

book club synopsis

october 2013

The Necessity of Strangers:
The Intriguing Truth About Insight, Innovation, and Success

Alan Gregerman

Jossey-Bass, 2013

To stay competitive in a fast-moving world, you and your business need access to more ideas, insights and perspectives than ever before. In *The Necessity of Strangers*, author Alan Gregerman asserts that the real key to success and innovative thinking lies not within our traditional network of friends and contacts, but in engaging with strangers and those of different backgrounds.

The following is a chapter-by-chapter synopsis that is designed to help you dive quickly into the content of the book. We hope that this will allow you to extract the greatest insights from it in the most efficient manner possible and help you find the sections of the book that will be of most value to you.

About the author

Alan Gregerman is an award-winning author, business adviser, and teacher. His writing and consulting work focuses on helping companies and organizations create winning strategies and remarkable products, services and customer experiences by unlocking the genius in all of their people. Gregerman is the author of two previous books, *Surrounded by Geniuses* and *Lessons from the Sandbox*.

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preface

The Necessity of Strangers: The Intriguing Truth About Insight, Innovation, and Success by Alan Gregerman focuses on how strangers are key to the growth of individuals, companies and organizations. When people are asked to enumerate reasons for an individual's or a business's success, they typically list:

- Visionary and effective leadership
- Clear and compelling purpose and strategy
- Great offerings tied to a powerful and unique value proposition
- The right people
- Real teamwork and collaboration
- The right knowledge
- Keen focus on customers' needs
- A bit of luck
- Award-winning quality
- Right systems and processes
- Cutting-edge or most appropriate technology
- Logistics

Strangers, however, are not likely to be mentioned. But from Gregerman's perspective, "the ability to engage, learn from, and collaborate with strangers who are very different from you—in terms of what they know and how they approach the world—is the real key to creating the remarkable breakthroughs that you are capable of, growing the enterprises you were meant to grow, finding and

delighting the new customers you were meant to serve, and making the most of your own life.” The Necessity of Strangers unfolds in three parts:

- **Frameworks ::** The promise of strangers, why people tend to have an innate aversion to strangers, and how people can overcome that aversion and create a more open mindset.
 - **Practice ::** Where, in people’s business and life, strangers are essential to their greater success in terms of innovation, people and talent, collaboration, customers and leadership.
 - **Possibilities ::** How travel can be the spark to greater openness, possibilities and success.
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chapter one:

necessity

“Practically all of my best ideas are built on the ideas and insights of others who were at one time strangers,” observes Gregerman. “These strangers ... are the people who force us out of our comfort zones and challenge us to question the knowledge, beliefs, and habits we hold dear. ”

Most people focus on the importance of friends in their lives. What if this is the wrong focus, and strangers are more important than friends? Strangers are a necessity because of their differences and capacity to challenge us to think very differently. Finding and engaging the right strangers, maintains Gregerman, has the power to make us more complete, compelling, innovative and successful.

Gregerman has a simple mantra: Explore, connect, innovate, grow. “We can do more remarkable things in our work and personal life if we are open to exploring the world around us, connecting with the right people and ideas, turning those connections and ideas into conversations and then innovations that matter, and using those innovations as the catalyst for business and personal growth.”

Where strangers matter: People and organizations need to be open to individuals not only from other cultures, countries, religions, races and genders, but also those from other disciplines and walks of life who have different personalities and different approaches to looking at the world.

The value and limits of friends: There's a common belief that friends are the real keys to success: "It's not what you know but who you know." Gregerman believes that the value of friends is somewhat limiting because most people don't have diverse enough friends to provide a breadth of insight and perspectives.

- **The numbers limit ::** Most people probably have a meaningful relationship with some 150 people, which is an incredibly small percentage of the total population. Relying on a circle of friends—even if they are experts on a subject—is very limiting.
- **The similarity limit ::** The people you know well are probably quite similar to you in their socioeconomic position, educational background, interests and viewpoints. This, stresses Gregerman, "makes them less than perfect when it comes to questioning our thinking ... and helping us to do new and better things."

The limits of business as usual: Gregerman believes that conformity is even more pronounced in the corporate world, and that companies and organizations tend to hire people who will "fit in." This creates a need to:

- Stretch your thinking from "who you know" to "who you could know."
- Reach out and connect with people of different backgrounds, sets of knowledge, perspectives on how to get important things done and different pieces of the puzzle you need to solve.
- Imagine what you would like to know and find the people who know it.

Gregerman proposes a new paradigm:

Business and Personal Success =
What I Already Know +
My Knowledge or Understanding Gap +
A Stranger (or Strangers) Who Knows How to Fill It

aversion

Most people have an innate aversion to others whose ideas, knowledge, insights, backgrounds, perspectives, questions, beliefs, approaches, customs and behaviors are different than theirs. Gregerman uses the contrasting examples of Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen and British naval officer Robert Scott competing in their quests to be first to reach Antarctica's South Pole as a way to highlight how "stranger danger" mindsets influence people's actions.

The race to the South Pole: Roald Amundsen, convinced of the importance of understanding the harsh environment he faced, studied and analyzed data on living, traversing and surviving in the cold. He also drew upon his personal experience living with and learning from the Inuit people. Observes Gregerman: "This openness to learning from strangers would inform all of his planning and prove to be vital to Amundsen's eventual success."

Contrast Amundsen's preparation with that of Scott, who didn't treat the natives as equals and failed to appreciate their understanding of their environment. Instead he was "ruled" by his "aversion to strangers," making a series of inadequate arrangements and calculations—relying on sledges and horses and failing to use and handle dogs properly. Scott's team's inexperience on skis, which hampered their keeping up with the dogs, also contributed to the disaster. Although Scott's team reached the South Pole, they perished from cold and starvation on the return trip.

The critical difference: “When I first read the story of the race to the South Pole,” writes Gregerman, “I was struck by the notion that curiosity, openness, and the practical knowledge both of and acquired from strangers were the real keys to success.”

Drawing upon Amundsen’s experience, Gregerman came up with a formula for success:

- Determine your objective and the compelling result you hope to achieve.
- Develop an initial plan to achieve it.
- Determine the knowledge and know-how required and the gaps in your understanding and abilities.
- Find strangers with the knowledge to fill those gaps—people for whom that knowledge is second nature.
- Invest the time and effort to learn from them in order to fill your gaps.
- Revise your plan based on new learning.
- Execute the plan with some flexibility, being open to making necessary adjustments along the way.
- Look for insights in some less-than-usual places, including science and art museums, music performances, preschools, industries worlds away and even other cultures.

Amundsen’s experience poses an intriguing question: “What if, instead of actively avoiding the ideas of people we don’t understand, as Scott did, we were to live with complete strangers? Not for years, but long enough to begin to understand how they live, the things they value, and the knowledge and wisdom they have accumulated through generations of engaging the world and each other. And what if we were open rather than averse to the possibility that some of these things might significantly improve our chances of achieving the objectives we hold dear?”

The real challenge of people who are different: The U.S. Census Bureau scrapped its plan to equip census takers with handheld computers in 2010 and turned instead to the older practice of door-to-door paper-and-pencil survey method when they had difficulty executing the plan. Why didn't they turn to the United Parcel Service, whose workers use handheld devices every day to record deliveries, for expertise? The failure to do so—the strangers-in-our-midst problem—happened because the Census Bureau missed the obvious and was unable to get beyond business as usual.

- **What science tells us ::** Psychology and neuroscience can help explain the human aversion to strangers.
- **Stereotyping and prejudice ::** Citing a 2013 study on “implicit prejudice,” Gregerman quotes the authors’ finding that prejudice is “unwitting, unintentional and uncontrollable—even among the most-well-intentioned people.” While people are 99.9 percent the same because of their genetic makeup, they still struggle to get past preconceived notions. The conclusion: People are wired to marginalize those who are different from them. Says Gregerman: “Our real challenge or opportunity comes when we choose to focus on the differences that matter—the ones that could be combined with what we already know to make us more complete and successful.”
- **Conformity and group thinking ::** Organizations often have an open, articulate philosophy that holds that group values are not only expedient but also right and good. Groupthinking is great for building harmony and consensus but limiting for stretching thinking and being open to different ideas and ways of doing things.
- **Attachment theory ::** Babies form a powerful attachment to their mothers, or a substitute, and use this attachment as a secure base from which to venture out and explore. Protection from “stranger danger” is present from the get-go. People also tend to build strong attachments to their bosses and members of specific teams rather than gravitating to new groups of people.

- **Believing we know best ::** Humans have a tendency to rally around things they believe are true even when presented with evidence to the contrary. In your own company, consider whether these might be examples of groupthink:
 1. Are there things that go on in your workplace that don't make sense?
 2. Are there business practices, processes and procedures that fly in the face of logic but people believe are absolutely right to do?
 3. When problems arise, is there a tendency to circle the wagons and do more of the same?
- **Invisible gorillas ::** People often don't notice strangers and their insights even when confronted directly with them. In one experiment, people were asked to watch a video where two groups of people in black-and-white T-shirts threw around a basketball and were asked to count the number of passes made by one team. In the video, a woman dressed in a gorilla suit walked through the game. Some 50 percent of the people participating in the experiment reported that they didn't see her. This is an example of "inattentional blindness" to things and people who cross our paths.

Greggerman uses these examples to piece together the aversion puzzle. "We are up against a bit of a challenge in understanding and leveraging an essential piece for our greater success as individuals, companies, and organizations," he writes. "We need to work to create a more open and less averse mindset."

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mindset

How open are you to a range of new ideas and possibilities, including those that come from strangers and are very different from what you already believe? “Mindset is how we are wired or choose to engage the world around us,” writes Gregerman. “It determines or predetermines the likelihood that we will reach our full potential.”

The importance of mindset: According to Gregerman there are two distinct mindsets—fixed and growth. People with a fixed mindset believe that their traits are givens; they are less open to new ways of thinking and doing things. These individuals focus on the innate abilities that enable them to achieve results, are less open to feedback from others except if positive, are disinclined toward learning for learning’s sake and more focused on learning that helps to achieve a specific result. They also seem to be less resilient when facing adversity.

By contrast, people with growth mindsets view their personal qualities as ripe for development, are curious, willing to try new things, open to constructive feedback, and eager to learn for personal growth. They bounce back after setbacks, seeing them as inspiration for growth, and view life as a journey to greater mastery. They believe in their ability to learn, grow, and develop, “creating the context for greater accomplishment and reaching their full potential.”

Gregerman tweaks the notions of fixed and growth mindsets to propose them as closed and open mindsets and examines the behaviors that they lead to.

Understanding the closed mindset and related behaviors: With a closed mindset people are likely to believe that:

- They know best.
- There is a best way to do things.
- Immediate results are valuable.
- Having the right expertise is key.
- Internal brainstorming is the best way to come up with ideas.
- They should protect knowledge.
- The people they know are important.

They are likely to:

- Focus on getting work done.
- Have a tendency to stay at their desks.
- Rely on their own expertise and the things they already know.
- Collaborate and brainstorm with people who are a lot like them.
- Rarely look beyond their walls for ideas and inspiration.
- Avoid, at almost all costs, stepping out of their comfort zones.
- Tend to avoid people who are different from them.

Understanding the open mindset and related behaviors: With an open mindset people are likely to believe that:

- They may not know best.
- There are many ways to do things.
- Discovering possibilities is valuable.
- Having an open mind is essential.
- Engaging the world around them is the best way to come up with ideas.
- They should share knowledge.
- Strangers are also important.

They are likely to:

- Focus on finding the real potential in their work.
- Get up and away from their desk to connect with colleagues in new ways and engage the world around them.
- Acknowledge the strengths and limitations of their expertise and seek to find new knowledge and approaches that will make them even more successful.
- Seek out opportunities to collaborate and brainstorm with people who are very different from them.
- Look for opportunities to stretch outside their comfort zones.
- Seek to engage with strangers—especially if they are very different from them.

A note on expertise: There is an assumption that people who are experts or geniuses are likely to come up with breakthroughs in their fields, that the more that people know, the more they are likely to see possibilities. “But what if this is not the case?” asks Gregerman. “What if it turns out that the more we know about something, the less likely we are to see its possibilities and the more likely we are to see things as we have learned to rather than seeing how they could be?”

Seven questions to help us understand our mindset: These questions should spark a conversation about what it means to have an open mindset and why it matters.

- When faced with a new challenge, is your initial inclination to try to solve it by first applying the knowledge, approaches and tools you already have?
- When looking for people to collaborate with in solving a problem or creating a new opportunity, do you rely on people with backgrounds and expertise similar to your own?
- Do you believe that there is generally a single best way to do something?

- When trying to solve a problem, are you typically satisfied when you come up with an acceptable solution or are you more likely to continue working until you get a more compelling result?
- Do you make a regular practice of sharing the knowledge you develop or acquire with people outside your immediate group or team?
- Do you believe that strangers—especially people in other, very different walks of life—have ideas, insight and perspectives that could help you to solve the problems you face?
- When faced with a problem or opportunity, are you likely to search for solutions across a wide range of disciplines?

From mindset to guiding principles: These core values help support openness to new people, ideas and possibilities.

- **Humility** :: the belief that you don't know everything and that you can always be better at the things that matter most.
- **Curiosity** :: the innate gift for being open to new ideas, new people and new possibilities.
- **Respect** :: the belief that everyone matters and that you learn and grow by engaging other people on their own terms.
- **Purpose** :: the reason for being that guides your efforts to learn and grow.

Changing behavior: Gregerman believes that if people stick with the behaviors he associated with a closed mindset they “will lead only incrementally better work and personal lives,” while the behaviors associated with an open mindset are “a guarantee” that individuals will be “more open to reaching our full potential.”

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innovation

There is a fallacy in the notion that innovation is built around the power of smart people putting their heads together. Real innovation and new ideas occur when people make connections and put together insight from strangers in other industries, places and walks of life. Innovation is a quest to be different in ways that matter, rather than a task to create a slightly newer version of what already exists.

Helicopters, hairstyle and cars that won't collide: Gregerman uses case studies to show that innovation happens when people build upon the ideas of strangers.

- **Igor Sikorsky ::** This Russian immigrant, who developed a U.S. aviation company, knew that vertical flight was possible from studying the history of strangers experimenting with vertical flight. His VS-300 was the first viable helicopter.
- **Vidal Sassoon ::** This British fashion and hair designer was inspired by studying Bauhaus architecture and design, which focused on simple shapes and sharp angles.
- **Nissan Motors ::** Nissan studied how schools of fish could swim continuously in crowded spaces, making almost instantaneous starts, stops and changes in direction without colliding. It developed technology that would enable cars to maintain a “uniform distance of separation” under any driving conditions.
- **Apple::** The iPod owes the concept of personalized music to the Sony Walkman; its technology platform harks back to the MP3 player, and the notion of creating the single source of content in the world (the iTunes Store) could be said to hark back to ancient Egypt's great library of Alexandria.

From 3M to 3-D and beyond: From the 1970s to the 1990s, the 3M Company was known for its innovation culture, including its practice of allowing employees to devote 15 percent of their time to their own ideas and projects. Several of its innovations—the Post-it Note and Scotchgard for example—were developed by colleagues who used this policy to experiment. The more recent developments in 3-D printing have utilized designers and innovators around the world, often communicating by social media, to think about new products.

Finding the right strangers: Beyond having an open mindset, it's critical for you to cast a wider net than you might originally have thought was necessary. Here are questions to stretch your thinking:

- What's our best thinking to date?
- What's the best thinking in our industry?
- What's the best thinking in other industries?
- What's the best thinking from popular culture?
- What's the best thinking in other cultures? What's the best insight from nature?
- What's the best insight from science?
- What are the best possibilities from science fiction?

Think about how these perspectives fit together, and let the broad universe around you fill you with inspiration and possibilities about how to reinvent what you do every day.

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Companies stress that that “our people are our greatest asset” or “our people are at the heart of our business strategy and strength,” yet many workers report that their companies never really engage them or get the best out of them. In 2012, Fast Company cited statistics showing that the median tenure of an American worker in a job was down to 4.4 years, while younger workers may spend a year or less on a job. “So if people are our most important asset,” asks Gregerman, “are we doing the right things to find the right employees, keep them motivated, and get the most out of them?” Companies can reach their potential only by hiring and fully engaging the right strangers who will challenge them to reach beyond the way that things have always been done.

Brilliance in our midst: In 2007, renowned violinist Joshua Bell, dressed as a street performer, performed for 43 minutes at a downtown Washington, D.C. Metro station. The Washington Post reported that 1,070 commuters walked by, seven people stopped to listen for a minute, and one person stayed more than six minutes. The Post concluded that “context” mattered and that most people were not able to appreciate genius when it was out of place. While context does matter, Gregerman notes, “We’re too busy and focused to change our plans in order to experience new people and new possibilities.”

Recognizing the genius in everyone: Businesses need people who are different—yet most of the “diverse” people that companies hire are similar to those “not diverse” people already employed there—except for their gender or color. Companies need to search for people who are different in what they’ve studied, how they’ve been

trained, in the experiences that they've had and how they look at the world. This should include introverts and extroverts, left-brained and right-brained people, etc.

The wonder of new hires: New employees typically begin with energy, fresh ideas and a desire to make a difference. But companies tend to treat them as people who have a limited amount of time to get “with the program” and focus on helping them get their new jobs done. Gregerman proposes rethinking how new employees are treated and have them “orient us.”

- **Discovering new employees' value at the start ::** New hires are the most innovative people in the building. Instead of orienting them, ask them to wander around, talk with the strangers they encounter, attend meetings, see demos, etc., and jot down their observations. When their “orientation” is finished, the new hires confer with the leadership team to offer their observations and ideas—good and bad.
- **Breaking out of business as usual ::** Reinventing employee orientation sets a tone for involvement and signals to new employees that their ideas and input really matter and that they have a lot to contribute to the enterprise.

Rethinking employee engagement—setting the stage: All employees, not just the new hires, need to be challenged to think of themselves as both the “visionary leader” and the “entrepreneur” of their job. How do you set the stage for employees, right from the start, to envision the greatest possible value that they and their role can have in supporting the organization?

- Paint a clear and compelling picture of your vision or purpose as an organization, how you intend to achieve it and the things that really matter to you.
- Make sure that every employee can find his or her place in this picture—or at least a starting point—and that all employees can see the value of their role in enabling you to achieve greater success.
- Let them know that you believe in them and their ability to do remarkable things.

- Challenge them to reimagine their role and how it might be filled to create greater value for the internal or external customers they meet.
- Help them to develop a clear and actionable plan to guide the changes they believe should be made—a plan that identifies the resources, support, learning and collaboration that will be required and the likely return on the company’s investment.
- Give them the tools to succeed, the encouragement and incentives to work through challenges, and a sense that you don’t expect things to always go perfectly—that failures and blips are essential to learning.

Rethinking employee engagement—motivation: Dan Pink, in *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, identifies autonomy, mastery and purpose as motivators for people. Yet most businesses use a narrow definition of incentives that focuses on performance plans, vacations and bonuses to motivate employees. Here’s an alternative:

- Ask new people—and all of your people—what it would take to make their most important dream or dreams come true.
- Be open to having them figure out what combination of assignments, learning, schedule, etc.—as well as money—will bring out their very best.

Rethinking employee engagement—do the same shoes really fit?: Gregerman proposes four scenarios in which employees need new shoes to illustrate the problems of most corporate incentive plans and how they need to be reconsidered:

- Take all your employees to the shoe store and let them each pick out their favorite pair of shoes :: This makes the most sense as people have their own preferences and different size feet.
- Direct your employees to an online shoe store where they can pick out their shoes :: This could work, but it can be hard to get the perfect fit and depends on the store’s exchange policy.

- Measure all your employees feet, then go to the shoe store and pick out your favorite shoe style and order pairs for everyone in their sizes :: This could work if you had great taste or could create a “corporate shoe” that employees will agree to wear.
- Go to the shoe store, pick your favorite style of shoes in your size, and order these same shoes in your size for everyone :: This plan doesn’t make much sense—even if your employees like your choice—because everyone’s shoe size is different.

The problematic fourth shoe alternative, however, is what most companies do with their incentive plans. Observes Gregerman, “They offer one size and assume that it will be okay for everyone ... as though treating everyone the same will inspire them to do uniquely different and remarkable things.”

Rethinking employee engagement—the potential of a promotion:

Promotion practices at companies typically are not for everyone. They may be reserved for those labeled as “high potential,” on the “fast track” or who have “paid their dues.” Now contrast this to the school experience where individuals regularly encounter new teachers, are challenged by new concepts and develop new skills. Gregerman wonders:

- What if businesses regularly promoted everyone to new roles and areas of responsibilities, new chances to learn and grow?
- Instead of viewing promotion as a reward for a job well done, what if businesses looked at it as an investment in a job to be done well?
- Could the best way to continually stretch an organization to reach its full potential be by continually challenging all of its people to reach theirs?

Everyone matters: Gregerman concludes: “Just think of what we could achieve if we could figure out how to connect in new and more powerful ways with the strangers we live and work with ... instead, most companies and organizations seem determined to miss the chance to bring all of their diverse talents to life.”

collaboration

Why is it that employees and leaders talk about the difficulties of working across “boundaries” within their organization and develop silos? Most efforts to encourage collaboration fail to realize their potential because they don’t consider how to connect and engage with strangers. This chapter demonstrates how bringing strangers together can unlock all of the know-how of your enterprises and how mergers and acquisitions can be used by companies and organizations as a way to become more remarkable rather than just larger.

Make the most of brief encounters: While the size of an organization may make it harder to connect, you need to understand how to build connections with strangers.

Guidelines for collaborating: By following these guidelines, you can make your organization a greater engine for collaboration:

- Before you begin to collaborate with those you work with in any meaningful way, commit to getting to know them better. Establish a basis for working together by finding common ground as humans.
- Spend time together learning and exploring the world.
- Have a shared and compelling purpose for collaborating that motivates you to work together in order to make a powerful difference in something that matters.
- Believe that working together enables you to provide much greater value in achieving your purpose.

The power of 10 things: Pair people who don’t know each other; ask them to talk for five minutes about anything they like except work

then create a list of 10 things they have in common. This will start to build a bond out of which they will be more inclined to collaborate.

Towards a culture of conversation: Finding common ground has three powerful benefits:

- Breaks down the barriers dividing people in organizations that limit their ability to share ideas in new ways
- Enables people to discover areas beyond their work lives in which they have great interest, knowledge and passion
- Develops people’s competency at having conversations with those they don’t know well or don’t know at all, making it easier to connect with people in other places and walks of life

Cubicles, questions and nicknames: Where people sit, how they ask for help and what they call each other matter. Some suggestions:

- Don’t let people sit with like-minded buddies. Put them with a cross-section of colleagues from other departments.
- Have colleagues identify the key question or questions that keep them awake at night and are essential to their success.
- Post colleagues’ questions publicly by writing them on a wall, a bulletin board or other public space.
- Create a Pinterest page—so that others can see questions their colleagues have and respond.
- Companies can also reach out to others to get help with the big questions; don’t limit this technique to individuals.
- Think about nicknames—for individuals and groups—and how they might break down barriers.

Reimagining M&A: About 75 percent of mergers and acquisitions don’t return the ROI that their dealmakers envisioned. Gregerman believes that the “big issue is the people and collaboration side of the equation.” Rather than focusing on gaining market share and entering into new markets, etc. through M&A, companies should recognize that “bringing on the right acquisition provides an amazing opportunity for even the best company to reinvent itself.”

customers

For companies to grow they need to deliver greater value to existing customers and identify new customers. Startups and lesser-known companies must rely on strangers to help them persuade customers to try their offerings. This chapter examines how the most astute businesses are creating powerful relationships with the strangers they call customers and why this is likely to be a widely used strategy in the future.

The new world of customers: With customers moving online, they are increasingly becoming strangers in their business interactions—having less and less of a personal connection with the companies they interact with. The Internet has altered the equation, and many “old-school” and local businesses struggle to find the right response.

On the front line with strangers: Gregerman describes patient experiences in the emergency room of a local hospital to illustrate how the hospital treats its visitors, many of whom are strangers. The hospital has customized care, which combines a deep understanding of the shared needs of different patient groups with the ability to diagnose and treat the specific needs of individual patients, who are arriving 24/7. Observes Gregerman: “We all talk about the importance of being customer-centric, but what we really mean is being stranger-centric. Our real task is to figure out how to create and deliver the right offerings and experiences when we might never really know the specific individuals or businesses that will buy our products, services and solutions.”

Understanding and empowering strangers: The changing reality requires companies to rethink their relationship to strangers. Companies such as Amazon systemically study the interests and buying patterns of the strangers with whom they do business and continually provide suggestions and offers for products that anticipate their needs. Consider these examples:

- Amazon and Staples collect information and mine that data to drive value for their customers. Amazon is always recommending other books like the one you just ordered or read, while Staples keeps your shopping lists and reminds you of when you last ordered a product.
- Apple has built strong bonds with strangers based on a commitment to making them smarter. Beyond online shopping, its stores are powerful magnets where customers congregate to try products and take classes to expand their knowledge.
- REI, which provides outdoor recreational gear, employs salespeople who know sports and offer their expertise.
- IKEA has studied the people who live in different parts of the world and how they use their dwelling places. This is then incorporated in the design and sizing of their furniture and room arrangements for every market they sell to.

Connecting with customers: Making customers more comfortable and more capable is a brilliant formula. Whatever your business, it is increasingly important to make your expertise more accessible. You are no longer trying to make your customer dependent on you to keep their business.

Expanding capabilities: Most businesses focus on customer needs, but remarkable businesses envision their customers' hopes and dreams. Apple has built its business understanding that enabling customers builds loyalty, which leads them to spend more money.

Strangers provide guidance: Companies also need to think about the growing importance of asking strangers for their insights and suggestions for new and innovative offerings. In the world of travel, for example, people traditionally turned to guidebooks when planning itineraries and booking lodgings. Now they are just as likely to go online and check websites such as TripAdvisor.com, where the last visitor to the hotel in Paris they're considering came from Australia. The advice is coming from "total strangers who are quick to rate their impressions and together form a powerful new model of expertise."

The power of the crowd: Through crowdsourcing, strangers have more power than ever before to influence buying decisions and corporate success. Online students rate teachers; patients rate doctors. RottenTomatoes lets users consider the opinions of movie viewers. Asks Gregerman: "Could it be that the aggregated voices of actual strangers are become more important and valuable than the detailed analyses and projections of experts?"

Strangers make offerings possible: Crowdsourcing has moved into another arena as strangers invest in ventures, creative projects and social initiatives through such sites as Kickstarter and Indiegogo. Crowdfunding also provides an initial set of customers and supporters for ideas that might never have made it into the marketplace except for the ability to connect with a world of like-minded strangers.

Expanding offerings: Strangers also make possible a wider range of offerings. "Building a new sense of community around strangers with similar interests is nothing new," writes Gregerman. "But it becomes intriguing when designed around a set of offerings that stretch our thinking about learning and the nature of social interaction." You may not have thought about "Sumo+Sushi+Sake" where customers dine and drink while learning about sumo wrestling and watch a competition, but it has sold out offerings in days.

Reaching around the globe: Strangers have the potential to change business and the world at large in compelling ways—addressing the needs of customers with big hopes and few resources. The innovative online educational resource Khan Academy provides education to strangers around the world. Concludes Gregerman: “We depend on strangers in more ways that we realize ... They are also becoming a powerful group of investors in making our most promising ideas a reality and inventors in imagining a world with greater opportunity. If we can’t connect and get comfortable with them as an essential part of our businesses and lives, or leverage their ideas and the opportunities they present, we’ll never reach our full potential.”

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leadership

Do leaders need to change in a world filled with strangers and countless possibilities?

The “new” rules for leaders: The essential roles for leaders in a world of strangers and possibilities are:

- Challenging people to ask the right questions
- Helping people see that they can always be better at the things that really matter
- Inspiring people to be remarkable
- Empowering people to discover their greatest strengths
- Encouraging people to cast a wider net and embrace the necessity of connecting with strangers and new ideas
- Building cultures of conversation, engagement and possibilities

Essential questions: Ask yourself: Why do we exist as an organization? Leaders have to help people move beyond their comfort zones and understand that they have the shared ability to do something remarkable when they work together.

Changing the game: The best leaders challenge people to envision business models that push the limits.

- **The danger of “yes” :: “Yes”** has to be about getting beyond the same old ways. Leaders must give people permission to seek to discover new and better ways of doing things.
- **Striving for perfection ::** Leaders must challenge their organization to be as perfect as it can be and expose their employees to different people and ways of thinking.

Fostering cultures of conversation and engagement: Leaders should live their business lives as though conversations with colleagues and strangers were essential to their success. They must:

- Take time to connect with employees at all different levels and within the different parts of their organization.
- Develop their ability to connect and learn about each employee’s role, sense of purpose, expertise and passions.
- Use this insight to help make connections between employees who might collaborate.
- Regularly engage with people outside the business and encourage employees to do the same.
- Bring new learning and connections into the organization so that strangers can share insights and exchange ideas.
- Connect people with each other and strangers. Leaving the office must be a real priority.

A few notes about learning: Belief in the power of strangers requires a fresh look at learning. This rethinking includes:

- Designing programs that teach people to be open and skillful at engaging others
 - Teaching people a new way to collaborate, based on finding common ground and then exploring different ideas
 - Reinventing the ways of teaching and nurturing innovation
 - Taking people into the world for focused and random exploration and discovery
 - Believing that people are skilled teachers and can share the things they know that could enhance innovation, collaboration and success
 - Ensuring that leaders are equal participants in learning by continually looking for opportunities to discover new information and perspectives
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the power of travel

Travel, to places near and far, has the power to break down the barriers that separate people and limit possibilities. Counsels Gregerman: “It’s the one way to gain instantly a fresh perspective and energize your thinking about different possibilities and the reality that we can always be better at the things that matter most.”

Gregerman believes that travel is a powerful tool to build a more open mindset as well as acquire humility. It provides people the chance to be uncomfortable enough to appreciate what they have and what they know best. But it also provides them with a way to imagine that there may be a better or at least a different way to do the most important things. And it enables personal growth.

Getting past the first bite: On a trip to northern India, Gregerman saw fragrant mounds of cow dung—formed into small towers—along the road. He learned from his companion that the dung mounds were used as ingredients in cooking. He discovered that the dung briquette was heated and then broken into small pieces and with potatoes, eggplants, tomatoes, and rolls. Later, he tasted the concoction. Gregerman writes: “I’m not suggesting that this is likely to become my very favorite food, though this certainly ranks among my most memorable meals. And I do think that most of you reading this would have found it to be quite tasty once you got past the first bite. And isn’t that what openness and innovation are all about? Getting past the first bite to seeing and then understanding what others know so well?”

Daring to explore: Maya Angelou has written: “Perhaps travel cannot prevent bigotry, but by demonstrating that all peoples cry, laugh, eat, worry, and die, it can introduce the idea that if we try and understand each other, we may even become friends.” Observes Gregerman: “We win in business and in life when we use our similarities to build a stronger sense of connection and use our differences to imagine remarkable new ideas and possibilities. That is the real power of travel and the necessity of the strangers we meet along the way.”

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Summary by Lois Gilman

Lois Gilman has written for a variety of magazines, including Corporate Board Member, Money and TIME. She has worked on the program development of numerous business conferences, including the Fortune Global Forum and the Wall Street Journal CEO Council. Gilman was a head researcher at Time Life Books; a senior reporter at TIME Magazine; a program research manager at Fortune conferences; and the Web files editor of Business 2.0 magazine. She is also the author of *The Adoption Resource Book* and *The New York Parents' Book*.

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