

Think

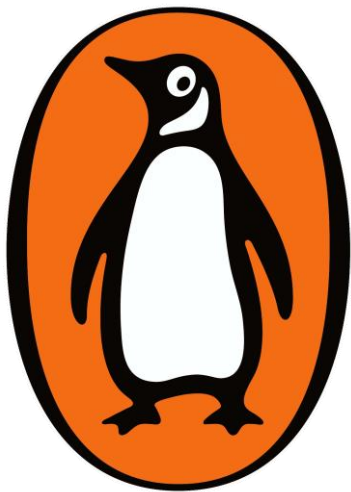


Take Small Steps and Build the Future You Want

DR GRACE LORDAN

'Eloquent and instructive'
ROBERT CIALDINI, AUTHOR OF
INFLUENCE AND PRE-SUASION

*'A host of perceptive, practical tips
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WRITE-ON PAGES

Any references to *'writing in this book'* refer to the original printed version. *Readers should write on a separate piece of paper in these instances.*

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About the Author

Dr Grace Lordan is the Founding Director of The Inclusion Initiative (TII), Director of the MSc in Behavioural Science and an Associate Professor in Behavioural Science at the London School of Economics. An economist by background, her research is focused on understanding why some individuals succeed in life and others don't. She is an expert on the effects of unconscious bias, discrimination and technology changes. Grace is an expert advisor to the UK government, sitting on their skills and productivity board. Her academic writings have been published in top international journals in economics and the broader social sciences. This is her first book.

Think Big

‘Insights from Behavioural Science are being used around the globe for a variety of purposes but never, until now, for career building – something Grace Lordan does systematically, eloquently and instructively in *Think Big*’ Robert Cialdini, author of *Influence* and *Pre-Suasion*

‘This is a rare self-help book that’s actually informed by evidence. Drawing on her knowledge of behavioural economics and psychology, Grace Lordan shares a host of perceptive, practical tips for getting out of your own way and making progress towards your career goals’ Adam Grant, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Think Again* and *Originals*, and host of the TED podcast *WorkLife*

‘Want to advance your career fast without compromising personal happiness? *Think Big* can help. It provides a handy, science-driven framework to career-building that can fit around even the busiest person’s daily life’ Jonah Berger, Wharton Professor and bestselling author of *The Catalyst*

‘On your journey to thinking big – about yourself and about the world – Grace Lordan is a wise and winning guide. She’s written the ultimate primer on enlisting modest changes to achieve monumental goals’ Daniel H. Pink, author of *When, Drive* and *To Sell is Human*

‘Dr Grace Lordan has created one of the most important books anyone can read to help their working life. Anchored with behavioural science she shows how all of us can move towards our ambitions while fighting back worries and self-doubts’ Bruce Daisley, author of *The Joy of Work*

‘In this must-read book, Grace equips you with the know-how required to take your career to the next level. This book will not only inspire you to

think bigger, but to take immediate action in turning those dreams of yours into reality. When you think big and start taking small, consistent steps forward each day, anything becomes possible!' Simon Alexander Ong

'If you know it's time to aim higher in your career, *Think Big* provides a clear and compelling behavioural science toolkit to help you realize your goals and replace your current reality with something bigger, better and more enjoyable' Dorie Clark, author of *Reinventing You* and teacher in the executive education faculty, Duke University Fuqua School of Business

'Engaging, practical and insightful. Reading *Think Big* is like having a savvy performance coach sat inside your head, helping correct your path towards the career you really want' Graham Allcott, founder of Think Productive

*Dedicated to my mum, Rita. Love
always – Grace.*



CHAPTER 1

Begin

It's not hard to picture someone who isn't enjoying their job ...

Imagine Katie. Katie left university, where she'd studied history, and entered a graduate training programme at a big advertising company. She showed a particular adeptness at marketing, and at the end of her placement she was offered a full-time position. Katie seemed to thrive in this role. At the time, social media marketing was in the ascendency, and Katie quickly grasped how she could make it work for her clients – mainly large food companies. A few big coups followed: a prizewinning campaign here, a new client there, and she was promoted. Then she was promoted again. Her twenties were flying by, and Katie seemed to be flying, too. Now, at thirty-five, Katie is in charge of a global team that delivers online marketing solutions to some of the world's biggest food production companies. She is well-liked by her colleagues, has an amazing salary, and is the envy of her social circle.

But Katie hates her job. Like many others, she fell into her profession. Katie feels she should be having the time of her life, but she's totally miserable. Something has to change. But what?

Katie represents those who on the surface seem to have it all figured out, but really yearn for something different. Katie could do with disrupting her work life and thinking bigger.

And Katie isn't the only type of person that needs to think bigger ...

Imagine Reyansh, who dropped out of university. He always intended to go back but never did, and instead bounced around a few different jobs in the service industry. He's been a barman and a waiter, but has found a niche as a barista. For the last couple of years he's been working in a coffee shop, and since joining, the coffee shop's fiercely loyal clientele has steadily grown. Reyansh makes a decent cup of coffee, but that's not why the coffee shop is doing so well. The reason people come back is because of Reyansh. He's funny, he's charming, and sometimes – because it's sunny, or he likes your coat – he gives you free coffee. (Though the owner cheerfully berates

him for this.) Reyansh isn't the quickest barista on the books – he's usually too busy chatting – and there is supposed to be a loyalty card scheme to administer freebies. But everybody can see that Reyansh adds inordinate value to the business. He's a great shift supervisor, he's brilliant at teaching trainees, and even the crankiest, most difficult customers leave the shop smiling.

But Reyansh isn't satisfied. Being a barista is fine, but it was always intended as a stop gap. For one thing, the pay isn't great. For another, while making coffee and hanging out with people is fun, he craves something deeper and more meaningful from his work.

Reyansh personifies people that fail to launch within the specific time period society expects of them. It can be daunting to launch later than your peers, particularly when you don't have a clear idea of what your passion is. Reyansh could do with thinking bigger, bringing his future self forward and identifying a more satisfying career pathway.

And Reyansh isn't the only type of person who needs to reimagine where their career is going ...

Imagine Juan, who is working happily in an investment bank. He likes his work and his colleagues, and is perfectly fine with the 50+ hour working week. Juan now manages a team of ten people, and takes great effort to bring them along. He is a mid-level manager. Over the last five years he has seen members of his team advance within the organization relatively quickly, two of whom have been promoted over him. Juan genuinely wishes them well, but he cannot understand why his own progress has stalled. He is growing disillusioned but keeps smiling on the outside.

Juan is a good example of people who plateau despite craving advancement. He could do with rethinking how he approaches the next few years of his career, so he can move beyond his plateau.

So Katie is miserable, Reyansh has failed to launch and Juan has plateaued. Perhaps you picked up this book because you're facing a similar problem.

Maybe you know where you want to be in your career, but you don't know how to get there. Maybe you don't even know that – you simply know that you aren't where you're supposed to be right now. Or maybe you feel as though you know where you want to go, and know, on paper, how to get there, but somebody else is preventing you from doing it – a bad boss, say, or an unhelpful colleague.

Fear not.

This book is going to help you take small steps to build the career you want, and it's going to show you how to do that using insights from behavioural science.

Drawing from multiple disciplines, behavioural science seeks to understand why people make the choices they do, and also identifies easy tweaks that we can make to our environment to get different outcomes. Behavioural science can help explain why people stumble in their career journeys. It can also help explain why some aren't entering the race in the first place, and why others drop out at the first sight of failure. Behavioural science teaches us that we should think big and set a goal for our future. It also teaches us that by taking regular small steps today that support this big thinking, we can get to where we want to go.

As a professor of behavioural science at the London School of Economics, whether I am teaching masters' and executive-level students or giving talks to industry, I always want one fact to land: the research I do into human behaviour helps explain why an outcome they want is not materializing.

I'm going to do the same in this book. I will explain why the outcome you've been working towards might not have materialized yet, and I'll also show you how to *overcome* these obstacles. I will blend my own original insights with research from the frontiers of behavioural science, and draw on lessons from the fields of economics, psychology and management to empower you to build the career you want. While I have changed the names and other identifying information of the people whose stories I tell in this book, the substance of their experiences is real. You may even see yourself in some of them.

Perhaps you are starting a business, or closing a business. Perhaps you are starting university, or thinking of dropping out. Maybe you are vying for a promotion, or wishing for a lateral move across divisions in your company. You could be one of the many people who are uninspired by their working lives and in need of change.

Regardless what role, industry or stage of career you are in, I guarantee you'll find valuable lessons in these pages that will help you think big about your future and visualize a big-thinking goal. To help you achieve this goal, the book will also focus on identifying the regular small steps you will take to achieve your ambitions. And just as important are the behavioural science insights that will help you stick to taking these small steps, and to

circumvent or navigate around biases and other obstacles that get in your way on your big-thinking journey.

HOW I ENDED UP WHERE I AM TODAY

In December 2011, I moved to the LSE as a lecturer. I was full of enthusiasm, excitement and expectation. About six months into my new role, I had a conversation with a professor in my external network who I really admired and respected. As we discussed the next steps in my career, he told me that it would take at least five years to become a senior lecturer, and that even that trajectory was highly unlikely.

I was devastated to hear it would take me that long. I felt like a deflated balloon. If I were a cartoon drawing, there would have been a black cloud hanging over my head. After the shock of the news, I internalized the feedback from Professor Negativity and hit a plateau. I even started going backwards. My enthusiasm for my research waned; I couldn't work productively. I dwelled on how mediocre I was compared to others.

The professor's comments became a self-fulfilling prophecy. A prediction like this, from a respected source, causes itself to become true – because whoever is impacted by the prediction believes it, and changes their behaviour accordingly. In this case, a supposed mentor's beliefs about my abilities negatively affected my performance as I lived *down* to their expectations.

But this professor did not know me well. Actually, he did not know me at all.

That realization came to me in the middle of one sleepless night, like a slap in the face. Professor Negativity had created a narrative about me which was false. Like a fairy tale, it was based on archetypes. These archetypes were constructed from inaccurate social norms about people like 'Grace'. People can confuse my relaxed demeanour for the attitude of somebody who doesn't take their career seriously. Or perhaps my admission that I found it difficult to finish projects had caused him to label me as someone who would never finish a project. Equally, women in economics are still a rare breed in academia, and even rarer still as you advance through the ranks. Maybe my unusual path to academia – with no stop at an Ivy League institution on the way – meant he assigned a lower probability to me ever being successful. Who knows?

One thing I realized that night was that he was wrong. I was also certain that his narrative about me had been constructed because of the professor's own cognitive biases and blind spots.

But what could I do?

One simple change I could make right then and there was to get a different mentor. So I did just that. In fact, I found three. I listened carefully to what they all had to say. This process was really important, as I truly believe in listening to feedback. I also believe that if everyone says you are dead, you should lie down. If, for instance, they had all told me the same thing as Professor Negativity – that I would be very unlikely to make senior lecturer within five years – it would have been wise to listen, and up my game. But they didn't. In fact, none of Professor Negativity's sentiments were repeated. Ever.

So what happened five years later? Well, I had already been promoted to associate professor (which is a higher grade than senior lecturer), and was writing a CV that would see me promoted to professor. I had far surpassed my expectations: I had my dream job, with a clear progression path. I also avoided Professor Negativity at conferences.

Perhaps more importantly, though, I was happier. I didn't have that black cloud over my head. But things would have been very different if I had continued to internalize the first feedback I heard as a hard reality. Things would have been different if I hadn't navigated around that obstacle.

I was lucky. At the time, I was conducting research about precisely these kinds of obstacles. I used myself as a laboratory as I furthered my understanding of the study of human behaviour. I was becoming a behavioural scientist.

These days, you can find me in Connaught House at the London School of Economics, where I am an associate professor of behavioural science, well on my way to becoming a professor. I am a director of the new MSc in Behavioural Science, and also the director and founder of The Inclusion Initiative at the LSE. My research seeks to understand why people choose the jobs they do, and why some people have more success than others in getting to where they want to go. My findings demonstrate clearly that while some factors on our career journey are not within our control, a lot of others are. This has led me to advise many business leaders, helping them find ways to level the playing field for their employees, to ensure they are rewarded based on ability, skills and talent alone.

This book, though, looks at the problem from the other way around. It is about empowering individuals to think bigger, and enabling them to build the career they want through taking regular small steps.

WHAT HOLDS US BACK?

While having big dreams is easy, making them happen is hard. Navigating working life today is tricky, and the skills we need are always changing. Advances in technology and increasing globalization are shaping the type of work that is available at a pace. More of us find ourselves working in winner-takes-all arenas. From the traditional workplace to the modern-day start-up, the people who are perceived to be the best at what they do get extraordinary rewards, while those who rank just a quarter percentile point below them get rewards that are much more ordinary.

It can feel exhausting if you are striving to get to a specific finishing line. It can be even worse if you are working really hard but have no direction or end goal in mind. Many of us sacrifice self-care in the quest for success. We miss family events, health check-ups, forget special occasions and more. If we are putting our well-being and happiness at risk, surely we should be rewarded according to our impact, skills, abilities and talent? Otherwise the risks we are taking don't have fair pay-offs.

So we put in the effort and enhance our skills. These newly acquired skills produce something amazing: breakthrough research, an innovative strategy, or a product that everyone will be better off from having. We are then rewarded in kind. Right?

Unfortunately, the process which determines who gets what reward and why is not exact, and is often unfair. Great new products fail daily, real talent goes unnoticed, and valuable innovations are cast aside. Cognitive biases are often the reason why our ideas falter and careers stall. These biases have likely impacted you and your career over and over and over again. They may even be so blatant they bring you to tears when you notice them. It is frustrating when people who can influence your career progression reveal blind spots that make the journey longer and – even worse – less enjoyable. You may grow disheartened when narratives of 'this is how we do things around here' stand in the way of your innovative ideas, or you have to waste time in endless discussions driven by bureaucracy, red tape and lobbying. You may find yourself getting grumpy when you witness biases hindering the career progression of extraordinary and intelligent

people in your own workplace just because they didn't go to one of the top schools, aren't part of the right networks or don't have the right look.

But it's not just about other people – the influence of cognitive bias is not isolated to the actions (or inactions) of others. *Our own* cognitive biases hold us back, too.

You may consider yourself a good decision-maker. You always put thought into the choices that you make. You don't allow emotions to rule your head. You're pretty logical, right?

Wrong.

Behavioural science has proven beyond doubt that, most of the time, our decision-making is badly hampered by cognitive biases and blind spots, regardless of how good we think we have been in our deliberations. We often hold a belief that we are acting purposefully when we aren't. We aren't as rational as we think.

How can our own cognitive biases hold us back at work? Well, for those of you who are working for a large company, ask yourself why you aren't going for a promotion next year. Is it because you haven't fulfilled the requirements, or (as is the case most of the time) are the promotion criteria unclear and you want to make sure that you more than exceed them?

Take a step back. What is the rational decision?

If I am rational, I want to get the benefits of a promotion as soon as I can. I want the extra income, the status, and the proverbial monkey off my back. In the case of criteria being unclear, then shouldn't I go for promotion even earlier? I should take a chance, right?

But maybe I'm placing too much weight on the cost of being rejected instead.

If this applies to you, a cognitive bias is holding you back. You are overestimating the costs of getting turned down (the rejection, the pain, the embarrassment and so on) and underestimating the benefits of potentially being successful.

For most of us, the anticipation of rejection is so bad that we don't put our hat in the ring as often as we should. We anticipate the rejection as being too awful to even consider facing it. However, the actual experience of the rejection is not as bad as we anticipate. And there are silver linings, too. For me, rejection tends to involve a good glass of red wine and some chocolate to accompany the pep talk I give myself before trying again. Most

importantly, we learn a lot from trying and failing. It is a life experience, in and of itself.

Let me use another example. Do you hate your current job and dream about setting up a business? Maybe you have a cool product idea, but you break out in a cold sweat when thinking about not having a regular pay cheque for the foreseeable future. So you carry on with your long commute, and worry vaguely that your true calling is passing you by.

Is this rational? Are you looking at the decision as all or nothing? Are you underestimating the cost of regret? Are you taking into account the costs of 'what if?' when you are eighty years old and haven't followed your dreams?

Our own cognitive biases hold us back. In fact, for most of us, *this is the main problem*. If I am truly self-reflective, I would put the ratio at 80 (me): 20 (others). I have stuck with projects far too long after I should have binned them. This makes me a victim of the **sunk cost fallacy**, which is the tendency to continue only because of previously invested resources. I have also grossly underestimated how long it will take me to do some of the most basic tasks, falling victim to the **planning fallacy**, which rears its head when we believe our pursuits will always follow the best-case scenario. At various phases in my career I have felt like an imposter when putting myself forward, despite having the credentials and the experience to make me a pretty solid bet. It is telling that even those that are aware of **imposter syndrome** fall into its trap. I have also procrastinated for endless periods (including when writing this book), to avoid feeling the pinch of failure or rejection.

To recognize that we are part of the cause of a prolonged career journey that stumbles, stalls, reverses and even edges near a cliff for periods of time is actually quite freeing. The acknowledgement of the possibility that *our own* biases hold us back allows us to be proactive. Looking at the above ratio, I can take control of 80 per cent of those cognitive biases. Doing so will have a huge impact on how my career progresses. And this is true for you, too – albeit your ratios may be different.

From today, I want you to take control of your career journey, and use behavioural science insights to help you identify and pursue a new bigthinking goal, or to get across the finish line and realize a long-term dream.

WHEN WILL I GET THERE?

When we think big, it can be tempting to put an exact deadline for completion on our new journey. I want you to avoid doing that. Everyone's journey is going to be a function of a combination of talent, effort and luck. You can put in effort and hone talent, but you cannot control luck. What I am certain of is that you are going to go on a careertransformation journey, and it is going to take years.

Yes, that's right ... years!

For some of you it will be two years, for others five years ... and if you are aiming to be the leader of a country, the CEO of a big company or create the next path-breaking product, it may even be ten.

But don't panic! There is plenty to enjoy along the way. You will not be waiting years to realize gains. In fact, I am certain you will experience growth almost straight away. Like a road trip from New York to San Francisco, there are key milestones, moments when you just enjoy the view, and lots of fun, exciting experiences to be had en route.

The point of a road trip isn't simply to arrive somewhere else; the journey itself is rewarding, too.

Equally, there will be times in your career journey when you get a flat tyre or hit roads where there is nothing worth seeing. You may also choose to take a break to allow for other key life events. If you buy a book that promises you a new destination – or a major life change – in one week or one month, I hope it's refundable. We all have the potential to achieve great things, but if it were that easy, everyone would be doing it.

Unless you are in a situation where you can upend your entire life, you need to get real and realize that big thinking is a medium-term expedition. We should view this expedition as medium-term because it will take years rather than days, weeks or months, but at the same time it will not take most of your adult life to complete it. This approach also allows for a great work–life balance. It is not do-or-die; if you don't get it right every single day, it's not the end of the world. And having a good work–life balance should be central to the pursuit of any big-thinking goal.

As a thought experiment, cast your mind back to the person you were five years ago. Make a mental note of any major changes you have experienced in your life since then. The major changes do not have to be work-related; they can include relationship changes, a bereavement,

moving country, having children, starting and finishing a degree, losing a significant amount of weight, running a marathon, etc. Do you think that your personality changed? Do you think that your ability to handle situations changed? Did you change how you physically dress or wear your hair? Make a list of all the notable changes you can recall. Now, make a list of the changes you think you will make in the *next* five years.

I do this exercise sometimes when I am teaching behavioural science executive students. But rather than asking the group to fill out both columns, I ask them to fill in one column or the other. Every single time, I have found that the lists written by the people who are reflecting on the last five years are much longer, and more ambitious overall, than the lists by those who are thinking forward to the next five years. And these are people who have elected to attend a course for business leaders! By default, they are expecting major future changes, right?

So what gives?

The majority of us see ourselves as having experienced many major changes when we look backwards. However, we also imagine that the next five years will not bring any great or significant change. We assume we will stay more or less the same. But this is simply a behavioural science illusion. Regardless of age, we tend to underestimate the amount we can achieve in the medium term going forward, yet we view ourselves as having made major progress in the medium term in the past!¹

So our future selves are underachievers; and, in contrast, our past selves are overachievers. Imagine what could have been achieved if you had consciously set a big-thinking goal for the last two, five or even ten years and committed to small steps to achieve it? Rather than striving for the next pay cheque, the next pay rise or the next promotion, you could have aimed for something bigger. You could have aimed for something different. You could have been striving for something you really wanted. Believe me: thinking big and taking small steps that support your ideas can reinvent you!

But, as humans, we are impatient. We generally favour a lofty goal over short periods because we are excited to walk in the shoes of our improved selves sooner rather than later. And that's pretty understandable. But it also sets us up for failure. Very often we can't make the changes that we need to over the short term without completely restructuring our lives. Voices in your head start shouting that it's too hard, that you are unhappy and life is too short. So you quit. And when you do so, you learn a lesson:

you are a quitter. Next time you plan a life change, you are reminded that you are a quitter – so why even bother starting something?

When thinking big, it is never all or nothing. Regular small positive actions have a disproportionately large positive effect on major life outcomes.

Have you ever tried to lose weight over a short period by cutting carbs only to fall off the wagon ... by eating a wagon loaded with pasta? It's the same phenomenon. Or maybe there is some long-standing New Year's resolution that you always make but never keep to? Quitting smoking, reading more, drinking less alcohol? Maybe every 31 December you pledge to overhaul your career, but come 31 January you are back on autopilot wishing for the weekend. All too often, by the end of January we lack the energy and motivation to follow through on our best-laid plans. That's because short-term goals set most of us up for long-term failure.

We are creatures of routine. The easiest way to ensure that you do not achieve a goal is to jump in too quickly. Of course, there are always exceptions to this rule – I'm sure you've read plenty of stories of people who turned their life around in two weeks. But we don't infer a trend from an anomaly. Besides, if you scratch the surface, you might find their story is much more complicated. Behind a spectacular two-week turnaround there's often years of structured and sustained effort. It is this effort that causes the success. It doesn't make for a neat newspaper headline or an exciting party anecdote – but it's the truth.

In most cases, the person who is deemed an overnight success has long been quietly honing their craft and creating opportunities so they can finally be recognized for their expertise.

There is real truth in the saying: 'Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.'

Setting your sights on a medium-term horizon of two, five or even ten years allows for real change. It is also a sweet spot: you will not feel a significant drop in happiness if you begin with small steps that are peppered into your usual routine. Your efforts will not disrupt your schedule too aggressively, but these small steps still accumulate, and add up to something big. This is a key insight from behavioural science: