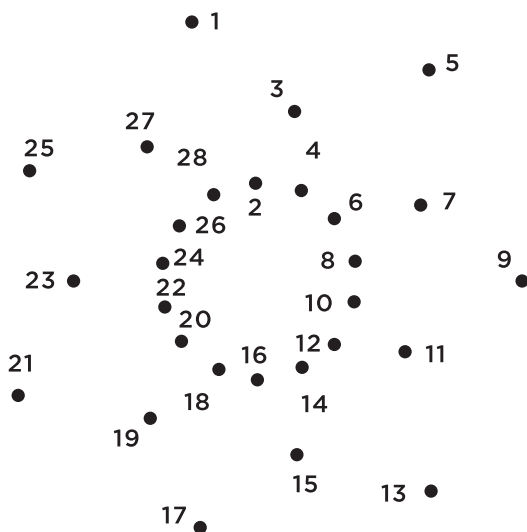


# THINK LIKE A *futurist*

KNOW WHAT CHANGES,  
WHAT DOESN'T, AND **WHAT'S NEXT**



CECILY SOMMERS

# Think Like a Futurist

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Cecily Sommers

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Jacket design: Adrian Morgan  
Author photo: Christopher Everett

Published by Jossey-Bass

A Wiley Imprint

One Montgomery Street, Suite 1200, San Francisco, CA 94104-4594—[www.josseybass.com](http://www.josseybass.com)

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#### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Sommers, Cecily, 1961-

Think like a futurist : know what changes, what doesn't, and what's next / Cecily Sommers. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-118-14782-5 (cloth); ISBN 978-1-118-22585-1 (ebk.); ISBN 978-1-118-23917-9 (ebk.); ISBN 978-1-118-26382-2 (ebk.)

1. Business forecasting. 2. Strategic planning. 3. Diffusion of innovations. 4. New products. 5. Creative thinking. 6. Organizational change. I. Title.

HD30.27.S68 2012

658.4'0355 — dc23

2012026748

Printed in the United States of America

FIRST EDITION

HB Printing 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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# Overcoming Resistance to Change

**R**esistance to change isn't only an external force in your environment. Sometimes the most difficult barriers to overcome are the ones in your own mind, the ones that start with "*But . . .*," followed by a complaint, a justification, a rationalization, an excuse, or any assumption about your circumstances that keeps you from moving forward. Though "*But . . .*"s come in all shapes and sizes, what's so insidious about them is that they keep you thinking and playing small, undermine your commitments and, worst, let you off the hook for doing so.

The key to moving all those big "*But . . .*"s out of the way is, first, to identify the variety of ways they eat away at your commitment and wear you down. "*But . . .*"s generally reflect a decision or an action not yet made, so the best way to diffuse them is to call a "*But . . .*" a "*But . . .*" when it appears, identify the underlying concern, then make a decision to take action in response to the situation.

The following descriptions of "*But . . .*" busters will be helpful for identifying and resolving resistance in yourself, as well as in others. Begin by becoming more aware of your own "*But . . .*"s and identify which patterns of resistance would be fruitful for you to "*bust*" through. Follow up with the relevant "*But . . .*" buster.

Carry this awareness, along with the "*But . . .*"-busting practices, with you as you go through your life. You're sure to find plenty of applications for them: in meetings, when negotiating a deal, and around the Thanksgiving dinner table. "*But . . .*"

busters are small yet powerful ways to, as Mahatma Gandhi advised, “Be the change you wish to see in the world.”

With that in mind, the following tips for overcoming resistance are addressed to you. When appropriate, you’ll find that “But . . .” busters are also useful for helping individuals and groups get unstuck and get moving. *But*, I advise you to use them respectfully, with a light touch. Otherwise, you risk creating the very resistance you wish to diffuse.

### FINDING FAULT (BLAME)

This “But . . .” comes in three varieties: “Something’s wrong with me,” “Something’s wrong with them,” or “Something’s wrong with the world.” All of them express an underlying set of beliefs:

- There’s a defect in me (or them or the world) that is a permanent obstacle to progress.
- I have an idealized view of how I think things *should* be.
- Someone is to blame, and someone (I, my parents, my boss, my partner, the business world, the government, those stupid people . . . ) should fix it.

If you tend toward indignation or hear yourself saying “should” a fair amount or feel your fists reflexively land on your hips, there’s a good chance that your philosophy or beliefs about how things *should* be have the upper hand.

#### **Blame “But . . .” Buster: Reference the Facts, Not the Philosophy**

Too much blaming, *shoulding*, or demonizing is a symptom that your worldview is bumping up against its own limitations and is adapting by “trying harder” (that is, by being more righteous, more rigid). (This profile is common among politicians and social

activists who are energized by the fight and find it difficult to compromise.)

Our beliefs guide us and help us make sense of the world, as do our values and morals. But becoming too attached to an ideology will cloud your ability to see the facts of the situation, which, consequently, will limit your capacity for strategic action.

As you would if you were going through the process in Define, when you look at all the facts in front of you, you want to back up and ask yourself, “What doesn’t make sense to me here?” “What am I not seeing that might help make sense of the situation?” The learning excursion will help you gain a broader perspective and understanding of your situation.

If, in contrast, you’re really in a situation that you just can’t abide, get out.

## ARGUING WITH REALITY (DENIAL)

Being in an argument with reality is a variation of “Something’s wrong here,” the difference being that the argument version is accompanied by an earnest do-gooder intention to change yourself, someone else, or a situation. Again, the underlying belief is that there’s something wrong, but it’s followed by efforts to fix things.

These efforts stem from an overdeveloped sense of responsibility for a situation that is not within your control, a need to mold yourself, others, or the situation into a more idealized version of the truth. An argument with reality is characterized by such thoughts as “If I [they] try harder,” “If only . . . ,” “This is good for me [a growing experience, a trial] . . . ,” or, “I just know I [we, they, it] have the potential to do better!”

### **Denial “But . . .” Buster: Three Strikes**

Trying harder, being open to challenges, and believing in potential are all vital to each of our successes. This philosophy gets in



the way, however, if it starts to work too hard on a situation that's never going to change.

How do you know if that's the case? Play by the three strikes rule: decide to give the situation the benefit of the doubt, and fully commit to its success by giving it your very best. If after two rounds of such efforts you still come back to frustration and disappointment, with no significant progress, then make a change.

Trying harder is not a change. Doing something radically different is. Get outside help; change your role in the situation; remove yourself from the situation; if you've been leading, step aside, but if you've been passive, step up; bring other players in. The key is to let go of things having to go your way (yes, that's what this is about, I'm afraid) and to accept that the outcome is not within your control. Even if you still believe that things truly can be different, accept the fact that they aren't right now. If you really can't let it go (which is often the case), walk away. And if you really can't walk away, get some help. You've already done everything you know how to do, and the situation is not changing. *But* your relationship to it can.

## NEEDING TO KNOW THE ANSWER (FEAR)

This is a very common, though unconscious, stalling tactic that plays out in business environments. You might hear yourself taking up the devil's advocate position. You might feel uneasy and ask for more proof and measurement. The risk: being a squeaky wheel that likes to hand out "constructive criticism" or gets caught up in minutiae. All of these behaviors signal a fear of commitment that hides behind time-sucking discussions and meetings and prevents you or others from taking action.

### **Fear "But . . ." Buster: Practice Courage**

Trying to figure out what the outcomes of an action or decision will be in advance is a futile exercise. You'll never succeed, and, in

the meantime, you'll wear down the goodwill and energy of those who are ready to act now.

Answers and results come only from experience. Making any decision is like deciding to get married: you can do all the due diligence—think things through, interview married couples, get premarital counseling, discuss your roles and your responsibilities to one another, even live together—but you'll never know what it's like to be married until you're married. You'll never know what it means to you until you're actually in it. There are no guarantees, and there is no other way there; at some point you just jump in and say, "I do." This is a perfect opportunity to practice courage, as I described in *The Futurist's Mind-set*.

Sure, people have different conditioning around taking risks, and different appetites for "going for it," but one thing that's true for everyone is that courage is cultivated through action. The best way to do that is to find your First Movable Piece in the situation. You don't have to jump in with both feet right away, but you do have to at least move one foot forward. Do something—anything—no matter how small. Celebrate it. Then do some more. Movement is what matters: start moving and keep moving forward.

When you feel the "But . . ."s coming on, intervene in your own thinking and decide, instead, to take action on something, no matter how small. This is one of those times when you have to exercise faith in yourself and in the overall vision. You'll not only survive the experience but learn things you never could have if you hadn't moved forward. And, without a doubt, those insights will enhance the outcomes you seek.

Practice courage, intentionally, every day.

## FOCUSING ON BUSYNESS (AVOIDANCE)

Let's face it, days are short. In fact, if you take out your yearly calendar and plot your standing commitments—holidays and

celebrations (birthdays, weddings, graduations, anniversaries), vacations, end-of-year reports, budgeting and planning season—and look at what’s left over, you’re likely to be taken aback by how little time is left to manage all your other obligations. The expectations to produce for our families, our bosses and companies, and our communities are quite high, and there’s little wiggle room left.

Busyness is a fact of life, and the only way to navigate through the overwhelming pile of to-dos is to stay focused on what really matters and dispense with the illusion that balance is achievable. It’s not. Most of the time, one part of your life demands more than the others. There are periods when you have to produce like crazy, with a laser-like focus and little sleep, and other periods when things slow down and lose their edge. Rarely are all parts of your life, or all projects, getting equal attention; instead, priorities shift as needed, and some projects fade while others become more urgent. This is the juggling act most of us do to manage our commitments in the relatively little time available to us each day.

Beware of hiding behind busyness, though. It’s easy to do because it’s so justifiable. No doubt you *are* busy, but the question is, are you busy creating your future, or are you just busy? If busyness is a part of your identity, if you have a gnawing anxiety about what you feel you really should be spending your time on, or if you find it hard to turn down requests, chances are that you’re allowing busyness to come between you and your future.

### **Avoidance “But . . .” Buster: Make a Decision**

When you overcommit, you’re already saying no to something in your life, because the physics of time are such that you will have to shortchange another commitment. Something has to suffer, and, paradoxically, it’s usually the things you really care most about, such as your family, meaningful work, and your future.

Who knows why you say yes to requests when you know you'd be better off saying no. There are many possible reasons: you may have been taught that it is the nice thing to do; you may have a fear of disappointing others, or a belief that if you don't do it, it won't get done (or done right); you may have an impressive capacity to get things done and have always been valued for it; or perhaps you have a very genuine enthusiasm for a lot of different things, and it overwhelms your sense of time and of your capacity. Whatever the reason for your "say yes" tic, the antidote is the same: before you answer, think it all the way through and make a clear decision you can live with, consequences and all. It's important that the way you spend your time and busyness aligns with who you are and where you're going.

### WHINING (INACTION)

"It's too hard." "It's not fair." "I don't want to." "It's a stupid decision." "I don't like that person." "I don't like the way the situation is being handled." "They don't value me." If you find yourself disparaging others and otherwise being a malcontent, the real problem is that you've neglected your responsibility for your own success (or that of others or of the project).

In contrast, what I call "conscious whining"—play-acting in order just to vent and hear yourself put your bad mood into words so that you can move past it—can be valuable, with the following conditions:

1. You ask permission of your audience: "May I just whine for a minute?"
2. You demonstrate a sense of humor about your pouty mood—for example, by overdramatizing your inner three-year-old: "I don't *want* toooooo!!!"
3. After you're done whining, state the decisions you've made to address the person or situation, then move on.

**Inaction “But . . .” Buster: Make a Request**

Behind every complaint is a request not yet spoken. Figure out what’s bothering you and attend to it. If you can fix it yourself, do so. If you believe that someone else can address the situation, ask for what you need. Be as specific as you can in your request; for example, instead of saying, “I need more time,” ask for “one more week to do [a specific task], due on [a specific date].” Make requests to which people can easily respond yes or no and that have an outcome attached. “I’d like to meet for ten minutes each Monday, at noon, to review our plans for the week. Does that work for you? . . . Okay, I’ll put it on both our calendars and plan to meet you in the cafeteria, next Monday, at noon. I’ll reserve a booth for us. I’ll send a reminder note, too, with an agenda. Thanks for being willing to give your time.”

Whining that you do not turn into a request is like poison. It’s just not fun to be around, and people’s trust in you will fade, but even worse is the way it seeps into the environment. When whiners convene, gossip grows, and that derails commitment and trust for the whole group. My recommendation: Hold each other accountable. When someone starts whining, hear him or her out and then ask, “What’s your request?” “To whom should it be addressed?”

**FEELING STUCK (RESIGNATION)**

Be careful that you’re not justifying your resignation by calling it acceptance. What’s the difference? Resignation has a fatalistic and cynical quality, a sense that you’re stuck. Acceptance, in contrast, is about embracing situations and people as they are, with compassion; its hallmark is that your development and growth are not limited by your circumstances.

Resignation is a major “But . . .” multiplier. Typically people who feel stuck have already heard endless suggestions for how they can remedy their situation, to which they invariably answer, “But . . . I can’t because . . . that will never work . . . I’ve tried that before . . . I know how they think, and it just won’t go . . .” In other words, they can come up with lots of good reasons to heave a heavy sigh and conclude, “It’s just the way it is. I’m stuck with it.”

It might be hard to believe, but, at least for people who live in free societies and have the permission to exercise free will, *stuck* is not a reality. Stuck is an attitude. It might *feel* real, but that’s because you don’t like any of the choices.

A need to know the answer often accompanies those who are stuck. If they could find a scenario that is guaranteed to work out, then they’d feel they had a viable choice.

### **Resignation “But . . .” Buster: Get Moving**

There’s always another decision to make, and it may not be as drastic as you think. Exercising choice when you feel stuck is, in itself, an act of liberation. Generally, the fear that bolts resignation to your outlook is one that whispers, “The devil you know is better than the one you don’t.” Consider this: you don’t know that that’s true, nor do you know what the outcome of making one decision or another will be. The only thing that’s true is that making a choice feels scary.

In fact, consider the opposite: the devil you know is *worse* than the one you don’t know! After all, the devil you know has kept you imprisoned and has drained you of your desire and passion. This brings us back to the principle of practicing courage. Do *something*. You may not know anything more about where you’re going than that you’re sure that your current situation is not it. The First Movable Piece in this situation is making the decision that you don’t want to continue to feel as you do. Choose change. Take action.

Even if you don't know how it's going to turn out, by putting change in motion, you will reanimate your desire. It will find new things to latch on to, generating feelings of "Like that!"



Do you recognize the theme running through every "But . . ."? Common to all is reluctance to act or to make a decision. Such reluctance is not the worst thing, but what can be corrosive is the underlying perception of victimhood that sucks the lifeblood out of your future. It's the difference between living by default and being guided by purpose. It's the difference between settling for safe and having an appetite for New. It's the difference between stasis and movement, no and yes, predictability and possibility . . .

You don't have to have a big personality to make a decision or take a chance. There are no prerequisites to taking action—no age, position, experience, status, background. Choice is something that each of us can exercise at any time; and, like courage, choosing—making decisions—becomes more comfortable the more you practice it.

Whenever you hear yourself excusing, protesting, or resisting with a "But . . .," identify whether you're finding fault (blaming), trying to change circumstances or people (arguing with reality), being overly insistent on gathering details (needing to know), claiming you're too busy (avoiding), complaining more than leading (whining), or feeling stuck (resignation). Think about what's scaring you—do this not with shame but with compassion—then ask yourself, *What action am I willing to take?*

The truth is that a reluctance to make decisions and take action wastes everybody's time. We have to deal with this reluctance continually, first within ourselves but also in the environment, where indecision is sometimes endemic to the organizational culture. No matter where you encounter resignation, and

the indecision that accompanies it, you can overcome it with a single action: make a decision.

When decisions are made, people focus and take action. The results of that action yield valuable information, information needed when it's time to make the next decision. In this way, decisions are the gateway to action, and action is what we use to create the future.



The commitment of *Think Like a Futurist* is that, by the end of the book, you have what you need to make smart decisions about *your* future. Fulfilling the “smart” part of this goal is addressed in the content of the book, in which you learn to think like a futurist. Here, in this addendum, I’ve offered some tools and encouragement to help you *act* like a futurist.

Now, you have what you need to *be* a futurist.

Welcome.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**Cecily Sommers** is a futurist whose unorthodox background in medicine and dance, combined with her experience in brand strategy and product development, brings unique vision and creativity to her work. She is the founder and president of the Push Institute, a nonprofit think tank, as well as a strategic foresight and innovation consultant for Fortune 500 companies, small private businesses, and not-for-profits. Clients including Accenture, American Express, Best Buy, General Mills, HealthPartners, Kraft Foods, Motorola, Nestlé Purina, Target, Wrigley, and Yahoo! turn to Cecily for global trend analysis, strategic planning, and innovation projects built for the fast pace of business today.

Cecily is a popular speaker at conferences, business schools, and retreats across the country, where her presentations, combining inspiring examples and current research, highlight important challenges and opportunities to make the future come alive for audiences. She is also a frequent contributor to Public Radio's *All Things Considered* and other media outlets. In her segment "Future Conversations," she reports on the emerging technologies, markets, and ideas shaping our world. Cecily is a member of the Association of Professional Futurists, was named by the *Business Journal* as one of twenty-five Women to Watch, and was selected as one of *Fast Company's* "Fast 50 Reader Favorites." She lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota. For more information, please visit <http://www.cecilysommers.com>.