Radical Learning Thinking

Idea In Short

Some problems do not yield to practice, patience, and small corrections. A firm facing a collapsing business model, a leader whose old playbook no longer works, or a student whose picture of the world blocks new ideas all need something different: a restructuring of the frame itself. Radical learning thinking names that kind of change. It draws on Thomas Kuhn's account of paradigm shifts, Jack Mezirow's work on transformative learning, and research on conceptual change. This article explains what radical learning is, why it is hard, how it is triggered, and how leaders can support it responsibly without confusing dramatic gestures with real understanding.

A regional bank spends five years improving its branch network. Wait times shrink, satisfaction scores climb, and costs fall. Meanwhile, customers quietly move their money to apps that never needed branches at all. Every improvement was real, and every one was aimed at the wrong target. No amount of polishing the old model could have shown the leaders what the new one required.

Learning that replaces the frame

Radical learning describes change in which people drop or rebuild the structures they use to understand a situation. It is different from adding facts or fixing errors. The learner does not only know more. The learner sees the problem differently.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on Thomas Kuhn offers a useful picture at the level of science. The entry explains that in normal periods, science is driven by adherence to a paradigm, which supplies puzzles to solve and tools for solving them. Crisis arises when confidence is lost in the paradigm's ability to solve worrying puzzles called anomalies, and a revolution follows if a rival paradigm supersedes the old one.1

Organizations follow a similar pattern at smaller scale. A dominant way of seeing the market

defines what counts as a problem and what counts as a solution. Anomalies accumulate, such as unexpected customer behavior or a rival's odd success, and eventually the frame itself comes under pressure.

Why frames resist change

Frames feel like reality, not like choices. Jack Mezirow, the founder of transformative learning theory, described frames of reference as structures of assumptions through which people understand their experiences, and as shapers of expectations, perceptions, and feelings.2

Because people use frames to interpret evidence, evidence alone rarely dislodges them. A leader who believes that customers value personal service will read a drop in branch visits as a temporary dip. The frame filters the data before analysis begins.

Education research shows the same difficulty at the level of individual concepts. The American Psychological Association notes that alternative conceptions tend to be very resistant to instruction because learning entails replacing or radically reorganizing student knowledge, and that ordinary forms of instruction such as lectures and reading are not very successful at overcoming them.3

Adults, including managers, hold such conceptions too. The lesson for leaders is that telling people the right answer is seldom enough.

What triggers transformation

Mezirow proposed that transformation often begins with a disorienting dilemma, an experience that does not fit a person's existing worldview. A summary of the theory says that this dilemma usually arises from a life crisis or major transition, although it may also result from an accumulation of small shifts in meaning over time.4

In organizations, disorienting events include a failed launch, the loss of a major client, a regulatory shock, or a rival's success that the old model cannot explain. These events hurt, and they also open a window. People become willing to question assumptions they once defended.

Leaders can use such moments well. Name the anomaly, invite explanations from several views, and resist the urge to restore the old story quickly. The goal is to stay with the discomfort long enough to examine what it reveals.

Radical change at work

Workplace learning research now treats radical change as a normal feature of working life. An editorial in a special issue on conceptual change at work notes that rapid and radical changes in science, technology, and society may produce new concepts and new workplace practices that require fundamental restructuring of prior knowledge.5

This observation matters because most training assumes steady knowledge. When a field shifts, as when software tools reshape a profession, experienced people may find that their strengths have turned into constraints. Their deep knowledge is organized around a structure that no longer fits.

The cure is not to discard experience. It is to examine which parts of it rest on assumptions that have expired, and to rebuild around new ones.

Supporting radical learning

First, surface assumptions. Ask the team to list what they believe about customers, competitors, and their own strengths. Then ask what evidence would show that each belief is wrong. This simple exercise makes the frame visible, and a visible frame can be questioned.

Second, create safe disorientation. Bring in a customer who has left, a rival's former employee, or an expert from another field, and let them describe the business as they see it. Hearing a different frame helps people notice their own.

Third, invite critical reflection. Mezirow's model includes self-examination and critical assessment of assumptions as central steps. Provide time for journaling, discussion, or coaching, because reflection cannot be rushed.

Fourth, test new ideas in small experiments. A frame changes when people see a new approach working. A pilot with a handful of customers gives evidence without risking the

whole business. In this way, radical learning often uses incremental tools to prove a radical idea.

Radical learning for individuals

Individuals face their own frame shifts. A skilled engineer moving into management must stop measuring success by personal output and start measuring it by the output of others. A founder who becomes a chief executive must give up control of details that built the company. Each change asks the person to rebuild an identity, and effort alone does not accomplish it.

Coaching helps here. A good coach asks questions that expose the old rule, such as "What are you assuming makes you valuable?" and then helps the person test a new rule in small situations. Over a few months, the new frame stops feeling like an imitation and starts to feel natural.

Patience matters. People often show a dip in confidence and performance during the shift, because the old habits no longer work and the new ones are not yet fluent. Leaders who expect the dip can support the person through it instead of reading it as failure.

How radical and incremental fit together

Radical and incremental learning are partners. Incremental learning refines a frame once it is in place, and radical learning replaces the frame when it no longer fits. Most organizations spend years in the first mode and need the second only occasionally.

The skill lies in telling which mode a situation requires. If results are slipping and everyone is working harder at the same methods, ask whether the methods still address the right problem. If a method is sound and execution is weak, practice will help.

A useful test is to ask what a newcomer with no history would build. If the answer looks very different from what you have, the frame deserves a hard look.

A hypothetical example

Imagine a hypothetical publishing house that sells print magazines through subscriptions.

Leaders keep improving print quality, yet readership falls. A new editor invites former subscribers, a game designer, and a data journalist to a workshop, and each describes how they find and use information.

The visit unsettles the team. They realize that readers care about the question being answered, and not the format. Over the next year, they run small pilots with short audio briefings and topic newsletters, and they keep what works. The example is invented, but it shows how outside views, reflection, and cheap experiments can shift a frame.

Cautions

Radical change carries real costs. People may feel anxious, lose confidence, or resist. Support them with clear communication, time, and a sense that their experience still counts.

Beware of theater. A dramatic offsite or a new slogan can feel transformative and leave beliefs untouched. Measure change by what people do differently and by the questions they now ask.

Finally, do not assume that every old frame is wrong. Some frames hold up well, and replacing them wastes effort. Test the frame, gather evidence, and change it only when the evidence points that way.

- 1Thomas Kuhn
- 2Transformative learning: theory to practice
- 3How do I get my students over their alternative conceptions
- 4Transformative learning
- 5Conceptual change and radical change in the work environment

Summary

Radical learning thinking recognizes that some changes require replacing a frame and not polishing it. Kuhn's work on paradigms, Mezirow's work on transformative learning, and research on misconceptions all describe how entrenched structures resist change and what can loosen them. Leaders can help by surfacing assumptions, creating safe disorienting

experiences, and supporting reflection and experiment. Beware of dramatic gestures that leave beliefs untouched, because they feel like progress without delivering it to the people who must change. Pick one belief your team treats as obvious, write the evidence for and against it, and design one small experiment that could show the belief is wrong.