

THE UNTAPPED POWER OF DISCOVERY

How to Create Change That Inspires a Better Future



KAREN GOLDEN-BIDDLE

"Navigating change is the hardest task that leaders and managers face. Karen Golden-Biddle is here to help. As one of the world's foremost experts on change, she's written a book that is an accessible, actionable resource for finding your way through the fog."

> Adam Grant, #1 New York Times bestselling author of HIDDEN POTENTIAL and THINK AGAIN, and host of the podcast WorkLife

"You have heard the phrase, 'Embrace the unexpected.' The puzzle remains, as a leader or manager, how do you recognize and make good use of the unexpected in a way that delivers results and positive change for your organization? *The Untapped Power of Discovery* is a unique guide to helping you understand and make good use of unexpected developments and convert them into a capacity for discovery. This focus on the process of discovery produces critical new insights about how to effectively lead during a time of unprecedented change."

Jane Dutton, Robert L. Kahn Distinguished University Professor Emerita, University of Michigan

"In a world full of uncertainty and surprises, Karen Golden-Biddle uses extensive research and compelling stories to teach us the overlooked practice of discovery. Readers will have many "ahas" on their way to learning how to more effectively innovate, solve difficult problems and advance in their careers."

Scott Sonenshein, bestselling author of STRETCH and co-author (with Marie Kondo) of JOY AT WORK

"This book will benefit any leader concerned about the failure of imagination in their company. Drawing on a wide variety of vivid cases, Golden-Biddle provides a tool-kit to jumpstart discovery in your company and using surprise and doubt are the doorways to lasting change."

> Hayagreeva Rao, Atholl McBean Professor of Organizational Behavior, Graduate School of Business, Stanford University, and co-author (with Robert I. Sutton) of SCALING UP EXCELLENCE and THE FRICTION PROJECT

"I sat down to start reading this book and couldn't put it down until I finished. This creative and very gripping book helps readers discover quite a lot. It conveys crucial insights by means of true examples of very ambitious change projects, and demonstrates in practice its underlying conceptual message. The examples in each chapter show not only what three-pronged discovery processes mean in practice, but also what the courage to carry them out as an organizational leader involves. The questions at the end of each chapter engage readers, making the experience of reading the book more than just seeing what others have done.

The book conveys beautifully both the temporariness of our knowledge and the worth of temporary unknowing. It conveys the value of being nervous and hesitant, at least with respect to the tools we use. Further, it not only discusses but also shows in practice, the profound importance of respect for people that change agents and other leaders often ignore—such as children, hospital patients, homeless people, village elders, low level employees in organizations. Most books about change do not even acknowledge the importance of such people, let alone incorporate them in creative processes. Finally, the very helpful figure that summarizes each chapter also ties the chapters together very well.

This is a beautifully written book. I hope that it will lead readers to experience some doubt about admonitions for change they have previously read, and point them towards important new possibilities that await creation."

> Jean Bartunek, Robert A. and Evelyn J. Ferris Chair and Professor of Management and Organization, Carroll School of Management, Boston College

"We must embrace change to achieve success in organizations and have a fulfilling life. Using stories and research, Karen Golden-Biddle provides a compelling framework with actionable strategies to integrate discovery for change with innovative impact."

> Kenneth W. Freeman, Boston University interim president, previously Chairman & CEO of Quest Diagnostics and Partner at KKR

The Untapped Power of Discovery

Despite being a game-changer in powering human growth, discovery remains a mystery. How can it produce *ahas* and insights to meet the challenge of new realities and reimagine organizational management?

This book lays out a process of inquiry that drives belief change and leads to discoveries, empowering leaders, groups, and the organization with a powerful tool for navigating an uncertain future. Discovery lights the intellectual spark for every breakthrough in science, technology, pharmaceuticals, and more—but fear and inertia can harden beliefs and practices that no longer fit the new realities. To counter this, discovery can be cultivated rather than suppressed, using a new, three-phase process, a management practice that consistently generates the *ahas* and insights that underpin all transformation. Based on years of research and real-world observation, this book inspires and equips leaders at all levels to champion this discovery process and fuel genuine, sustained change in their communities and organizations.

Accompanied by a website that includes proprietary tools, audio and video clips, and a downloadable workbook, this book is an enriching resource for current and aspiring leaders and managers across industries, as well as management consultants, HR professionals, corporate educators, and business students.

Karen Golden-Biddle is an organizational ethnographer whose award-winning research illuminates the connection between discovery and organizational change. She is committed to supporting leaders' efforts to cultivate discovery as a conscious practice. Karen's work has appeared in numerous peer-reviewed publications, including the *Academy of Management Journal* and *Organization Science*. She received her PhD and MBA from Case Western Reserve University and BA from Denison University. Karen is Professor of Management and Organizations, emerita, Questrom School of Business at Boston University, and Fellow of the Academy of Management.



The Untapped Power of Discovery How to Create Change That Inspires a Better Future

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For Mark



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I am especially grateful for my husband, Mark, who read every chapter with care. His keen ability to recognize sources of vitality in my written stories, and his fruitful search for stories of discovery made this a significantly better book.

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As well, I am thankful to the many leaders who opened their organizations for my research. These leaders let me observe daily life and experience their struggles, joys, and hopes with change that inspires a better future. Their stories both richly shape and populate this book.

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Introduction

How do leaders make the most of new realities that upend beliefs?

Beliefs about leading people. Beliefs about market success. Beliefs about internal processes and practices. Beliefs about stakeholder needs. What happens when those beliefs no longer fit today's realities? When they no longer enable the organization to win as it once did? When you're the one responsible for getting beliefs in line with reality?

At the very least, you're going to feel disoriented. Your gut may churn with discomfort. Your team may doubt your authority. You've got a challenge on your hands. And it requires not just garden-variety change management. It requires reorienting your and everyone else's ill-fitting beliefs to create new ones, and in turn, reorienting your organization's practices to create better futures.

Making that happen—guiding people along the trail to the *ahas* and insights that foster belief change—is what this book is all about. It's about a core practice that's often not recognized—and yet essential—for tackling critical change-management challenges that you have to confront increasingly, and more urgently, with every passing year. In the face of realities that upend prevailing beliefs, you need the skills to get everyone to reimagine, redesign, and rethink the organization.

THE SOLUTION: A PROCESS OF DISCOVERY

Research I've undertaken during my career reveals that, to take advantage of new realities, you need to master a fundamental process that only a few leaders to date have been championing: the process of discovery. This discovery process fuels *ahas* and insights that support your reorienting of beliefs and creation of novel solutions. It's an ongoing process as well, a process you have to stick with, to foster change in yourself and others that underwrites your better future.

My research shows further that discovery as a process involves much more than people think. It requires going on a journey with others that is powered by three motors. The first motor is surprise; the second, genuine doubt; the third, launching new ways. Using each in turn, and again all iteratively, everyone rises to the challenge of altering ill-fitting beliefs to address those new realities.

It is through these three motors that the discovery process paves the way for people to assess the continued functioning of their core beliefs. Do the beliefs still fit the current situation? Should you let go of prevailing ones and take up new ones? Should you consider, indeed embrace, beliefs you have never before considered? Without engaging all three motors—once, twice, many times—you cannot gain the conviction to let go of the old and put your energy into the new.

Notice that the process of discovery involves not just assigning a few hot shots to assess surprise, wrestle with doubt, consider new ways of working, and then come up with a plan for everyone else to execute to transform the organization. Rather, it involves welcoming, internalizing, and processing the new understanding gained through everyone's engagement with each motor. What do the group's findings and realizations mean—not just to business as usual—but to the core beliefs behind the business?

Think of the three motors as facilitators of belief change. When you, with others, go through surprise, the first motor, you experience a collective waking to the fact of a new reality. *Something isn't right*. *Why doesn't my current belief work any longer?* A sign of success is when group members are taken aback by what they're recognizing.

When you, with others, walk into the unknown of genuine doubt, the second motor, you start questioning: *Are these beliefs still the best ones to hold?* A sign of success is that you are filled with a sense of *not* knowing. Only your uncertainty—not knowing what to do—will loosen the iron grip of long-held beliefs.

When you and your group launch new ways, the third motor, you enthusiastically search for a new, future way of working. Everyone asks: *What other possibilities might there be?* At this point, you and your group launch action that takes place in the context of implementation. You try on new beliefs and practices that you have assessed as better able to function well in the new reality.

It is only through a discovery process like this that people are inclined to grab the promising handrail of new beliefs as they face up to new realities. And it is only through guiding this process as a leader that you and group members let go of ill-fitting beliefs and take up new ones that propel you, the group, and the organization into the future.

Make no mistake about the centrality of belief change to discovery. In the past, you might have thought of discovery as a natural result in the life of an organization, emerging as if through evolution. Or you might have thought of it as serendipitous, in which happenstance guides you and everyone else to breakthrough innovation, invention, and transformation.

But viewing discovery in this way is incorrect. Although you recognize *that* discoveries are generated, and that they catalyze leaps of progress, you don't get any insight into *how* those discoveries unfold. Worse, you encourage people to step over the process of discovery as if the three motors don't exist. Or even worse yet, you encourage them to sidestep new ideas and perspectives once they do learn how to generate them. And that's a huge loss for everyone.

You're making the mistake of grossly undervaluing and woefully under developing discovery. Despite its game-changing role in work and life, it is getting so little attention that you—and most people continue to lack the skill to cultivate discovery. The result is that you risk squandering one opportunity after another to reshape your future and that of your organization. As you fail to lead with the three motors of discovery, you forego untold benefits.

The Untapped Power of Discovery aims to inspire and equip you, perhaps for the first time, to incorporate discovery as a process into your work and life. When you and your fellow employees embrace the discovery process, everyone can rise, together, to transform organization-wide beliefs, and in turn meet the challenge of new realities that any type of organization faces at almost every turn.

SELECTING THE STORIES

Anyone who follows the news knows how essential, yet how difficult, such transformation is. The business press is replete with horror stories. Studies suggest that 70 percent of all change initiatives, and 85 percent of cultural change initiatives, fail. That means that only a limited few succeed, of course, and I was intrigued to find stories of organizations and people who had beaten the odds. I wanted to know why this happened, but most especially, I wanted to know *how* they made it happen.

I went on a search for stories of leaders who embraced unexpected, sometimes vague situations in their organizations or communities. I purposely varied my choices of dozens of organizations in my research. I assembled the stories of discovery in large, medium, and small organizations—in hospitality, entertainment, software design, information technology, and other sectors. I have also included stories from a Fortune 200 manufacturing company, health systems in the US and Canada, a US nonprofit, a global, non-governmental collaboration, and more.

When I found them, I also found that in each one, a discovery process that elicited *ahas* about the suitability of beliefs—and in turn how to reshape no longer suitable ones—was the key to success. To be included, each story had to stem from documents from multiple sources. Each one also had to reveal data that provided clues to the use by the organizations' leaders of a discovery process, a process in which leaders, for example, were "taken aback," or "peered into the void of the unknown."

The stories in the book are not always about dramatic transformation. People do not change their organizations into something they are not. They do not become people they're not. Rather, the stories are about people who have created change in their organizations and communities that, through a re-orientation of beliefs, inspired action toward a better future.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

As a leader, your journey on the road to discovery begins when you learn the central role the process of discovery plays to spark and fuel human creativity, both in your own work and across your organization. Your journey continues as you learn to guide people in operating the motors that fuel discovery. It culminates when you and others conduct multiple cycles of discovery and generate multiple insights. That's when you reorient patterns of belief and practice that spur genuine transformation. In the process, you will gain a new perspective and use new tools to deal with, or even avoid, gut-wrenching periods where you miss insights that would benefit you in mastering new realities. You will learn a brand-new process to move from suppressing to eagerly cultivating *ahas*.

The Untapped Power of Discovery opens by examining how leaders suppress discovery. In chapter 1, you will learn the three main behaviors of leaders who, often without awareness, thwart new realitcmies and derail discovery. The rest of the book presents a plan to develop the personal and organizational skills for cultivating discovery. Chapter 2 portrays leaders of two mature organizations—in the information technology and health sectors—who navigate a discovery process that reorients outdated beliefs and creates new ways of working that sustain success. It also introduces the "discovery cycle" that helps you learn how discovery's core motors and dynamics of belief change are set into motion.

The following three chapters (chapters 3 through 5) describe those core motors and elements of the discovery process approach, providing specific strategies, questions, and tools to enable you to put them into action now. Each chapter builds out the process for generating the *ahas* and insights that spur belief change.

Chapter 3 examines the motor of surprise. It shows how you can use three common enablers to capitalize on this powerful motor for igniting discovery. Chapter 4 examines the motor of genuine doubt. Through greater awareness of doubt's latent value, and through skilled use of three discovery enablers, you learn how to harness doubt as a generative power that fuels insight and new ideas. Chapter 5 examines the third and final motor of discovery, launching new ways. It shows how, once you learn discovery enablers based in situated action, you can turn vague, yet promising new possibilities into new ways of operating.

The final three chapters show how to fortify discovery's generative power. Through a case study of a global collaboration to eradicate Guinea worm disease developed in chapter 6, you will learn how to help people build their capacity for engaging and conducting discovery through the use of three important enablers: building diverse representation, fostering respectful engagement, and enacting flexible roles. In chapter 7, you will learn how to use the multiplier effect of discovery when you sponsor the repeated use of discovery cycles. Through the use of multiple cycles, you and other leaders and employees can generate consecutive insights and *ahas* that spur 5

belief and behavior change for full transformation. The last chapter brings *The Untapped Power of Discovery* to a close with a call to integrate discovery processes into change management for greatest gain (chapter 8).

INVITATION

We are in a moment filled with new realities that upend our beliefs. It can be a daunting moment in which to see and create new possibilities for achieving a different and better future. We feel hopeless in our ability to effect change. Although a desire for a better future is a vital part of our human society, we often disbelieve that our action can make a difference.

Yet this moment is also an opportunity for organizational and community leaders, together with their stakeholders, to build a different kind of capacity—one that enables everyone to reshape their beliefs in the service of creating novel solutions to the challenges of unexpected situations and new realities. This capacity is discovery, a process that significantly elevates other processes, such as traditional change management, design thinking, and innovation.

A mountain of new research—much of it in this book—suggests that when you, *with* your colleagues, make discovery continuous, when you generate one cycle of discovery after another, you will realize escalating transformative impact. As you confront new realities, you will generate new beliefs that foster growth as a community. Everyone will learn how to routinely—reflexively—catalyze the discovery on which you depend. With multiple cycles of discovery, you'll provoke new ideas and possibilities to create change you had not ever believed possible.

This book invites you, as a leader, to imagine people in *all* organizations as able to generate *ahas* and insights that open new possibilities and perspectives. These, in turn, promote change in beliefs and practices that inspire a better future—often against unbelievable odds, for themselves and others. As a leader you can shed top-down interventions and directives for a more nuanced and expansive approach to change: one that engages people rather than controls them; one that actively explores what is *not known*, rather than rigidly adhering to what is already known; and one that delivers a dynamic organization that thrives as it faces the challenge of each new reality in today's flood of change.

6

In the process, you will learn to make the discovery of insight, new perspectives, and new possibilities more dependable and systematic. With this discovery repertoire, you will embolden your team and organization to move away from know-it-all ways of operating and on to emerging ones that will enable you and others to master the nebulous new realities and unexpected situations that upend beliefs.

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- 1. Identify a new reality or unexpected situation that upended your beliefs. Which of your beliefs were upended? How did you respond?
- 2. What ideas in this introduction catch your attention? Why?

#### Suppressing Discovery

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