



INTRODUCTION

I SPENT THE first half of my youth in a treehouse, or at least that is where my mind lived. While the neighborhood children rode bicycles, played board games, and paged through storybooks, I perched in my treehouse thinking about how I could make it better.

I'd look up into the upper branches of that big maple tree and wonder which of them could hold another seat, one high among the leaves that could be reached by an interesting progression of winding wooden slats, or one that would allow me to see farther across the neighborhood. You never knew who or what was out there, or how it would feel to be tucked up among the leaves with a lot of sky overhead and human activity below. That is, until you put those ideas into motion. Every year I figured out a new design. Then my brother set to work building it.

I don't wish to suggest I never rode bicycles, played board games, or read books. While I enjoyed those activities, my mind

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was forever pulled by the dreams of how could I create an environment that was more satisfying, useful, or compelling. I was a rather shy kid, and I noticed most of my friends found their bicycles and board games more interesting than my ideas. That made me nervous. Yet I continued to dream. Dreams fed me. Even better was actualizing them.

Cut to a few decades later. It was just after lunch. My blood sugar had peaked and was spiraling downward into a midafternoon lull. I sat in a small, sunny office opposite the CEO of a large, well-known company. We were exchanging random thoughts and anecdotes as we waited for the rest of the meeting attendees to assemble. At one point, we talked about what it was like to have a moment of stability when at least some of the trains were running on time.

It felt good to get to a place where not all actions required a major negotiation due to lack of procedures. Then we stopped, both of us sounding a little bored. The CEO said, “Every time I feel things starting to get calm, I have to turn them on their edge.”

I chuckled. “Yes, and every time you do that, my life becomes insane.” He let out one of his signature volcanic laughs.

I spent four years navigating Jeff Bezos’ constant shifts in direction as we experimented with the new global business model called ecommerce. Our post-lunch conversation took place in 2001. I had been at Amazon for three years as its first global real estate executive. My job was to capture the company strategy and convert it into bricks and mortar, no easy matter when the company strategy traveled at the speed of bits and bytes and real estate travels at the speed of bricks.

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The asynchronicity of the two worlds posed major challenges. At the same time, I thrived on it. The comment Bezos made to me resonated deeply. There was something familiar about the unease that comes with trying a new idea and then embarking on the adventure to see it through.

Finding and Avoiding Our Leadership Edge

During thirty-five years of business life, I have met many people like me. They showed up in every industry, geography, and size of organization. What we shared was a hunger to raise the game, take chances, and move things into a better future for our organizations. Our yearning often landed us in leadership roles, taking us through many unmarked pathways. We had an idea of where we wanted to end up, but until we got there, the outcome was unknown. Not knowing was scary, and scary was okay.

What we also shared, along the way, was how we inevitably tripped over our own blind spots and landed in box canyons we pretended weren't there. In reality, they were places to escape from the discomfort of not knowing whether our dreams would turn out. Eventually, with the help of intervening events, conversations, or moments of self-reflection, our hunger to see a new idea come to fruition took over. It allowed us to push past our discomfort to make our dreams come true, or find new ones that worked better.

The Journey of Not Knowing Book

This book explores the deep influence of the unknown on leadership and its critical importance to leadership success. It is organized into five parts.

PART 1: What Amazon Taught Me about Leadership and the Unknown. The genesis of this book came from my experiences and those of many others who have taken on leadership roles. The book opens with a personal story from my life at Amazon, and how the experiences there crystallized for me the fundamental linkage between leadership and the unknown. What we don't know, whether it is something about the environment in which we work or something that resides inside of us, can either drive us or get in the way.

PART 2: Leadership and the Unknown. While the unknown has always been relevant to leaders, the twenty-first century has upped the ante, as no one knows what is coming next. It is hard to hold all that anxiety. Many leaders deal with it by simply avoiding what they don't know. By doing so, they miss the opportunities in what they don't know but could find out to the benefit of their organizations and themselves. Part 2 describes the relevance of the unknown to leadership and a brief description of the Journey of Not Knowing principles.

PART 3: Arrow, Inc.: One Day in March. The Arrow, Inc., story comprises the bulk of the book. The narrative describes one business day in the lives of the leadership team at Arrow, Inc. While Arrow is a fictional company, its characters will be familiar to anyone who has worked with executive teams. During that day, to win a project with Porter, a new client critical to its

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business, the Arrow leadership team has to explain why a former client fired them.

None of the eight members of the Arrow leadership team knows the answer. In fact, until Porter asked its question, each has managed to avoid figuring out what happened. The Porter request forces the team to push through defensive and highly ineffective behaviors to solve the mystery of what they did not know about the former client. They also have to learn how their individual behaviors prevented them from unearthing the answer earlier.

PART 4: The Journey of Not Knowing Model. To start you on your own Journey of Not Knowing to more successful leadership, I have included a roadmap of the Journey of Not Knowing principles and examples from the Arrow story as to how they apply to its characters.

The roadmap represents the foundation of the Journey of Not Knowing leadership development program (<http://www.journeyofnotknowing.com/>). During the past six years, hundreds of executives from around the globe have participated in the program. They come from a wide diversity of large, medium, and small companies, including Microsoft, Mead Johnson, Philips, and King/Z2. The many participants with whom Journey program leaders have had the honor of working have further informed its principles and their application to the organizational world.

PART 5: The Reward of Taking the Journey: One Night at Amazon in Late December 1999. The final part of this book explains the value of taking the Journey and concludes with a second personal story from my Amazon days that took place on

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December 23, 1999. It describes what I uncovered as an important personal guiding principle that not only got me through that year at Amazon, but also laid the foundation for the Journey of Not Knowing.

As will be revealed, the Arrow story illustrates that uncovering the truth about an organization and oneself releases the great potential that comes from confronting the unknown. It also demonstrates the loss of opportunity when ignored. That evolution is the Journey of Not Knowing.