

Breaking the mold of management models

Executives are notoriously in love with frameworks or models. But could they be doing more harm than good? Here we examine three classic business issues from fresh angles. Time to break the spell of the tried-and-tested model.



September 15, 2022

By Roger Martin

Five forces, CAPM, the 4 P's: We in business education frequently teach such frameworks, practices, theories — what I call “models” for short — and executives and managers use them habitually until, over time, they become embedded in our psyches. When one model rises to the top, it becomes the received business wisdom that no one ever questions. To question it is difficult: It means you would have to come up with a new, better model from scratch. It's also socially risky: Who are *you* to challenge what everyone else holds to be

true? It should come as no surprise, therefore, that when one of these models doesn't seem to work, rather than reject the model, we will instead blame ourselves for failing to apply it correctly. So, we go back and apply the same model again, this time more vigorously, hoping for a better result.

To be clear, I'm not against models per se. There's a reason why, in the battle of ideas, one model emerges as dominant because, in a certain context, it has been proven to work. As a species, human beings like models: They are handy shortcuts to help us live our lives. If we can apply a known and accepted way of thinking to a familiar problem that others have faced before, then it saves us time and effort and is a lot less daunting than us trying to figure it out for ourselves.

But my four decades as a strategy adviser have taught me that there are some situations in which applying a model simply doesn't work, and to do so is the well-known definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. I come from the Karl Popper/Imre Lakatos school of falsification. I don't believe there are right or wrong answers, just better or worse ones, and if presented with a model, I prefer to ask: Why does it work? Does it always work? Does it work in this case? And if not, is there a better model out there that would produce results more in keeping with my goals in this new context?

In my latest book, *A New Way to Think*, I take a fresh, critical look at some of the common models used by default in business today and turn them on their heads. I propose alternative ways of approaching the same issue — not 14 “correct” new models, but 14 new or different ways to think about a topic that might expand your range of possibilities and deliver an outcome more effectively than the old model. And I would welcome the next thinker who will improve on my ideas.

For the purposes of this article, let's look at three business areas that I believe require a new way of thinking.

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