

## **Review from Terry Kinnear**

Title: "How Doctors Think"

Author: Jerome Groopman

Publisher: Houghton Mifflin Company

Publication: 2007

Length: 307 pages

Price: \$26.00

Reading time: 6 hours

Reading rating: 5 (1 = very difficult; 10 = very easy)

Overall rating: 3 (1 = average; 4 = outstanding)

Jerome Groopman, M.D., offers insight into how doctors think, acknowledging that medicine is both an art and a science. Management, too, is both an art and a science. Reading this book about addressing medical problems is useful to managers; they can learn much from how doctors both misdiagnose problems and correctly attend to patient symptoms.

Although "How Doctors Think" focuses on health care, it provides managers with a perspective from which they can reflect on their own problem sensing, diagnosing, and solution development.

Groopman addresses doctors' thinking processes as well as their personal characteristics and external forces affecting decision making. He pairs faulty thinking in specific cases with correct diagnosis and treatment of patients, often identifying critical decision points and paths. Ultimately, he addresses why doctors succeed and err, raising points directly applicable to business decision making.

A wide range of doctors and specialties are used in Groopman's research and reporting, including himself as both a decision maker and a patient. He discusses patient characteristics and their role in problem solving. Likewise, it is useful to engage business clients to help determine how to deliver goods and/or services successfully.

The author focuses on how doctors "should" think and points out that "Intellect and intuition, careful attention to detail, active listening, and psychological insight. . ." are of importance, but not always practiced. Is this not also true for managers, where they may be ". . . unaware of their [own] cognitive errors"?

Harvard's Howard Gardner emphasizes the need for managers to think in new ways, pose unfamiliar questions and arrive at fresh answers, as well as put information together sensibly. This process is articulated in Groopman's book and can usefully guide managerial thinking.

Groopman uses a circus performer spinning stacked plates of different shapes and weights as a metaphor for some doctors' experiences. The same applies to the chaos witnessed by managers, who have limited resources and must establish priorities. Both

professions work with incomplete information, experience high levels of uncertainty, and individuals must think while faced with constant interruptions and distractions.

Ron Chernow states Groopman exposes doctors' snap judgments, stereotyping, and submitting to pressure from others. Managers, too, are prone to these behaviors. Medical mistakes affect human beings, and managers similarly err and cause unintentional harm while serving others.

The benefits for managers of "How Doctors Think" are many. The author explains thought processes by which doctors make a correct diagnosis in a given context. They ask questions like, what might be missed and what would be the worst thing missed? This kind of inquiry would serve managers well.

"How Doctors Think" likely has weaknesses, but these are not obvious when applying Groopman's discussion to managing. Individuals in business, with the author's insight, can better reflect on their own decision making and address how errors in thinking can be prevented.

Attention is given to metacognition in the management literature and Donald Schön's classic work on the "reflective practitioner" is pertinent here. Furthermore, managers have much to learn from professions beyond their own.

Being mindful and examining others' thinking processes can be of considerable benefit to business professionals. Hence, practicing managers are urged to read Groopman's book about how others critically think in situations beyond the business sector.

Terry Kinnear is associate professor of management in the College of Business at Western Carolina University. His current professional interests include virtually all topics addressing the well being of people in the workplace. For previously reviewed books, visit the Internet at [www.wcu.edu/cob/](http://www.wcu.edu/cob/).