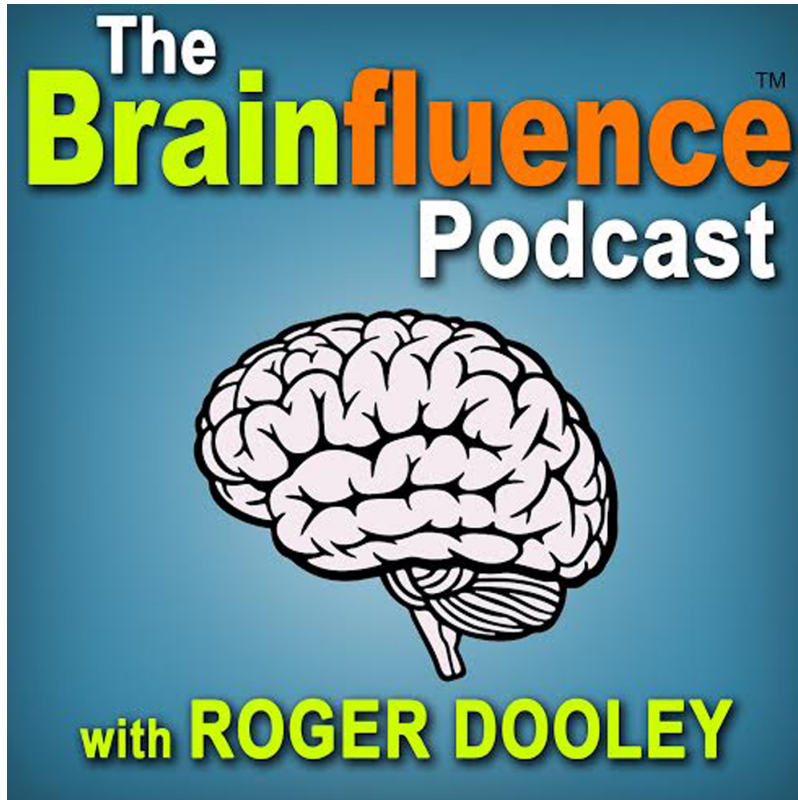


Liminal Thinking? Here's How It Helps



Full Episode Transcript

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Roger Dooley

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Liminal Thinking? Here's How It Helps

Welcome to the Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley, author, speaker and educator on neuromarketing and the psychology of persuasion. Every week, we talk with thought leaders that will help you improve your influence with factual evidence and concrete research. Introducing your host, Roger Dooley.

Roger Dooley: Welcome to the Brainfluence Podcast, I'm Roger Dooley. I find my guests in different ways. Some I know from their books, or meeting at conferences. Some find me, because they think you, my listeners, would be interested in their ideas. This week's guest I found via Amazon. Needless to say, I read, buy, and sometimes review a lot of books about our brain and the way it works, along with behavior science and practical applications of all this. Amazon's recommendation engine popped up a book consistently called, Liminal Thinking. Now, it kind of struck me as odd. Liminal may not be a word you use every day, and if you look it up on Google you'll find these definitions. One, "Relating to a transitional or initial stage of a process," or two, "Occupying a position at or on both sides of a boundary or threshold." That didn't help me all that much to really understand what liminal thinking was, so I reached out to the book's author, Dave Gray. That led me to reading the book and today we have Dave himself on the show to explain more.

Dave has a background in design and is the founder of Xplane, a strategic design consultancy and the co-founder of Board Thing a collaboration platform for distributed teams. He's written two earlier books, Gamestorming and The Connected Company. His area of focus is on the human side of change and innovation, including how to alter deeply ingrained habits. His latest effort, as you now know, is Liminal Thinking: Create the

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Change You Want by Changing the Way You Think.
Welcome to the show, Dave.

Dave Gray: Oh, thanks Roger, it's really great to be here. Thanks for having me.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, Dave, as I was looking at the illustrations in your book, they were really cute, they were your own informal, but always informative little sketches where probably some other authors might have used fancy graphics. It reminded me a little of Dan Roam, the visual communicator who was on the show back in episode 129. In fact, I noticed then that Dan was one of your endorsers, as also is Dan Pink, another previous guest. As I dug a little bit deeper, I saw that way back when you were a news artist and a news art editor for some big west coast newspapers, as well as, a St. Louis post dispatch. You were wrapping up your news art career nearly 25 years ago. At this same time, you were starting a consultancy that by this year, 2017, has worked with 40% of the Fortune 500. Now, that's really some transition and political cartoons come to mind, but for starters, what does a news artist really do and how did that lead you to found the Xplane company?

Dave Gray: What a great question. I spent my whole life ... I think I was a very frustrating child to my parents, because I never stopped asking why my whole life. I've always been a very curious person and I've always also been an artist of someone who draws pictures. Put those together and you get a news journalist, or a news graphics artist. Someone who is curious, who is going out, interested in asking questions. Just like a reporter, they'll be interviewing people on topics. Except the difference being, instead of coming back and writing a story, they

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come back and draw a picture. That might be a map, might be a bar chart or some kind of a diagram. When I worked as a news journalist, I explained all kinds of things.

How do they sound proof the freeways? Why do they put those barriers up? Why did this floating bridge sink? Why does a bridge float in the first place? Why did the plane crash? There are tons and tons of things that need explaining in the world, and some of them can be explained in words, and some of them are better explained in pictures. You probably, if you've ever picked up a copy of National Geographic, you've probably seen they do a great job of explaining, drawing pictures, what was life probably like in Ancient Egypt? Explaining how the tides work. That's what a news graphics artist does, is they are the person who is making those visual explanations that you'll occasionally see in your newspaper or in a magazine.

Roger Dooley: The transition to explain then wasn't maybe as big as it sounds?

Dave Gray: No, in fact ... You mentioned the word, liminal, which is a word I discovered and fell in love with, because liminal times and periods are those times when ... It's a term that comes from anthropology, and it refers to times where there's a lot of change going on. A lot of them are life changes. You're living with your parents and you move out. That's a liminal time in your life, because you're having to go from one whole set of activities, and habits, and routines, into a ... Form and create a whole new set of habits and routines. Newspapers for over a very long period of time have been going through this period of

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transition, just like so many other businesses in the modern world. They're being disrupted.

They're being disrupted by, at first it was Craigslist and Google. I mean, all the things that people used to pick up the phone and call the newspaper and make a classified ad about are now things that you're getting on Google, and Facebook, and a lot of these other places, so newspapers are in trouble. The reason I started my company was I was in love, I had fallen in love with this practice, or craft of visual explanations, creating visual explanations of complex and potentially confusing things, and I could see the writing on the wall that the newspapers, they weren't going to be the vehicle that was going to ... I mean, newspapers are still around, but they are nowhere near as instrumental and forging our view of the world as they were at one time.

Roger Dooley: I wouldn't say they're becoming irrelevant, but certainly, particularly local newspapers seem to have less reason to exist. I think that some place like The New York Times will probably continue to have a role for years to come, although exactly what that role is going to look like and how they're going to build it and monetize it, is perhaps a bigger question. I think in terms of explaining some of the interesting things that have perhaps changed a little bit since your days as a news artist are now the ... Some of the visualizations that they're doing are really amazing. I was watching the election results on newyorktimes.com, where they had a beautiful constantly updating display of the results from the different states, the totals, and they represented it so nicely. It showed the error bands, so you could gage, "Okay, well this is how much of the vote is in and right now this is within 90% probability range or significance range and so on."

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To me, it really enabled you to understand a really complex thing, because obviously you've got different states with different amounts of data coming in and one is almost done, and the other one you've only got 10% of the votes counted, and so on. They managed to display all that in a really effective way and also they managed to predict the outcome hours before the news networks were willing to call it. Of course, they have different standards. The networks really going to make a call until it's ... There's absolutely zero chance of it going the other way, but where New York Times on that display could report, "Okay, hey it's 95% sure right now." For most folks, that's good enough.

Dave Gray: Yeah, and that's a wonderful and really great explanation of what a news artist does, is a news artist takes that information and helps people make sense of it, helps people explore it, understand it, make sense of it. I started to explain my company back in 20 some years ago to bring that kind of clarity of communication to the business world. I'm sure you're as aware as I am, and I've only become more aware over time, how much complexity and confusion there is in almost every business on the planet, how many communication breakdowns there are. There's a lot to explain.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, well so a few years ago you sold your business, at least briefly to the Duchess Group that actually was based here in Austin and then spun back out a few years later. Here's a fun fact, did you during the time that you were associated with them, were they already in their new offices at that ... Our listeners may not know that the TV series, Revolution, was filmed, at least a portion of one episode was filmed in those very Duchess offices in downtown Austin. The funny thing is, the whole show was

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set in this sort of post-apocalyptic time that was mostly sort of a Texas version of Mad Max, but in this one dream sequence they actually went into sort of modern day downtown Austin and the Duchess office served as the set for Pittman Digital, which one of the characters in the show was this sort of tech genius and Google millionaire and this was his company's headquarters.

A little thing, in fact, Peter Kim wrote a blog post about that, that I'll link to in the show notes. It actually has photos of that office and how they were transforming it for the TV show. Sadly, that show didn't survive. Although, it didn't present much of a picture of Austin, because generally if you saw any scenes they were like, bombed out buildings and looked like something out of like a post-Terminator scenario. Enough trivia. We've gotten into what liminal is, explain what liminal thinking is and sort of the underlying thesis of the book, Dave.

Dave Gray: Yeah, well I described liminal, but I'll just kind of briefly go over it again. It's these periods of change that happened in your life, getting married, entering into a new relationship, having children. There are periods of time where there's a lot of change. You move to a new house, I know you buy a new house, or even think about buying a new house, and you start getting a huge increase in the volume of your junk mail, right? The reason for that is because people know if you're moving, you're going to change your house, you're going to have to probably get a new bank, you're probably going to have to go figure out a new place to shop for your groceries. There are all these new habits that you form. The idea behind liminal thinking is that you can be intentional about this, you can actually be ... If you feel like you're, for whatever reason, you're stuck, you're in a rut, you want to see ... You have

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something in your life that you want to change, whether it's in work, or in relationships, or you want to quit smoking, or whatever it is, that you can intentionally create liminal space, liminal periods, spaces in your life where change is more possible than it would be otherwise. That's the idea.

Roger Dooley: The first part of the book is all about beliefs, how our perceptions, our behavior is shaped by our beliefs, but those beliefs aren't necessarily always accurate, they don't always service well. Why don't you dig into that a little bit? What is it about ... I mean, we all think that, probably we all think that we know what we know. If you ask somebody about a topic, they'll give you their opinion on it and it will be perhaps largely based on what they believe is fact. In fact, often these are more beliefs than anything else. Explain that, Dave.

Dave Gray: Yeah, I think the best example I could point to right now is our nation. As you are I'm sure very aware is in a very liminal state right now. We just had the introduction of a new president, who was ... Really broke all the rules of politics and continues to break the rules of politics, at least the sort of the customs and standards that we're aware of. If you look on Facebook, or any of the places that you typically go to find conversations, maybe it's even your local park, or wherever you might go to listen to those kind of water cooler conversations, you're seeing tremendous clashes of beliefs right now. The thing I think that is so important ... I mean, beliefs are ... If your beliefs in a lot of ways are tied to your identity, you have beliefs, you form beliefs over time based on your experiences and you act based on those beliefs, and as you take more and more actions, let's say, because of your religion you act in a certain way, you make decisions in your life and choices

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that are sort of commitments that you are actually, as you make these choices, you're forming your character, you're forming who you are.

Your beliefs do translate in a very tangible way into who you are and when someone questions those beliefs, that can be very emotionally difficult because they're questioning you in some ways that it may feel like they're questioning the validity of your existence. Even though people may have very different beliefs from each other, I think it's important to recognize that people form their beliefs based on their experiences and what has worked for them. Some people have more limited set of experiences. Some people have a very broad, very wide set of experiences. Some people have never left their home town. Some people have traveled all over the world. Some people have worked at the same company for their whole life. There are various tremendous variety in the experiences that people have had, and the experiences that they've had, and that just because someone believes something that's different than what you believe ... If you look on Facebook, you see a lot of arguments. Just this morning I saw a friend of mine post, "My mom unfriended me because of politics," because of politics, specifically.

Roger Dooley: There's been a lot of that going on. Hopefully not too many moms and their kids, but yeah, it's I think about the only ... After all the political ranting, the second most common kind of post is those people who are saying, they're sick of the politic ranting.

Dave Gray: Oh yeah, "I'm leaving Facebook," or "I ... " Actually, another one today, literally today, another friend, a

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Facebook friend posted, "I have just unfriended my brother-in-law, could not take it anymore."

Roger Dooley: He was never that good anyway. Yeah, it's ...

Dave Gray: What is going on? Here's the thing to think about, if someone were saying, if someone were proposing a belief to you that was truly just crazy, out there, completely and obviously wrong, you probably wouldn't have an emotional reaction to it. You probably wouldn't unfriend them. You might be worried about them if they were proposing that the sky is purple, or something that just ... There is no moon. You would probably be more concerned than upset. The reason that ... I think what a lot of people fail to think about and recognize when they have these emotional reactions is to examine their own emotions, and examine, well, why is that belief so upsetting to you? What is it about that belief that is causing you to feel this way? To actually start to examine those things. I'm not saying that all beliefs are equally valid. Certainly I would never propose that. Some beliefs are more valid than others, but even beliefs that might seem strange or odd to you have some basis in the person's belief.

Roger Dooley: Right. You've got a good example of a ride you took with an Uber driver who was kind of out there. Maybe you ought to tell that story quickly. That's probably a good example of somebody whose beliefs appear at first glance to be out there.

Dave Gray: Well yeah, I got ... Basically, in my hometown I called up Uber. A guy came to pick me up, an older gentleman, he maybe was retired is my guess. We were driving through the city and he seemed to have quite a strong knowledge of all the stuff that we were passing and we would pass a

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business and he probably knew the last two or three businesses that had been there, and so he seemed to be kind of very interested in business. I had a feeling that he was interested in entrepreneurship and business ventures from the kinds of things that he was saying, and I started asking him questions about that. As we drove along, it was probably a half hour drive, I noticed that more and more of his descriptions of things were almost conspiracy theory-ish. We were driving down a road with lots of beautiful mansions and he was saying how ... As I started asking him questions and I really try ... I was trying ... I think I was still writing the book at the time, and I was trying to explore this with him, I found that he ... Some of the answers that he was giving were contradictory and I think the thing about ...

Anyway, he just was full of conspiracy theories and the thing about conspiracy theories, I actually went and kind of looked up where do these conspiracy theories come from? Why do people form beliefs? I think it's, if you've had a life and you're not getting the results that you want, and I didn't have the impression this guy was driving an Uber car because he wanted to, because he loved to drive, I think that he had tried multiple entrepreneurial ventures and he had not been as successful as he wanted to be, or as he had hoped he would be. I think when you try and fail at something and you're not actually achieving the results that you want, it's very difficult to look inward at yourself and ask yourself if there are things that you're doing that you need to be doing differently. It's easier to blame the world, even if ... Not all failures are the fault of the world, or the person, but we have a need to attach explanations to things. If we're not achieving the results that we want, I think the need is ... What that often translates into is to create explanations that explain why

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you have not achieved the results you want due to outside forces, things that are beyond your control.

Roger Dooley: Right. I think a key point there is that rather than simply dismissing this guy as a crank, if you're in the marketing business that guy might be your customer and it might be worth your while to understand why he might have these beliefs. I think in a much broader case, you brought up the election, certainly I think many people have just dismissed Trump supporters as racist, homophobic, morons. I mean, some combination of things like that. Basically, you talked about people having their beliefs that are attached to their identity. I think they can also project their beliefs onto the identity of others. I would guess that only a very, very tiny fraction of people who may have voted for Trump and actually of course, there are millions of them, would put themselves in any one of those categories, but there's not any attempt to look at, "Okay, gee this guy seems really strange to me and sort of an unacceptable guy for president, why would you choose him?"

Then find out, "Well, gee I'm really concerned about the economy, or the military, or some other hot button issue." There's this very quick assumption to say, "Okay, I can project my belief that anybody stupid enough to vote for this guy is in fact an idiot," and they're done with it. As business people, whether it's inside the organization, or whether you're dealing with your customers, you really can't be so quick to generalize, you've really got to dig in and understand, because if you're going to persuade those people to think your way, or to buy your product, or to get on board with your new project in the company, you've got to begin by understanding what they're doing

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and why they believe what they do, as opposed to, just sort of projecting your own beliefs onto them.

Dave Gray: Yeah, there's a very interesting story. I don't know if I told it. I can't remember if I told it in the book or not, but it comes from the field of conflict resolution. There's an approach, a methodology that is about basically having ... You have two sides, or two groups that are antagonistic and are in conflict, that you have them reverse roles and explain to each other their beliefs. It's not that you have to agree with it, but you have to take on the opposing group's beliefs and express it in such a way that that group will hear it and say, "Yes, you have accurately expressed what we believe." The particular story was in a group of women, they were pro and anti-abortion, pro-choice and pro-life advocates, however you want to describe them. They did this exercise, so you flip a coin. Let's say, you're pro-choice, you have to take the pro-life position and you have to advocate it and you can't turn the mic over until the other group has said, "Yes, you have accurately reflected our point of view." Then you switch off, and you do the same.

The interesting outcome of this story, which I found fascinating was that after having gone through this exercise, these two groups of women ... I don't believe that any of them changed their position on abortion. However, they did identify during the course of this dialog and listening to each other, that they had a shared interest in child welfare, or the welfare of children, and they actually began to work together issues that they cared about. I think this is a really important point and a good lesson, or thought provoking point for our nation especially. Many other nations around the world that are facing similar conflicts, is that you can ... When you focus

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on the things that divide you, of which there are always going to be many, then you are by focusing on those areas of division, you are increasing the divide, you are creating, in a way, more division, you are emphasizing the division. When you focus on the things that unite you, and we saw just recently in the women's march, right? We saw the, let's say, Trump in some ways has created more unity on the left than we have seen in many, many years.

Perhaps, the focus on the things that unite, as opposed to, the things that divide, is much more productive and actually much more conducive to relationship building. If you are a Hillary Clinton supporter and you sit down with a Trump supporter, of course you could have an argument, of course, but perhaps a more interesting challenge is to find the things that you do mutually care about and things that you actually find that you can productive work on. We have so much of our culture is focused on debate. We have always sports teams, it's always about the winner. Whenever we have a topic we want to talk about we have a debate. We put two people up and two people with extremely opposite points of view and we watch them argue and we think we're going to learn something from that. Yet, what do we ever learn? It's entertainment, but do we ever really learn things? I think we learn more when we see people focusing on actually having a dialog or a conversation about things that they both care about. They may have different perspectives, but they both care.

The Trump phenomenon is interesting in some ways, because there are certain policies that he is promoting that were historically very more left wing, and certain that are more right wing. I mean, certainly massive spending on infrastructure is not something that the right has been

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hammering on or proposing. That sounds a little bit more FDR, doesn't it?

Roger Dooley: Right. I would say what's interesting in the emotions that have sort of carried through the whole thing on both sides have been really fascinating. The second portion of the book is what you can do about your beliefs, and how to effect change, and so on. One story we like was Mick the turnaround expert. Why don't you explain that one, because I think that will probably resonate with our listeners.

Dave Gray: Yeah, Mick Calder, yes. I have a friend, he's Australian guy, he's from Melbourne, Australia, his name is Mick Calder. He's a turnaround guy and he basically, his job is he comes into ... His company's called the 333 Group, they will go into organizations when they are on their last legs, when they're failing, they will come in and they will buy out the management team, usually for pennies, really buying them out of debt in a lot of cases. They will buy them out and they will take the company and they will turn it around. I was visiting with Mick not too long ago and I asked him this question, which had been haunting me, which was, "How can you ... You're taking over businesses that you know very little about. I mean, you know some things about business in general, but you know very little about the individual businesses that you are turning around, and you are able to come in knowing so little, and take the company over from a group of managers who have been there, in some cases their entire careers, years and years, decades of experience, and they can't turn it around, and you can. What is it that makes that possible? How can you do that?"

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He looked at me and he said, "Dave, usually it's the managers that have to go, the managers are the problem. When we come in we talk to customers and ask them a lot of questions and we talk to employees and we ask them a lot of questions. Usually between the customers and the employees, they know what to do. It's the managers that have been in the way of that." That blew me away, really, when he said that. I was like, "Really, seriously, that's what you do? You listen to customers and you listen to employees. What is it about the managers that makes it ... Why don't they do that? Why can't they do that?" He said that, "It's habit. It's routine. They're on autopilot, they had something that they figured out 20, 30 years ago, or 100 years ago, the management team figured out something that worked, and they just kept doing it over and over."

What they did not realize is that the world is ... While you're doing the things that you're doing, while you're stabilizing and operationalizing your processes and all these other things, the world around you is slowly evolving. Sometimes slowly, sometimes rapidly. Sometimes slowly at first, but accelerating. As the world changes and you keep doing the same things, the things that worked in the past, don't work anymore. What happens is, the managers are in a bubble of belief they are so confident that what they know how to do works, that even though they're hearing from customers how it needs to change, or what the problems are, and even though they're hearing from employees how things need to change, they will discount that. They will live in denial, they will not listen, they will explain it away that it's more important for them to maintain their beliefs about themselves, than it is to take in this new information from the outside world and they actually create a bubble of

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denial that keeps them from seeing that. It's a sad thing, and it's incredibly prevalent. Since I had that conversation with him, I see it everywhere, including in my own life. It's very hard to get outside of your bubble, it's very hard.

Roger Dooley: Right, well I think we all sort of develop firmware in our heads that we know what's worked in the past and what hasn't worked out so well, and various other beliefs. When something comes in conflict with that, trying to say, "Okay, well we've got to chuck those beliefs and do something different," is difficult. That kind of reminds me of the story of Andy Grove at Intel. Back in the earlier days they were losing money hand over fist, because of memory chips and a bad situation in that market. The founders were anticipating being booted from the company, because things were so bad. Memory chips, even though they were losing money, they were really an integral part of the business. They've been there from the start and they really couldn't envision getting rid of that part of the business. Grove and his co-founders sat down and said, "Well, after we're gone, what are the new guys going to do?" They both answered, "They're going to get rid of the memory chip business." Left the room either physically or metaphorically, came back in, in the role of the new managers and they got rid of that business and saved the company. They were probably a rare example of key managers who are able to completely change their sort of core belief system and act more like turnaround pro, like Mick, to save the business.

Dave Gray: Yeah, it's very difficult to do that. I think it's also very ... I mean, you build not only your beliefs and your ideas, but you build your relationships, and your friendships, and you tend to develop blind spots around, related to those

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people that you have a lot of affection for and it can be difficult.

Roger Dooley: In the book you have a sentence, which probably should be highlighted as a poll quote or something, but it's, "Reason does not get people to act, emotion is what causes people to act." I think our listeners would really tend to agree with that statement. They tend to be involved in various kinds of behavioral marketing, or neuro marketing, or various applications of psychology to business. How does this thought play out in your framework?

Dave Gray: Yeah, I mean we don't ... If you think about what we ... We do a lot of reasoning in business, right? We do a lot of marketplace analysis, we do a lot of research, we do a lot of reporting, we do a lot of debating and we work with logic. At the end of the day though, nobody does anything that they don't care about. Nobody gets up in the morning and comes to work because of some rational reason. I mean, there's a rational reason to get a paycheck, I suppose, but even then, it's because you care, right? People do things because they care, because they have an emotional reason. We have a bit of a blind spot in western business culture about that people ... Because we have done the analysis, that people are going to actually step up and do these things. The most amazing that have been accomplished in business have been accomplished because people had passion, and energy, and excitement, and enthusiasm for them.

I think leadership is important. It's important that as leaders, we spend a significant portion of our time not just debating what is the right thing to do, but talking about how we get people on board, how we get people excited,

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how we create that passion and energy for them to care that these things are important. That the same things that we think are important are the things that they think are important. That we're aligned not just intellectually, but emotionally. That's one of the things that I've found is powerful about visual explanation and making pictures. When you draw a picture of something, it's much easier for people to see it, but it's also a lot of times much easier for them to get excited about things, and to get started moving toward action on things. Because it's like that old adage, "Seeing is believing." If you're hearing some abstract Charlie Brown noise, wah-wah-wah-wah, coming from the boss, right? That doesn't get you excited, but if you can see a picture, "This is where we're going. This is what we're going to be doing, this is what life is going to be like in the future for us and for our customers. Look how happy those customers will be, and just imagine when they have this or this when they don't have to fax us," right? I mean, nobody has a fax machine anymore, except the big, big companies.

Roger Dooley: True, so true. Well hey Dave, we're just about out of time. Let me remind our listeners that we're speaking with Dave Gray, author of *Liminal Thinking: Create the Change You Want by Changing the Way You Think*. Dave, how can people connect with you and your content online?

Dave Gray: I'm very easy to find, @davegray on Twitter, D-A-V-E G-R-A-Y. My website is Xplainer, X-P-L-A-N-E-R, and that's because I've got this passion for explaining things. My company's Xplane, X-P-L-A-N-E.com.

Roger Dooley: Great, well we will link to those places and to any of the resources we mentioned in our conversation on the show notes page at Rogerdooley.com/podcast, and we'll have a

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handy text version of our conversation there too that you can either read or grab as a PDF. Dave, thanks for being on the show.

Dave Gray: Thanks for having me, Roger. It's really been a pleasure to be here.

Thank you for joining me for this episode of the Brainfluence Podcast. To continue the discussion and to find your own path to brainy success, please visit us at [RogerDooley.com](https://www.RogerDooley.com).