



# The Secrets of Visionary Thinkers

## 5 Steps to Living in Possibility

BY SUSAN ROBERTSON

**W**e tend to believe that famous innovators or other “creative” people have some inherent quality that the rest of us don’t have. But the truth is—they don’t.

They’ve simply cracked the code on how to consistently live in possibility instead of living in obstacle.

Visionary thinkers see possibilities. Always. Most of us mostly see obstacles, most of the time. We move through work, and life, by addressing whatever the next obstacle is that falls into our path. We problem-solve the next issue on a project, we deal with the next customer complaint, we address the next challenge with our kids. But too rarely do we look up, survey the world, and make a conscious choice to shape our world to make it the way we want it to be.

Visionary thinkers make that daily choice—to imagine the possibility of a different world, to hold on to that vision, and to refuse to let the obstacles limit their thinking. They live in possibility.

Visionary thinkers are open-minded, innovative, imaginative, willing to take risks, optimistic, and collaborative—all skills related to creative thinking. They regularly imagine, consider, and pursue new ideas and solutions.

The good news is that all these creative thinking skills are learnable! Anyone can become a more visionary thinker by learning to leverage the creative genius that’s already hidden inside.

One of the primary barriers to living in possibility is the negativity bias, a cognitive bias, or mental shortcut, that all humans share. It’s the phenomenon that negative experiences have a greater impact on our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors than positive experiences do. That seems counterintuitive, but a wealth of research shows that negative affects us more than positive. As a result, we are much more motivated to avoid negative than to seek positive.

Our brains have evolved to excel at identifying potential negative so we can avoid them. It’s a survival mechanism, and it happens in the most primitive part of our brain, the amygdala. The

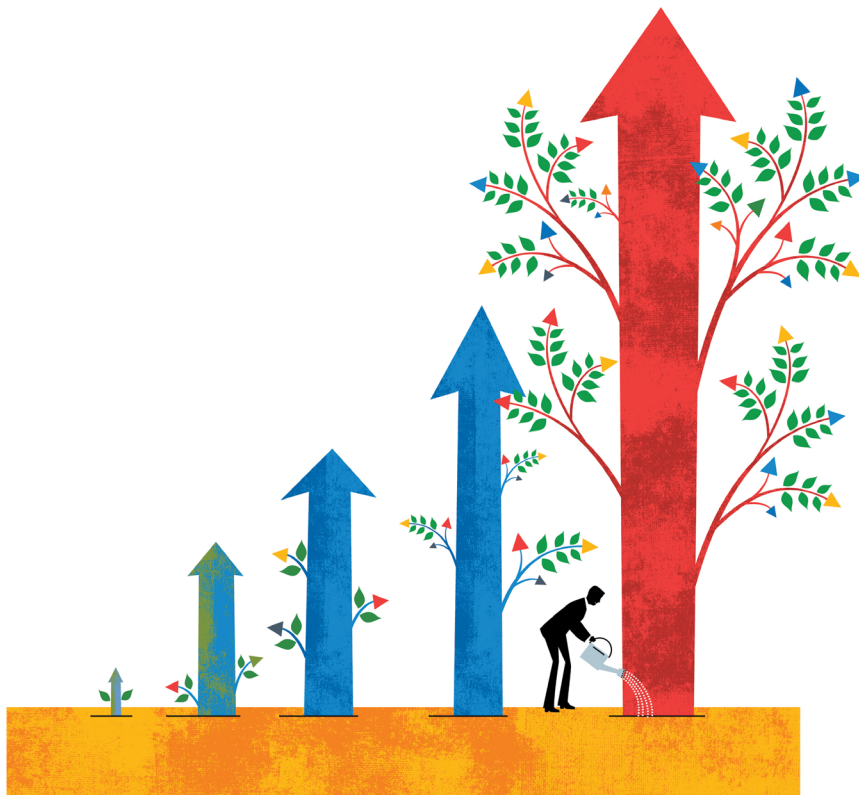
amygdala is responsible for detecting threats and triggering the fight-or-flight response. It’s laser-focused and lightning fast at identifying potential problems. This instant identification of negatives is what can trap us into living in obstacle.

Living in possibility requires refusing to let the negativity bias rule our thinking. There are a few steps that can make a significant impact, helping us manage around this pitfall and transform the way we think.

### #1 Pinpoint the problem.

First, we must be able to spot when the negativity bias is at work. The easiest way to do that is by monitoring one simple phrase: “Yes, but....” On the surface, these words seem innocuous. And because we say them and hear them so frequently, they don’t seem like a problem.

But this short phrase is a massive blockade to creative and visionary thinking. It dismisses any potential positives in an idea or concept before



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even identifying what those positives might be. Instead, it focuses the energy and attention of both the speaker and the listeners on all the possible negatives. This can easily overwhelm any idea and immediately kill it.

## #2 Manage your mind.

Once you've determined the negativity bias is at work (someone said "yes, but..."), the next step is to make a conscious choice to change your thinking. The key is to first identify the potential positives in any idea before focusing on the negatives.

This sounds easy, but it's actually quite hard. It's counter to a basic instinct, so it really does require a conscious choice to think this way,

plus very real discipline to put it into practice regularly.

## #3 Nix the negatives.

The next critical step is to refrain from saying the negatives out loud—not yet anyway. The truth is, regardless that you've consciously chosen to identify the positives first, your brain will subconsciously identify the negatives anyway. It's instinctive and instant. Even while you're enumerating positives, your brain will be busy identifying negatives, too. But the simple trick of not saying those negatives out loud will help dramatically. Force yourself to speak out loud—and write down—the positives first.

## #4 Teach the team.

When working with others, ask them to do the same. Help them understand that letting our natural negativity bias dominate the conversation has the potential to immediately kill any idea. Let everyone know that, of course, there will be a time to solve the problems, but the first task is to identify the potential the idea holds. If there aren't enough potential positives, then it's time to move to a new idea.

But if the idea is visionary and can make a real difference, it's imperative to hold off on the negativity bias momentarily and allow the brilliance of the idea to shine through.

## #5 Transform the troublesome term

Once the above steps have led you to a potentially winning idea, it's time to address the problems with it. To continue to remain in possibility, you must change the conversation; you cannot return to "yes, but..." language.

Instead, articulate the challenges as a "how might we...?" question. So, instead of saying "Yes, but it's too expensive," say, "How might we do it more affordably?" This trick of flipping a problem statement into a problem-solving question is a neuroscience brain hack that will revolutionize your thinking and problem-solving.

This process of identifying positive potential first is the only way to find big ideas. Every successful innovation, in any industry or endeavor, is the result of someone, or a team, choosing to live in possibility in this way.

Visionary thinking requires making space for ideas that, at first, seem scary or difficult. It takes some real courage to push past our immediate "yes, but..." response and instead focus the conversation on "what if...?" If we don't hold ourselves accountable to looking for the positives, we'll never consider or implement any truly new ideas. Visionary thinkers must master this skill and learn to live in possibility. **■**

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