that right now*). Consider a problem that you're concerned about, whether it's something global such as climate change or something specific to your organization or family. In the context of that problem, which one of those three barriers has been the hardest to overcome?

Chapters 5-11: Seven Key Questions For Upstream Leaders

1. Consider the remarkable effort in Iceland to reduce teenage alcohol and drug use. Do you think a similar effort could work in the U.S.? Why or why not?
2. Joe McCannon distinguishes "data for the purpose of inspection" from "data for the purpose of learning." What are examples of each category that you've encountered in your life? What does it feel like when data is used for inspection?

3. Many of the upstream successes discussed in the book involve the use of a “by-name list”: the at-risk students in Chicago Public Schools, victims of domestic violence in Newburyport, and homeless people in Rockford. Why does such hyper-focus yield different results? What’s different, exactly, between the abstract focus on “getting homeless people housed” and the specific focus of “getting John Smith housed”?

4. Heath compared health outcomes in the best neighborhoods to a roulette wheel where you can win by hitting either black or red. Meanwhile, in the worst neighborhoods, you can only win with a green 0 or 00. What was your reaction to that analogy—fair or unfair? Do you believe that big discrepancies in life expectancies between nearby ZIP codes are primarily the product of flawed systems, as Heath argues, or of other factors, such as individual choices?

5. David Foster Wallace’s parable of the fish asks us to consider, “What’s the water?” In other words, what’s the nature of our environment, and its influence on us, and might those forces be invisible to us? What was “in the water” of your own upbringing?

6. What are your feelings about an organization such as DonorsChoose—which is clearly well-intentioned and helps a lot of people, but might also reinforce the bad systems that spawned its work? Are there comparable questions you might ask about your own organization? Even as you pursue admirable goals with good intentions, might there be larger inequities or injustices that are unwittingly reinforced by your work?

7. In the chapter on leverage points, Heath cites the example of an “age simulation suit,” that helps people feel what it’s like to be elderly. It’s an example of getting closer to a problem in order to identify leverage points. Can you think of situations where you consciously pushed yourself closer to the source of a problem and, as a result, you uncovered some solutions that might have otherwise been hidden?

8. Heath writes, “One of the most baffling and destructive ideas about preventive efforts is that they must save us money.” Did you buy this argument? If so, why do you think this mindset is so widespread—the notion that preventive interventions must pay for themselves?

9. What was your take on Gil Welch’s turtle/rabbit/bird analogy for cancer? Can you think of other situations in life where you encountered this same dynamic—that is, situations where people took aggressive action to fight problems that might have been false positives?

10. Does your organization use data or technology to hunt for early warning signs of problems? Talk about the approaches you use. Have you been able to use those early-warning signals successfully to avoid problems?
11. In the story of Boston’s sidewalk repairs, the city had been tracking three perfectly reasonable metrics that turned out to be deeply flawed. Similarly, as a nation, we obsess about the GDP as a measure of economic success. Yet that measure, too, is deeply flawed. By the standards of the GDP, a divorce is “good” (since lawyers charge fees, which creates economic activity, while happy couples don’t ring the cash register); paying for child care is good, while providing it to your own kids is value-less; and extracting resources from the earth is good while protecting them is not. What other example of this phenomenon can you think of, where the numbers being measured don’t reflect our true values?
12. Heath shares the story of how he gamed his Dad’s offer to pay him \$1 for every book of the Bible he read. What examples have you encountered in your life of people “gaming” measures? Have you ever indulged in such gaming yourself?
13. What was your take on the Macquarie Island story? Was it a fiasco—or a success story that simply took a long time to realize?
14. Did you feel paralyzed by the complexity involved in systems thinking (as with the plastic bags example)? If so, did that paralysis make you feel less confident/excited about pursuing upstream work? If you didn’t feel paralyzed, talk about how you get comfortable with complexity and unknowns. What allows you to stay optimistic in the face of so many uncertainties?
15. Were you familiar with the “wrong pocket problem” before reading the book? What do you think should/could be done to create incentives for programs like the Nurse-Family Partnership to be funded? Did South Carolina’s three-year slog to create a “Pay for Success” program feel like a sound investment to you—or like bureaucratic madness?
16. Is there any service that you buy—in the spirit of Heath’s pest control subscription service—that reflects an upstream investment? I.e., you’re spending money today to prevent or delay a more expensive problem down the road?

Chapters 12-13: Far Upstream And You, Upstream

1. What's your take on Y2K, from what you know of the issue? Crisis avoided—or hoax?
2. FEMA couldn't come up with \$15,000 in travel expenses for more disaster-preparedness exercises like Hurricane Pam. Subsequently, over \$62 billion was approved for rebuilding the Gulf Coast after Katrina. In some ways, these two facts are the perfect symbol of our preference for downstream action over upstream. How do you account for this enormous discrepancy? Why are we “penny-wise and pound foolish” in this way?
3. What did you think of Nick Bostrom's “urn” analogy? Do you think mankind is at risk of extinction for the reasons he describes? If not, what gives you more faith? What do you think could be done to lower the risks of the catastrophes Bostrom describes?
4. In the last chapter, Heath quotes an old proverb: “The best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago. The second-best time is now.” In what areas of your life do you wish you'd acted years ago? And, in the spirit of the proverb, how might you take action today?
5. Heath offers three suggestions to guide our efforts to contribute to societal problems: 1. “Be impatient for action but patient for outcomes.” 2. Macro starts with micro. 3. Favor scoreboards over pills. Which of these did you find most helpful or relevant for your own interests? What else have you learned about how to be effective in situations where progress may come slowly?
6. Robert Baden-Powell said, “Try and leave this world a little better than you found it.” Who is an upstream hero of yours—someone who clearly accomplished that? It might be someone on the global stage—a leader or activist. Or it might be someone you've encountered personally: a mentor, a relative, a teacher. What did you learn from that person's example?