



Subtract

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leidy Klotz is a professor appointed in engineering, architecture, and business at the University of Virginia.

The Nutshell

In our striving to improve our lives, our work, and our society, we overwhelmingly add. There are many interwoven reasons for this—cultural, economic, historical, and even biological. However, it doesn't have to be this way.

We're all doing essentially the same thing—trying to change things from how they are to how we want them to be. And in this ubiquitous act of change, one option is always to add to what exists, be it objects, ideas, or social systems. Another option is to subtract from what is already there.

The problem is that we neglect subtraction. Compared to changes that add, those that subtract are harder to

think of. Even when we do manage to think of it, subtracting can be harder to implement. But we have a choice. We don't have to let this oversight go on taking its toll on our cities, our institutions, and our minds. And, make no mistake, overlooking an entire category of change takes a toll.

What I am interested in is not simplicity, or elegance, or any other form of “less is more.” Subtracting is an action. Less is an end state. Sometimes less results from subtraction; other times, less results from not doing anything. There is a world of difference between the two types of less, and it is only by subtraction that we can get to the much rarer and more rewarding type.

In other words, subtraction is the act of getting to less, but it is not the same as doing less. In fact, getting to less often means doing, or at least thinking, more.

Can a page of takeaways really sum up the lessons of an entire book? Isn't that the idea? Here are your takeaways.

Invert: Try less before more. Subtract detail even before you act. Then, once you are ready to make changes, put subtracting first—play Jenga. And remember, just because we can appreciate that less is not a loss, that does not mean that your audience and customers do. So, tell them about this book and, in the meantime, don't "subtract." Instead, clean, carve, and reveal. Add a unit of transformation.

Expand: Think add and subtract. Nature shows us that these are complementary approaches to change. Adding should cue subtracting, not rule it out. Try accessing a different multitude. If you run out of multitudes, hire an editor. And don't forget to zoom out to see the field, because stop-doings and negative numbers are not im-

possible. Plus, the field is where the tension is, and removing it is the "good" way to change systems. So sure, add diversity, but subtracting racism is the prize.

Distill: Focus in on the people. Strip down to what sparks joy. Decluttering delights, and so does the psychology of optimal experience. Use your innate sense for relative difference. Taking away a mammoth is a bigger transformation than adding one. Embrace complexity, but then strive for the essence. Forget objects, remember forces—and pass mechanics. Subtract information and accumulate wisdom.

Finally, **persist:** Keep subtracting. Can you make less undeniable? Costa Rica made neutrality noticeable. Don't forget that you can reuse your subtractions, like doughnut holes. Subtract stuff to leave a legacy of options.

I sincerely hope that you find yourself turning this book's ideas into better things, whatever they may be for you.