Masters of Scale: Rapid Response Transcript – Adam Grant

"Why we need to think again, w/Adam Grant"

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> I think almost everything in life is more complex than it seems at first blush. The number of topics that we're actually knowledgeable enough about to call ourselves experts is so much smaller than the number of topics that we feel comfortable just blasting and broadcasting our opinions around – a little more humility is in order.
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> There's also, for many people, a sense of new possibilities. That's not to say that anybody is going to appreciate the pandemic and all of the struggles and tragedies that have come from it. But recognizing that, once we make it through this experience, there are ways in which we're going to grow from it, gives us a chance to at least see some silver linings.

BOB SAFIAN: That's Adam Grant, a best-selling author and professor at the Wharton School. Adam is an extraordinary researcher, with a gift for translating new scientific insights into actionable business practices.

He is also an adviser to key tech leaders, with an in-the-trenches view of how theory and practice meet.

I'm Bob Safian, former editor of Fast Company, founder of the Flux Group, and host of Masters of Scale: Rapid Response.

I wanted to talk to Adam because his new book, *Think Again*, about the value of recognizing what we don't know, offers a timely guide to skills that we need now more than ever.

As we grapple with pandemic-charged change in so many areas, in business and as a society, we've become more fractured, more divisive, and more vulnerable.

Adam's research reveals the power in taking a fresh look at our assumptions, about others, and about ourselves.

[THEME MUSIC]

SAFIAN: I'm Bob Safian, and I'm here with Adam Grant, a psychologist and professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School and author of several best-selling books like *Give and Take* and *Originals*, as well as the just-published book *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know*. Adam is joining us from his home in Philadelphia as I ask my questions from my home in New York. Adam, thanks for joining us.

> **ADAM GRANT:** Thanks for having me Bob. Glad to be here.

SAFIAN: So I have to ask you, over the past year, wow, we have found that there are plenty of new things to learn. What led you to this topic? And how has the last year impacted your perspective about it?

> **GRANT:** Well, I guess it would be ironic if I didn't rethink a lot of my perspective in writing a book about rethinking during this craziness. There are a lot of experiences that got me interested in this topic, but one of the defining moments was three years ago. Early 2018, I went to a bunch of the most powerful CEOs in Silicon Valley.
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> I said, "I'm interested in running a remote Friday experiment. I'm curious about whether letting people work from anywhere one day a week could increase productivity and creativity without hurting culture and collaboration." They all said: No thanks. I was pretty surprised by this, so I asked them why, and they said things like, "Well, I don't want to open Pandora's box. Because once we let people leave, they might never come back. And I'm afraid that productivity is going to falter, and our culture is going to fall apart, and people won't work together."
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> Hilariously, Bob, at least three of these CEOs have announced that their firms might never return to an office. They were so resistant to rethinking the simple idea of just letting people work remotely one day a week, and now that they were forced to rethink it, they've decided, maybe we should work remotely all the time.
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> I think in many ways, 2020 was a year of forced rethinking for a lot of us. Basic assumptions about is it safe to invite people over, to eat in a restaurant, to go outside even. My hope is that in 2021 and beyond, we'll be more proactive and deliberate about rethinking things that we haven't been pushed to question yet. Because we all have assumptions and ideas that either never made sense or no longer made sense as the world around us evolves, and I think we need to be as flexible in our thinking as the world is fast in its evolution.

SAFIAN: There is something about business leaders, entrepreneurs like the ones you're talking to, where their success only comes in defying. And so when someone like you comes in with a different idea from what they have, their success is based on being resistant to that.

GRANT: I guess I should have planted the seed and made it their idea. But at some level it's surprising to me because this is a group of founders who are known as swashbuckling daredevils, who are willing to take all kinds of risks that a lot of people think are crazy. And this felt like such a small step.

And I already had evidence from a whole bunch of studies. There's actually a meta-analysis showing that as long as people were in the office at least half the week together, there was no cost to performance or coworker relationships or satisfaction, and there seemed to be benefits from that autonomy and flexibility.

I got these reactions like, "Well, but that would never work here. That's not how we've always done it." I'm long past arguing with those reactions. Now I just ask back, "All right, that sounds familiar. Blackberry, Blockbuster, Kodak, Polaroid, Sears. Should I keep going?"

SAFIAN: Yeah. The message is, things change and if we're not attuned to those changes, we're going to be left behind.

GRANT: It is remarkable how many visions and strategies and areas of expertise were developed for a world that doesn't exist anymore.

SAFIAN: Beyond the realm of business in this year, we are also now in a country that is divided, camps of believers who vilify those folks on the other side. Are there insights from your research that we might apply to see each other differently to bridge some of that?

GRANT: I hope so. One of the places that I went to explore that question was, of all places, to sports rivalries.

I decided, maybe we can learn something about how people can see the other side differently if we study these deep-seated rivalries that have a lot of emotion, even though there probably aren't hyper-rational reasons behind it. So with Tim Condron, I ended up designing these experiments with Red Sox and Yankees fans.

Red Sox/Yankees I think is widely regarded as the most heated rivalry in baseball and by many as the most heated rivalry in American sports. So I thought, if we could get Yankees and Red Sox fans to rethink their views of each other, that would be progress. And I tried a bunch of steps that didn't work.

One of the things that was completely ineffective was trying to humanize an individual fan of the other team. Because people will say, "Well, yeah that guy's okay, but all the other fans are terrible." Another step that didn't work was trying to create a common identity and say, look, you're all baseball fans. People said, "Yeah, you know what? They just repped for the wrong team, and they're bad baseball fans."

What did work was a different approach where we said, "Look, the basic problem is that when people look at the other side, they think there's something essential, something in your very essence about belonging to that tribe. But in fact, a lot of our tribal belonging is just an accident of birth and circumstance. If you're a Yankees fan, what if you had been born in Boston and grown up in a family of people who root for the Red Sox, would you still be a Yankees fan? My guess is no."

We just finished a follow-up experiment that didn't make it into the book with people on opposite sides of the gun debate. We had some people who were very pro gun rights, others were pro gun control, and we asked them to think about how they might hold different beliefs if they had grown up in a family that was the opposite. If you're somebody who's really interested in gun control, what if you'd grown up in a hunting family? If you're somebody who's really interested in gun rights, what if you had been raised in Parkland or Columbine or any city that had recently experienced a mass shooting? What if that was part of your upbringing? After reflecting on that, we saw the same kind of drop in animosity that we did between the Yankees and Red Sox fans.

SAFIAN: As you're giving the sports analogy, I'm thinking, well, "We're all Americans" doesn't necessarily draw us together. It can actually drive us apart. It sounds like what you're saying is you have to get to even more emotional places.

GRANT: I think a lot of this is about counterfactual thinking. In psychology, counterfactual thinking is just a simple form of mental time travel. You revisit the past and say, "How could my life and my worldview have evolved differently if I'd been exposed to different kinds of events?"

There's something about doing that that makes people less fixed about their beliefs. That makes them more open to recognizing that opinions are flexible and fluid and they can change and maybe the other side isn't so horrible. Maybe these people didn't even choose their beliefs. They just happened to be born into them, and so I should stop vilifying them and demonizing them.

SAFIAN: As a researcher who believes in facts and science, how do you deal with conspiracy theories and resistance to facts? Whether those are health facts or election results and so on?

GRANT: Well, I think the first thing we need to do is we need to apply a classic idea from philosophy. John Rawls and his veil of ignorance.

The basic idea was that you could judge the justice of a society by asking, "Would you want to join that society if you didn't know your place in it?" If the answer is no, it's probably an unfair place because you're afraid of landing on the bottom. I think we need a similar veil of ignorance, a similar question when it comes to forming beliefs about facts.

Which is to say, let's talk about the methods of a study, and the question is, would you agree with the conclusion based on the methods alone before knowing what the conclusion is?

Before I tell people the results of the data that I'm about to bring to the table, I will ask them, "What evidence would you find convincing? What data might change your mind?" Then let them walk me through what they think is a rigorous study. Then of course, as a social scientist, my job is to add rigor to that study and let them know why there are even more sophisticated ways to design it or to analyze the results.

And then say, "Okay, we've agreed on the terms of what kinds of data would qualify as leading to good facts?" Now, let's go and find that study or let's go and run that study and see what happens. Lo and behold, if they bought into the methods, it's much harder to disagree with the conclusions.

SAFIAN: You did some talking to those who are skeptical about vaccines. Is this the approach you took in having those dialogues?

> **GRANT:** I had a really interesting conversation with a friend who's an extreme skeptic on vaccines and hasn't vaccinated any of his children and doesn't plan to. Before I had tried to preach about the virtues of vaccines and prosecute anti-vaxxers for putting not only their children but other families at risk, and not surprisingly, that fell on deaf ears.
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> What I learned from the research is that it's much better to go into scientist mode, and say, "All right, let me treat this person as somebody who I'm really fascinated by, a puzzle." How did you end up with such strong convictions that go against what I understand to be the mainstream consensus in science? Let me try to understand that better.
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> And we had a much more thoughtful conversation where I was just interviewing him and asking him questions. He at the end of it was more willing to acknowledge that there are some vaccines that he might consider under some circumstances, which I'd never heard him do before.
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> There were a bunch of conspiracy theories about how pharma companies and the government are pulling the wool over our eyes. What I did was I asked him more questions.
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> "Okay, I know you don't trust the mainstream media. I have to tell you though that there is a Pulitzer Prize waiting to be won by the journalist who can go and discover this conspiracy. And you're telling me that in the whole mainstream media of skeptical independent journalists, there is not one person with the motivation and the skills to go and discover that this is going on?"

I felt like what I learned from that conversation was instead of giving answers, I should ask more questions. I should try to be curious about all the complexities in the other person's thinking and then hear him recognize that some of the things that he thinks he understands are actually really hard to explain.

SAFIAN: So when you talk about the power of knowing what you don't know, some of that is knowing the perspective of the person on the other side. It's not necessarily acknowledging that what you know is wrong but that they're looking at something in a different way?

GRANT: My knowledge is always incomplete, and one of the places where my knowledge is always incomplete is: I can't read somebody else's mind. The data show actually that the further apart you are from somebody else on a particular opinion, the more likely you are to completely miss the mark when you try to guess what their beliefs are. I think the first step is to have the humility and curiosity to find out what you don't know, and that's where interviewing is such a powerful skill.

The second thing that that comes into play here is, there's this idea in psychology called the illusion of explanatory depth. The premise is very simple, that when it comes to complex systems, we often assume we understand them better than we do. If you ask people why they believe in a system or a policy or practice, they could give you a bunch of reasons and then double down on their convictions.

If you ask them how they would implement their policy or how they would explain their views to an expert, they start to realize just how complex they are.

So you could do this on an issue like climate change or taxation. Ask people, "Take your favorite tax policy. Explain to me exactly how it's going to work, and what impact it's going to have on a whole society." As people try to do that, they start to discover gaps in their knowledge, they become less polarized, they become more open to what they don't know. You may not change their mind, but you've at least helped them see that they still have a lot to learn and the hope is that you do too.

SAFIAN: That these systems and these situations are so much more complicated sometimes than our knee-jerk reaction to them is.

GRANT: I think almost everything in life is more complex than it seems at first blush. The number of topics that we're actually knowledgeable enough about to call ourselves experts is so much smaller than the number of topics that we feel comfortable just blasting and broadcasting our opinions around, so I think a little more humility is in order.

SAFIAN: You write about the Dunning-Kruger effect, about overconfidence blinding us to mistakes and incompetence. Can you unpack that for us a little bit?

GRANT: This is one of the most popular findings in psychology of the last two decades. The core finding is that the people who are least knowledgeable or least skilled in a domain are the most likely to overestimate their knowledge and skill in that domain.

The people who have the poorest grammar are the most overconfident about their grammatical skills. The people who are the least emotionally intelligent are the most likely to overestimate their emotional intelligence and actually avoid training because I've already mastered it. Why do I need it?

I think a lot of people assume that this happens because of ego, that we all want to see ourselves in a flattering light. Or maybe because of image, that we want to paint ourselves positively to others. That may be part of the story but I think the more interesting explanation is something that David Dunning has put eloquently. He says, "Very often when you lack the knowledge or skill to produce excellence, you also lack the knowledge or skill to judge excellence."

The very fact that you don't know a lot about a topic means you're completely ignorant about what it means to be knowledgeable about that topic.

SAFIAN: Doesn't this though also apply to people who are expert and successful in one area, and then assume that that means that they're expert in everything?

GRANT: Yeah, that's founder syndrome, right? I was a genius at coding an app, and therefore I'm a genius at everything. I think that at minimum, competence in one area is completely independent of competence in another. In some cases they're actually negatively correlated. Because the more overconfident you become, the less likely you are to invest time and energy and learning.

I think it's really easy to laugh at people who we know have fallen victim to the Dunning-Kruger effect. Everybody knows a confident ignoramus. But what we have to remember is there are times when we are that person.

[AD BREAK]

SAFIAN: You mentioned at the outset, you've spent a lot of time talking to founders and executives in Silicon Valley, including folks in social media business at Facebook. They've gone through a lot of soul searching about the content they have available on their platform, what they allow. Only after people stormed the Capitol were new policies, definitive policies put in place.

I remember having conversations with Mark Zuckerberg, who's quite adamant and been for a long time about open sharing of information provides benefits that outweigh whatever these other messier costs are. How do you get people in those situations to rethink the potential negative repercussions before they become cataclysmic?

GRANT: I don't know. This is a good moment for me to be very clear about knowing what I don't know. I think it's an extremely complex problem. We've watched many people at Facebook rethink their stances in recent weeks with the ban of Donald Trump. But we've also watched them rethink their stances on, hey, actually calling for government regulation as opposed to resisting it.

I'm not going to pretend that I have any of the answers. I believe everyone has the right to voice their views. I don't think that means that everybody with an opinion should be broadcasting those views to 300 million people.

I think we need a mechanism to make sure that algorithms are not rewarding outrage and falsehood over truth and evidence. I think this goes back to the point that almost every problem we see in society is more complex than we realize. Also the solutions are more complex to you, and this might be something to think about. You started this question, Bob, by saying, "Okay, how do you convince somebody who's running a technology company that they might want to rethink their views?"

One of the things that comes to mind there is. psychologists study what's called solution aversion, which is the idea that when somebody gives us a way to fix a problem and we don't like the solution, we'll often just deny that the problem exists. I've been surprised by the number of people who believe that they know the answer from the outside when they haven't really looked at the problem from the inside.

If you're going and trying to sell a single solution or trying to peddle one fix, odds are it's not as complex as the problem, and so it's not going to solve the problem. But you're also putting yourself at risk for motivating the person who doesn't like your pet solution to ignore or dismiss the problem.

So one of the things that I would do if I were entering into that conversation is to say, okay, "Here is my understanding of all the problems that social media has created in the world. I recognize that there are benefits too. I'm not here to just vilify you and say that you're a net negative. But what I'd like to do is get the benefits without the costs; here are the costs that I see. Can you help me understand what solutions you've thought through so far? What are the pros and cons of those?"

Then after hearing those, I might be able to figure out whether there's something I can bring to the table that's novel.

SAFIAN: You write about knowing what you don't know and being open to learning. Are there surprising things that you have learned in the last year about yourself?

GRANT: I've learned a lot of surprising things about a lot of things, including myself. One of the things that I've really rethought is, I do most of my work from home, and I've been

doing that for at least 15 years. I thought that going remote wouldn't have much of an impact on me, and I was very wrong.

I was very wrong because I dramatically underestimated the importance of being in a room with people for energy. There are lots of things that were silver linings when it came to teaching virtually, as opposed to in a live classroom. But there is no substitute for being in a room and feeling their energy when I'm trying to communicate something that I think is surprising or important to understand.

I think I'd assumed as an introvert that I was impervious to that craving of face-to-face connection. And I should have known better because I have been trying to set the record straight on introversion and extroversion for years, and saying, "Look, it is not where you get your energy, according to half a century of evidence." Introverts, as well as extroverts, are energized by social interaction. It's just a question of how much stimulation you seek and can take before you get overwhelmed.

And I think I probably confused the fact that I don't crave a ton of social interaction for saying I don't enjoy it and benefit from it. I guess my surprise is even though I have been a shy person for most of my life, I really miss getting on stage in front of a classroom or in front of an audience.

SAFIAN: Do you feel like in this remote world, can you be as effective learning and teaching digitally?

> **SAFIAN:** I don't know. I would love to have much more rigorous evidence than... We had to revise our exams, and so I can't do an apples-to-apples comparison of exam scores before and afterward, which would be one measure of learning.
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> The fact that there's a pandemic going on, the fact that there are racial justice protests going on. Now there's an insurrection. It's hard to know, if there are changes, what's really driving them? One unexpected upside of going virtual is the quality of my guest speakers improved markedly. Because I wasn't limited to the people who were in or near Philly, I was able to beam in people from around the world, and everyone was available.
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> The other thing that changed is, I think we had deeper and richer conversations than I've typically had in the classroom before. My classes are typically 70 to 80 students per section. For years, what I've done is, I ask a question or make a comment or send students to do a breakout exercise, and then I call on the hands that get raised. But I have no idea what those people are going to say.
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> What I was able to do because of the chat window in Zoom was actually get real diversity of thought and also get people to build on each other's ideas. My colleagues and I ended up using hashtags. We said you can use hashtag #question, #debate, #aha, and #on fire. Then I could look at the chat every few minutes and say, "Okay, if

somebody has put in #debate, there's somebody who wants to challenge me or one of their classmates, and that's going to stretch all of our thinking. Let's get more of that in the classroom."

If somebody has put in #aha, I can track what the eureka moment was or what the insight was. I can see, okay, I've made that point. I don't need to belabor it. Or there were no #ahas on this point that I just thought was really important. It clearly didn't land. I want to find a way to bring that into the live classroom.

SAFIAN: It's so interesting as you're talking about the schooling, the teaching experience, and all the other experiences we've gone through over the last year, it's like we're in this real-time experiment where the data set isn't clear, the experiment isn't necessarily organized the way we might want to, and there's this overlay of stress because of the changes and the challenges that we're all grappling with. Do you have tactics you use or you advise that people use about how to deal with all of this change, all of this stress?

> **SAFIAN:** It's hard. I don't have a magic bullet. I'm not even that kind of psychologist. But I would say, Bob, that one of the most basic and consistent findings in the psychology of emotion regulation is that it can be helpful to label your emotions. So if you think about back in March, when the pandemic first started, there was an HBR piece that went viral. I think it was actually the most-read piece in the history of *Harvard Business Review*. It was by David Kessler, and it was about how [the emotion that everyone was feeling was grief](#).
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> I think the reason it took off is because people were having all these feelings that they couldn't make sense of and didn't understand. When David named it, and he was the right person to name it because he's a leading grief expert, people said, "Oh yeah. You know what? Even if I haven't lost a loved one, if I haven't lost someone I know or care about, I'm grieving the loss of normalcy. Now I can manage it better because I've faced grief before, I have dealt with loss before, and I have an understanding from my own past resilience of how to face this hardship."
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> I think there are two principles there. One is that when we label our emotions, sometimes it gives us a little bit of distance from them so that we can think about them in a slightly more clearheaded way. Then the other thing is that when we identify the emotions we're feeling, we can start to realize that they're not completely foreign. That we have faced a version of those emotions before. And then instead of looking to other people and saying, "How do I manage stress? How do I build resilience?" we can actually use our own past experiences as a guide.

SAFIAN: That what works for us, we can identify and go back to tap those wells.

GRANT: Yeah. I'm surprised by how long it took a lot of people during the pandemic to say, "Let me think about the most stressful events in my life, and ask what has helped me in the past, and can I apply some of those same principles now?"

SAFIAN: You wrote a best-selling book with Sheryl Sandberg, *Option B*, which revolved around the tragic death of her husband and grief. In a lot of ways, we're all living a certain version of *Option B* in this environment. Are there things or principles from that book that you would draw on, that you would look to now?

GRANT: I think one of the most important ideas that we understood better after reading the research and writing about it is what happens after traumatic events. When people hear "trauma," what most of us do is we think "post–traumatic stress disorder." The data suggests that about 15% of people will encounter PTSD after some kind of traumatic event.

Roughly half of people, though, report a different response, which is called post-traumatic growth. It's the idea of not just bouncing back, but actually bouncing forward. Saying, in some ways, I am better because of this tragedy that I suffered. Let's be clear, nobody wishes that it had happened. Nobody wants to face loss or have to deal with a pandemic. No matter how much we grow from it, if we could, we would go back and undo it. But we can't, we're stuck with it.

Post-traumatic growth is about recognizing that these challenges do make us stronger in some ways. If you break down post-traumatic growth, the most common forms of growth in the face of tragedy are gaining perspective and strengthened gratitude. Saying, "Okay, I got through that. I can get through almost anything." Appreciating things that you might've taken for granted before.

There's also, for many people, a sense of new possibilities or new meaning around saying, "Okay, you know what, I need to take a step back and really figure out what matters in my life and what's important to me." Now again, that's not to say that anybody is going to appreciate the pandemic and all of the struggles and tragedies that have come from it. But recognizing that once we make it through this experience, there are ways in which we're going to grow from it, I think that gives us a chance to at least see some silver linings that we might've missed otherwise.

SAFIAN: Well, in terms of gratitude, I want to thank you for sharing so much of your ideas and your thoughts and your time with us today, so thank you, Adam.

GRANT: Thank you for having me. I appreciate it.