

'CliffsNotes' Book Club Recap

DO YOU LOVE BOOKS ON LEADERSHIP, NEUROSCIENCE, AND BUSINESS, BUT NOT HAVE TIME TO READ ALL THE BOOKS?

Join the '**CliffsNotes' club**—where there's no pressure to pre-read the book, no membership required, no cost, and lots of discussion in just 90 minutes. Each month, you will hear a **summary of highlights** from a recently-published business book. This discussion summary is intended to provide a recap of the conversation at Book Club, rather than serve as a thorough book summary. We'll keep you "in the know" on the latest and greatest concepts and models. **Register here** for upcoming events.



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Subtract

By Leidy Klotz

Discussion Highlights

Presented by Sally Bloomberg, MBA, PCC

Subtracting represents untapped potential when it comes to solving problems. This book is designed to help us see and leverage the power of subtraction when designing solutions that optimize our strategies, our processes and our time. Subtraction requires that we overcome our default response to search for solutions that rely on addition. (p. 12, 19)

Why Adding is the Default

Evolutionary Forces

- Biology favors adding. Think about food; to survive we need to eat. Our hunter-gatherer ancestors could not shop and store food. When they found food, they needed to eat as much as they could since they did not know when they would find their next meal. (p. 51)
- Psychologists Robert White (in 1959) and Albert Bandura (in 1977) put forth that we have a biological need to deal with our environments and feel competent. One way we meet this intrinsic need to feel competent is by completing tasks (aka checking things off the list). (p.49)

Developmental Forces

- Even before we learn math, we can perceive quantity. (p. 60) It takes children a while to learn the concept of something being less than zero. Negative numbers require abstract thinking; to consider subtraction as an option we need to override the instinct to add and to show competence. (p. 67)

Neuroscience

- The reward pathways associated with adding are difficult to turn off; they were essential for us having enough food to survive. Neuroscientists have confirmed the same reward centers are activated when we find food for survival as when we acquire other things. (p. 57)

Cultural Forces

- When we didn't have to spend time searching for food, we could think about staying in one place. Material culture helps us live together in larger groups – people can divide labor and share the

bounty. Building monuments (e.g., pyramids, the Washington monument) requires people to come together to plan and to build. That's what leads to culture and civilization. (p. 79)

Economic Forces

- Adam Smith is often called “the father of modern economics.” He is also known for creating the concept of gross domestic product (GDP). Smith advocated that growth was the fastest way to improve situations for as many people as possible. Without economic growth, “most people had no chance to satisfy a natural desire to better our lives.” (p. 116)
- John Maynard Keynes also believed that individual consumption was key for collective prosperity. After World War II, Keynes' ideas about individual consumption began to inform government policies in the US and in Europe. The US advocated that people should pursue economic wealth. This was seen as the road to peace. (p. 117)

Why We Neglect Subtraction as an Effective Approach for Improvement (Examples)

- We ignore subtraction because we don't even think of it as an option. (p. 44)
- People tend not to notice less, but they are more likely to notice when something is added.
- Although we can develop competence by subtracting, it is harder to show competence by subtracting. When we transform things, we like to demonstrate these accomplishments to the world (e.g., parents, children, bosses, competitors, colleagues). (p. 129)
- We tend to add things when designing solutions to feel like we contributed to the final result.
- Things in existence must be there for a reason; who am I to question the designers! (p. 24)
- We are more averse to losses than we are attracted to gains. Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman published a paper (1979) that demonstrates that we value things we have more than things we do not have. They showed that when people lose \$100, the emotion they feel for the loss is greater than the level of emotion they feel when they gain \$100. This explains our aversion to loss. (p. 167)
- Brain imaging confirms that losses and gains stimulate different circuits in our brains. Marketers use this knowledge to their advantage. When you test drive a car, you identify more with it than when you just look at it in the showroom.
- It takes more work to create shorter works. To write a shorter phrase, we need to write it first then we need to spend time editing it. (p. 143)
- Words Matter: The words Subtract, Less, Reduce, and other synonyms have a negative connotation whereas Addition, More, Increasing, and other synonyms are regarded as positive.
- Busy-ness has become a badge of honor; “it is a boast, disguised as a complaint.” (p. 120)

Risks of Ignoring Subtraction (Examples)

- We have exceeded the carrying capacity of the earth; it is unable to support the current population of 8 billion people and their related consumption. For our planet to be more sustainable for the future, we need to think about subtraction as a viable and preferred option.
- Building new highways reduces traffic in the short-term, long-term traffic and pollution increase.
- Focusing on GDP inadvertently places greater value on things like building prisons, cleaning up after hurricanes and oil spills, and inefficient government spending. Many things reflective of a healthy society are not captured in GDP; therefore, they are undervalued. E.g., GDP does not capture improvements in the environment, health, or quality of life. (p. 218)
- We limit opportunities to make our lives more fulfilling, our institutions more effective, and our planet more sustainable when we fail to think about subtraction as the preferred option. (p. 13)
- Our brains can only hold a limited amount of information in working memory – we need to limit the number of steps and key information to focus on the what's essential. There are biological limits to how much information we can process simultaneously. Devoting our info processing to one situation means it is not available to be used elsewhere at the same time. (p. 226)

- A poverty of attention is not good for learning. Too much information does not just tax students' bandwidth, it can make them believe that cheating is the only option to meet all the demands. (p. 230)
- Too much information threatens our mental health and adversely affects our ability to make decisions. We are faced with too many interruptions and experience anxiety from too many choices. When we are confronted with too many options, we become paralyzed. (pp. 225-226)
- Results of the 2017 Gallup/Knight Foundation Survey on Trust, Media, and Democracy show that most Americans believe it is now harder to be well-informed and to determine which news is accurate, despite the plethora of information and sources available.

Approaches to Embrace Subtraction (Ideas to Get You Started)

- Embrace subtraction and regard less as more. Less is an end-state; subtracting is the act of getting there. (p. 24)
- The more we stimulate the pathways in the brain to subtract, the more often we will consider this option.
- Persist: Be on the lookout for ways subtraction is already in use. Overcome the default response to add by seeing subtracting as an option. (p. 251)
- Reframe: Instead of thinking of subtraction as synonymous with less; replace with more positive words (essentialism, create joy, create spaciousness, clean, reveal). (p. 167)
- Expand: Think Improv – Replace Add OR Subtract with Add AND Subtract.
- Invert: Try less before more. Identify the essential activities and eliminate the rest (e.g., Triage in Emergency Room). (p. 191, p. 250)
- Look for opportunities to re-use the subtractions (e.g., doughnut holes). (p.196)
- Focus on the larger system (Kurt Lewin, Donella Meadows) and the humans using it. (p.174, p. 188)
- Visioning. Make invisible and distant changes more noticeable. People who saw aged images of themselves saved more money than those who didn't. (p. 214).
- Remove barriers. Consistent with Kurt Lewin's Three-Step Change Model (Unfreeze: Change: Refreeze). To achieve the desired behavior change it is necessary to remove barriers and constraints. This approach is more effective than rewarding good behavior and punishing bad behavior. (p. 179)

In Our Favor

- Synaptic pruning: Our brains "clean up" unused connections between neurons. By getting rid of less useful synaptic connections, we can devote more energy and space to other things and also free up more space to learn new things. (p. 71)
- Working memory: A brief list of items is more cognitively accessible than a long list. When dealing with complex systems, we need to refrain from overloading our working memory. To find the essence, we need to subtract. (p. 187)
- Through repetition, we can increase our capacity to consider subtraction as a viable option.
- When we subtract to make improvements, we are more likely to end up with a new and improved system. (p. 197)

Personal Challenge

- What can you do to bring subtraction into your personal life and in your professional work?

About the Book Club In this monthly club, a presenter shares highlights from a book related to leadership, business, neuroscience, or coaching. Membership is not required, and there's no obligation to pre-read the book. This discussion summary is intended to provide a recap of the conversation at Book Club, rather than serve as a thorough book summary. [Register here](#) for upcoming events. For the full set of discussion summaries, [click here](#).