

Leapfrogging

Harness the Power of **Surprise**
for Business Breakthroughs

Soren Kaplan

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Foreword by Marshall Goldsmith, author of *Mojo: How to Get It,
How to Keep It, How to Get It Back if You Lose It*



Praise for Leapfrogging

Leapfrogging challenges its readers to break out of conventional thinking by implying a few simple notions: know who you are, stay true to your purpose and enjoy the journey along the way. By showcasing examples of challenging conventional thinking, embracing surprise and welcoming failure as a learning exercise, readers will learn from the stories of others. Kaplan's book is part storytelling, part self-reflection. Leapfrogging shows that leaders who look inward to challenge the status quo will be on track to truly change the game."

Sarah Robb O'Hagan
President of Gatorade

Kaplan's book is a powerful and practical read on an aspect of breakthrough thinking that many of us have been missing – even though it's always been there right in front of us. Through the use of compelling stories, he brings to the foreground principles and practices that cause the reader to see the world of opportunities with a new lens. His integration of what it takes to innovate, both organizationally and personally, is exceedingly pragmatic. And his use of questions to help readers reveal their own insights and wisdom make this a must read for anyone wanting to take their success to the next level.

Teresa Roche
Vice President and Chief Learning Officer
Agilent Technologies

Throughout my career I have relied on building prototypes to guide the path to great solutions. Whether it is a new product, service, experience or business, the goal is to challenge assumptions and find unexpected and hopefully breakthrough insights, and these often come in the form of small and large surprises. Soren's treatise hits the nail on the head.

Dean Hovey
President & CEO of Digifit and Co-Founder of IDEO

Change and therefore innovation, is often seen as disruptive and uncomfortable. When a change requires us to adjust our own habits and behaviors, it takes additional energy to learn, understand, and adapt, as well as to take the risk of leaving known paths to try new ways. Leapfrogging provides individuals and organizations a tried-and-true path for stepping into the unknown. With experience and compassion, Soren leads the reader through a process that is not only imaginable, but invaluable.

Renee Dineen
Head of Organizational Development
Roche Pharma Division

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Foreword

by Marshall Goldsmith

Soren Kaplan is one of those interesting individuals who has spent decades working with a variety of different types of organizations and individuals. And, those of us fortunate enough to have selected his book to read will benefit by leaps and bounds from his knowledge and expertise.

Drawing on his extensive experience with all types of organizations, from corporations to non-profits to start-ups, Soren has boiled the basic mission of business down to a simple sentence: “individuals, groups, and organizations across all sectors of society want bigger ideas so they can have a greater positive impact.” The rest of *Leapfrogging* explains how leaders can guide their organizations to successful and continued completion of this critical mission.

One of the most poignant messages I found in the book is in Chapter 3. In this chapter, Soren makes the strong point that “leapfrogging to breakthroughs is a *process*, not a one-time event.” Many of us want, even expect, things to happen right now, just because we believe they should. For instance, by picking up this book, you might expect that your organization will change tomorrow. It won’t, but you have taken a big step in the right direction!

As we all know, things have changed quite a bit in the last few decades. Globalization, which we in the West thought would mean a world of people competing to buy our products, has actually come to mean millions of smart, hard-working people around the globe working and competing for food, oil, cement, wood, and natural resources. In this era of uncertainty, nothing can be taken for granted. We have to keep upgrading, changing, and growing if we're going to be successful.

This is exactly what Soren teaches us. Using stories and examples from his own experience with leaders in different organizations, Soren reveals how these leaders have led their organizations to breakthrough success. These are real-life examples, from successful leaders who understand the concepts behind *Leapfrogging*. You will learn much from these leaders, for instance: How did they challenge the norms, break the molds, and inspire followers? How did they approach tough times? How did they make the most of mini-successes? How did they stay focused on the larger goal—to create something new or significantly different that would push the organization forward?

Read this book. Take its message to heart and implement it in your business. You will be glad you did!

Life is good.

Marshall Goldsmith

Marshall Goldsmith was recently recognized as the world's most-influential leadership thinker in the bi-annual *Thinkers50* study—sponsored by the *Harvard Business Review*. His 31 books include the *New York Times* bestsellers, *MOJO* and *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*.

Introduction

After twenty years working with corporations, start-ups, nonprofits, and health-care organizations, I've seen that individuals, groups, and organizations across all sectors of society want bigger ideas so they can have a greater positive impact. Whether developing a new product or service, creating a new HR program, improving finance procedures, introducing a new fundraising campaign, embarking on a membership drive, or launching a new business, people want success through *being different and making a difference*.

Today's business, political, economic, and social challenges are so daunting that we're experiencing a palpable, collective yearning for breakthroughs—recognition that small changes no longer move the needle and that incremental thinking won't suffice. We want meaningful results, but we know we can achieve them only by challenging norms, inspiring others, and crafting a future unconstrained by the present.

Leapfrogging is about changing the game—*creating something new or doing something radically different that produces a significant leap forward*. What you create or change can vary, but one thing remains constant: Individuals, groups, and organizations that leapfrog old ways of doing things often become the new leaders of the future.

I'll be honest. When I began this book, I thought I knew where big breakthroughs came from. It took a small café in Paris to teach me what leapfrogging is really all about.

One of the best things about being a business consultant and part-time professor is that I can work from anywhere. When I'm not on airplanes or leading workshops, I can work from home, at the local coffee shop, or just about anywhere else for that matter. So, at the end of 2010, I took advantage of my professional portability and moved my family to France for a year. My wife was thrilled to go. My two daughters weren't quite so enthusiastic. But they were only in elementary school at the time, so they weren't old enough to put up much of a fight.

Our goal was to get outside of our comfort zones and expand our minds. I also knew that I wanted to write a book about the subject that's been my work and passion for more than two decades—how leaders and organizations create business breakthroughs. I couldn't think of a better place to step back from the flurry of my regular life than in Paris. We took an apartment in the Marais and enrolled our girls in public school. They didn't speak a word of French when they started, but after several months, they could sling insults and use slang words like the rest of their French friends. We visited tourist attractions and mixed with the locals. We tried French delicacies like *foie gras* (goose liver), *rognons* (veal kidneys), and *andouillette* (pig colon)—although my wife and kids watched me eat the colon solo, saying it would push their taste buds just a little too far beyond their American roots. My taste buds will never be the same.

One day shortly after we arrived in Paris, I wandered into a little café called Caféotheque, hoping to find an Internet connection, a caffeine boost, and a corner table with an electrical outlet where I could hole up with my laptop and get busy writing. Little did I know

that inside this modest coffee house I was about to experience something that would shape the entire focus of this book.

I ordered a *café crème* (like a strong latte) from a woman who turned out to be the owner, a native of Guatemala named Gloria Montenegro de Chirouze. I took a seat, preoccupied with the task of writing I had ahead of me. The moment I took a sip of my coffee, I forgot about everything else that had been on my mind. What a sublime cup of java it was! So smooth and yet so potent. I was absolutely stunned.

As I savored my beverage, I glanced up at a couple of newspaper clippings tacked onto the wall above me. One was written by David Lebovitz, the author of *The Sweet Life in Paris*,¹ whose book and blog are the bible for foreigners in France. Out of 35,000 bistros and cafés, Lebovitz called Caféotheque “the best coffee spot in Paris.” The other article was from *The New York Times*. In a city chock-full of world-class destinations like the Louvre, the Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame, and the Bastille, the paper had recommended this tiny café, with just eight small tables and a few well-worn lounge chairs, as a must visit attraction.

I immediately realized I needed to get a better understanding of what exactly made this place so special. I struck up a conversation with Gloria. She told me that when she first came to France, she was shocked at how *bad* the coffee was there. Even in the best restaurants, terrible coffee would follow an exquisite meal. So, she and her husband, Bernard, quit their jobs to introduce Parisians to the truly great stuff she had known in Guatemala. This all made sense to me. But when she started describing how they do it, and what’s behind it all, that’s when she really blew me away.

Caféotheque breaks all of the rules for a café in Paris. There are no quintessential outside tables. They don’t serve food. And you

won't find any snooty waiters in white aprons. A miniature in-house roaster by the front door beckons every passerby with a welcoming aroma of pure smoky bliss. While 99 percent of other French cafés serve blended coffees of varying quality to reduce cost, Caféotheque offers only single-origin espresso drinks using beans from individual plantations. And customers can book personal coffee tastings (similar to wine tastings) that allow them to experience Caféotheque's twenty varieties of beans from around the world. Gloria personally goes and buys beans directly from each of these plantations, ensuring that they receive a fair trade price for their precious commodities, which in turn gives Caféotheque an assured supply of the best-quality product available. Gloria even sends her best full-time baristas to visit these plantations so they can see and experience every step of what makes great coffee truly great.

Caféotheque is all about “purity of purpose”—and that purpose is to give the highest quality coffee-drinking experience to others. In keeping with this, Gloria doesn't hoard her beans. She sells her special roasts to other cafés and restaurants around the city. But perhaps the business's most unique venture is Caféotheque University, where budding baristas can receive a degree in “cafeology,” which includes a month-long hands-on “menteeship” working under Gloria and Bernard. Most of their students have gone on to open their own cafés around France and even in far-off locations such as Ethiopia and China—and many return as customers to buy their bulk beans from Caféotheque.

As Gloria recounted her story for me, I had a startling realization. Here I was trying to use a little caffeine to jump-start my writing about what exactly constitutes a business breakthrough. And just by chance, I had wandered into the midst of the very thing I was laboring to describe. I was literally sitting inside of a business

breakthrough, something that had vastly exceeded its peers by “leap-frogging” the conventions of what it means to be a French café (or any type of café for that matter).

Put simply, Caféotheque surprised me. It delivered exactly what groundbreaking innovations always deliver: something new, something powerfully effective, and—most important—something *unexpected*. And that rather straightforward concept led almost immediately to another. But this second insight was a lot harder for me to quantify and articulate, which is why it took me an entire book to do so.

Here’s a preview. Surprise is not just something that differentiates breakthrough products and services. The unexpected is also a key ingredient in *creating* those delightfully surprising breakthroughs. In fact, as I’ll show, the single most important factor in fostering true game changers isn’t the classic lightbulb-above-the-head big idea. It’s the way leaders and organizations handle the discomfort, the disorientation, and the thrill (and pain) of living with uncertainty, finding clarity from ambiguity, and being surprised.

Before that morning at Caféotheque, I had witnessed this dynamic time and time again as an executive, a consultant, and an academic. But it took a little café in Paris to crystallize just how critical the concept really is. That’s right—I had to be surprised by surprise itself. The power of surprise, it turns out, is as robust as the coffee at Caféotheque.

Surprises Are the Most Predictable Thing in Business

My experience at Caféotheque provided me with a new lens through which to view my previous twenty years of working in the fields of strategy, innovation, and organizational change. As I said, my first

insight was quite simple—that most business breakthroughs surprise us when we first experience them. From there, the concept of surprise as an important driver of breakthroughs became firmly implanted in my mind. I reflected on my career, researched the underlying dynamics of breakthroughs, and spoke with some seriously successful people across many different types of organizations using my new lens. Time and again, unexpected events and sometimes even big surprises surfaced as playing essential roles in how ideas initially arose and *especially* throughout the process of making them real.

At first, I wasn't completely ready to acknowledge this notion. I was hesitant, even resistant to writing about it. Could it really be true that unanticipated events and surprising experiences *themselves* were key factors in the larger process of achieving breakthrough business success? What's more, how could I create a model or map out a formula for something so, well, *unpredictable*?

The more I explored the topic, the more I saw surprise cropping up in various places during the process of creating breakthroughs—and the more important, even critical, it seemed. Here's a brief example of the type of thing I kept finding that shows the relationship between being surprised and creating the type of breakthrough that delivers “surprise” to the market.

Scott Cook, the founder of Intuit, once said, “I'm a big believer—and this is something I've come to learn—in savoring surprises. If there's something that's really a big surprise, upside or downside, that's generally the real world speaking to you, saying there's something you don't yet understand.”² Cook credits the power of surprise for providing the impetus for a whole host of Intuit's successes.

Intuit's flagship product was Quicken, which rapidly became the leading software program for managing home finances. But

principles.” In the same book⁴ he says, “In an age of wrenching change and hyper-competition, the most valuable human capabilities are precisely those that are least manageable.” These two brief quotations propose something revolutionary: that we must embrace counterintuitive ideas that go against the grain of management and leadership as we know it if we are going to succeed in today’s whirlwind world.

Our control-at-all-costs attitude may indeed be softening. In their book *Great by Choice*, Jim Collins and Morten Hansen found that how leaders respond to “luck events” plays a big role in their business success.⁵ The best leaders, they say, capitalize on good luck when it happens and are the most prepared when they experience bad luck. These same leaders credit their luck *in retrospect* as a significant contributor to their longer-term achievements. Our mindsets seem to be evolving as we look for the deeper secrets of business success. Events beyond our control—yes, even good and bad luck!—are slowly being recognized as key elements of the formula.

It’s one thing to recognize *retrospectively* that unplanned events affect our lives and our business decisions. It’s another thing altogether to develop the awareness and the tools to deal with our surprises proactively in *real time*. That’s what I hope this book can help you accomplish, so that you can turn whatever is thrown at you (good or bad) into something productive for yourself, your team, and your organization.

It’s Ultimately about Leapfrogging

One of the goals of this book is to uncover and share the deeper leadership experiences and dynamics that are success factors during the often “messy” process of creating business breakthroughs. I define

leapfrogging as the process of overcoming limiting mindsets and barriers to create business breakthroughs. I named this book *Leapfrogging* because when it comes down to it, that's exactly what achieving business breakthroughs is all about. It's about leapfrogging our mindsets so we can overcome the hidden assumptions and barriers that constrain us. It's about leapfrogging the expectations of customers, partners, employees, and the rest of the world so we can surprise them with a dramatic increase in value over what they're getting today. It's about leapfrogging the competition so that we can create a remarkable difference between ourselves and what others are doing. This transformation in value—whether through a product, service, business model, or process—is what I refer to as a *business breakthrough* throughout the book. Admittedly, the word *business* is a relative term. As I'll show through a variety of examples beginning in the first chapter, these types of breakthroughs are equally applicable to nonbusiness organizations.

My messages are simple:

Business breakthroughs deliver surprise. Our brains are wired to appreciate positive surprise. Great ideas surprise us with a strong dose of remarkable newness in ways that add value to our lives and challenge our assumptions about what we thought possible.

Surprises are strategic tools that drive breakthroughs. By proactively seeking out and using surprises as “guideposts” when they occur, we can gain new insights, generate ideas, and discover new directions for ourselves and our organizations.

Business breakthroughs transform people and organizations. Breakthrough business success doesn't simply result from

a great idea. It involves a challenging and transformative journey through deep ambiguity, unforeseen events, and inevitable failures in order to come out on the other side to achieve business breakthroughs.

Leapfrogging isn't easy. When we're in the process of challenging the status quo, people take notice. At first they can be critical, telling us that what we're doing is impossible, unimportant, or even wrong. But if we persist and start to succeed, eventually criticism can give way to recognition and praise. Leapfrogging is about the journey of traversing ambiguity to find clarity. It's about finding direction in ourselves as leaders, which in turn creates new opportunities for our organizations. It's about revealing new possibilities to customers, clients, business partners, or others so they see themselves in our own hopes and aspirations, and then jump on board to join us on our journeys.

This book is the result of hard research and soft insight. It draws upon my twenty years of hands-on experience, research studies from universities around the world, and case examples from diverse organizations including global companies, start-ups, and nonprofits. I spoke to many people while writing this book. Some were clients and colleagues. Others were referred to me because they had achieved an undeniable breakthrough, or were currently involved in the process of doing so. Some were running multi-billion-dollar businesses with tens of thousands of employees. Others were in much smaller organizations with only several people.

Most of the book's examples come directly from my work or discussions with these leaders who possess track records and stories of breakthrough success from organizations including Gatorade, OpenTable, Intuit, Four Seasons, Philips, Colgate-Palmolive,




Kimberly-Clark, and numerous others. And I don't focus only on organizations that have created breakthrough products. I intentionally include examples from outside of the traditional mold, since today's world is much more about services, business models, processes, brands, and global collaboration. A number of examples also demonstrate how breakthroughs can relate to specific business functions, like finance, information technology, and marketing.

Many leaders have confidentially admitted to me that they have questioned themselves, their strategies, and the abilities of their teams and organizations during their journeys to their breakthroughs. On the exterior they portray themselves as confident, self-assured, and ready to take the world by storm. In the privacy of their corner offices, however, they acknowledge feelings of doubt, fear, and surprise, but they adamantly believe that they need to keep these experiences hidden away like skeletons in a closet. Massimo d'Amore, President of PepsiCo's Global Beverages Group, shed light on this dynamic when he said to me, "If anyone who's led a breakthrough says they didn't have a single doubt, you know they are lying. The challenge is to deal with ambiguity and doubt while balancing it with the determination leaders must show to their own teams. When we were reinventing Gatorade, I had many doubts during the difficult days but I always managed to keep them away from the team so they wouldn't be distracted from their journey. Deep-down I always knew it was the right journey to take, but when everyone's telling you what you're doing is crazy, it's hard not to have doubts." Discussions like this one reveal that some of the most important underlying leadership dynamics and secrets to breakthrough success are systematically hidden, since the very nature of creating business breakthroughs involves experiences that are pervasively considered to reveal weakness—including admitting to being surprised.

No Surprises Just Yet—Here's What's Next

This book is for all those who believe that the best way to leapfrog our mindsets and achieve breakthrough success is to push beyond our day-to-day thinking and begin living outside our comfort zones. It's for those who have a hunch that business—like life—is chock-full of serendipitous surprises that all hold hidden answers and opportunities.

But here's a warning before we get started. We're going to explore a side of business that usually flies under the radar. In fact, most leaders and organizations typically avoid the essential principles and practices that I describe. So, if you're willing to open yourself up in order to learn how to tackle your biggest challenges and capitalize on new opportunities in some pretty simple yet very unconventional ways, then welcome aboard.

		
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