ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dan Heath

Dan Heath is a senior fellow at Duke University's CASE center, which supports entrepreneurs fighting for social good.

Upstream
THE NUTSHELL

First Avid Reader Press 2020

Downstream actions react to problems once they've occurred. Upstream efforts aim to prevent those problems from happening. In this book, I'm defining upstream efforts as those intended to prevent problems before they happen or, alternatively, to systematically reduce the harm caused by those problems.

It's not that the upstream solution is always right. And it's certainly not the case that we should abandon downstream work—we will always want someone there to rescue us. The point is that our attention is grossly asymmetrical. We're so focused on saving the drowning kids in the river that we fail to investigate why they need saving at all.

The Three Barriers to Upstream Thinking

Problem Blindness
To succeed upstream, leaders must detect problems early, target leverage points in complex systems, find reliable ways to measure success, pioneer new ways of working together, and embed their successes into systems to give them permanence. For that to happen, leaders first have to awaken from problem blindness. You can't solve a problem that you can't see, or one that you perceive as a regrettable but inevitable condition of life. The escape from problem blindness begins with the shock of awareness that you've come to treat the abnormal as normal.

Convene

Upstream

A Lack of Ownership
A lack of ownership means that the parties who are capable of addressing a problem are saying, "That's not mine to fix."

Why do some problems lack "owners"? Sometimes self-interest is to blame. In some cases, people may resist acting on a perceived problem because they feel as though it's not their place to do so. Asking "What if you were the only one responsible?" might help us overcome indifference and complacency and see what's possible: "I choose to fix this problem, not because it's demanded of me, but because I can, and because it's worth fixing."

Tunneling
When people are juggling a lot of problems, they give up trying to solve them all. They adopt tunnel vision. There's no long-term planning; there's no strategic prioritization of issues. And that's why tunneling is the third barrier to upstream thinking—because it confines us to short-term, reactive thinking. In the tunnel, there's only forward. People who are tunneling can't engage in systems thinking. They can't prevent problems; they just react. And tunneling isn't just something that happens to poor people—it can also be caused by a scarcity of time.

Seven Questions for Upstream Leaders

How Will You Unite the Right People?
To succeed in upstream efforts, you need to surround the problem. Meaning you need to attract people who can address all the key dimensions of the issue. Once you've surrounded the problem, then you need to organize all those people's efforts. And you need an aim that's compelling and important—a shared goal that keeps them contributing even in stressful situations where people's lives may depend on your work.

How Will You Change the System?
Systems change starts with a spark of courage. A group of people unite around a common cause and they demand change. But a spark can't last forever. The endgame is to eliminate the need for courage, to render it unnecessary, because it has forced change within the system. Success comes when the right things happen by default—not because of individual passion or heroism. Success comes when the odds have shifted.

Where Can You Find a Point of Leverage?
Every problem will have its own array of factors that increase risk for or protect against it, and each of those factors is a potential leverage point. As an alternative to the focus on risk and protective factors, consider whether your leverage point might be a specific subpopulation of people. Getting proximate is not a guarantee of progress. It's a start, not a finish. Upstream change often means fumbling our way forward, figuring out what works and what doesn't, and under what conditions. But in this context, even a defeat is effectively a victory. Because every time we learn something, we fill in one more piece of the map as we hunt for the levers that can move the world.

How Will You Get Early Warning of the Problem?
When we can foresee a problem, we have more maneuvering room to fix it. That's why a key question bearing on upstream efforts is: How can you get early warning of the problem you're trying to solve? As we design early-warning systems, we should keep these questions in mind: Will the warning give us enough time to act effectively? (If not, why bother?) What rate of false positives can we expect? Our comfort with that level of false positives may, in turn, hinge on the relative cost of handling false positives versus the possibility of missing a real problem.

Upstream

How Will You Know You're Succeeding?
With upstream efforts, success is not always self-evident. Often, we can't apprehend success directly, and we are forced to rely on approximations—quicker, simpler measures that we hope will correlate with long-term success. But because there is a separation between (a) the way we're measuring success and (b) the actual results we want to see in the world, we run the risk of a "ghost victory:" a superficial success that cloaks failure. Ghost victories, in all their forms, can fool almost anyone—even (or perhaps especially) the people achieving the "successes." It's only when you examine them very closely that you can spot the cracks—the signs of separation between apparent and real success.

How Will You Avoid Doing Harm?
In planning upstream interventions, we've got to look outside the lines of our own work. Zoom out and pan from side to side. Are we intervening at the right level of the system? And what are the second-order effects of our efforts: If we try to eliminate X, what will fill the void? If we invest more time and energy in a particular problem, what will receive less focus as a result, and how might that inattention affect the system as a whole? If we aren't collecting feedback, we won't know how we're wrong and we won't have the ability to change course. Feedback loops spur improvement. And where those loops are missing, they can be created.

Who Will Pay for What Does Not Happen?
Paying for upstream efforts ultimately boils down to three questions: Where are there costly problems? Who is in the best position to prevent those problems? And, how do you create incentives for them to do so?

Far Upstream

Upstream thinking is not just for organizations, it's for individuals. Where there's a recurring problem in your life, go upstream. And don't let the problem's longevity deter you from acting. As an old proverb goes, "The best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago. The second-best time is now." Maybe you're also motivated to help solve a bigger problem in society. There are countless places you could invest your time or money.