

STRATEGY

COVID-Imposed Opportunity to Selectively Unlearn Past Practices

by Vijay Govindarajan, Anup Srivastava, Thomas Grisold, and Adrian Klammer



Pandemic conditions have forced most organizations to evolve, leaving old practices behind.

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The **Three-Box Solution** suggests a three-pronged framework for creating successful organizations: to discover and adopt new business models, to transform and improve existing business practices, and to selectively forget old habits that don't work anymore.

For an automobile company, these prescriptions would imply: developing electric cars with mobility as a solution, making production and distribution more environmentally friendly, and gradually closing gas-guzzling, internal-combustion models.

Most companies eagerly attempt the first two prongs of Three Box Solution framework. However, they under-pursue the third prong. They are reluctant to drop business practices, departments, product lines, and markets, that have worked so well in the past. Many of the legacy departments are headed by people who command respect and wield significant political power in the organization. This attachment to legacy business practices not only prevents a firm from freeing up its precious resources to implement new strategies, it also obstructs new initiatives. How can a car company project the image of being an environment-friendly organization, and attract a new crop of customers and product designers, when it continues to advertise its gas-guzzling models and operate under a president whose life was spent on producing and selling legacy models?

COVID-19 has imposed a shock that can accelerate several decades' worth of business-transformation effort to a few years. For example, many service organizations would have eventually allowed their employees to work from home, and most universities would have **eventually shifted most of their classes online**. The current pandemic compressed those transformations to just a few weeks. COVID-19 both requires and facilitates the third prong of three-box solution. **Based on our research in many organizations**, we propose a four-point program to implement the selective-forgetting part more successfully, using college education as an example.

1. Uncovering and Questioning Established Assumptions

Current business practices often originate from an era when the regulatory, information, resource, and technological environment was entirely different from today. For example, the dominant logic of universities is rooted in times when there was no internet or alternative sources of knowledge. The implicit assumption still seems to be that the professor is the only source of knowledge, who delivers knowledge to students, seated neatly in rows of the lecture theater. This model presupposes that all students are at the

same stage of learning, have similar levels of intelligence and motivation, and need a uniform pace of learning. However, over time, better alternatives have emerged, at least for the algorithmic aspects of teaching, those with predetermined answers to predetermined questions. Students can access knowledge from the best teachers around the world, who can deliver that knowledge using audio-visual, immersive technology at a customized pace, place, and time. For example, students can learn the Pythagoras theorem while playing a video game. While the face-to-face classroom model may remain best suited for customized discussion and problem solving, monologues in massive lecture theaters no longer have to be the dominant option for algorithmic learning, which can be best done via technology.

COVID-19 has forced the key stakeholders, students, faculty, and school administrators, to question the assumption behind the old models that underlie many routine activities in a university setting.

2. Establishing an Urgency to Break Patterns

The general motto in organizations is: If it isn't broke, don't fix it. Crisis provides an impetus for breaking routines and identifying and unlearning dysfunctional practices, simply because old things cannot be done anymore. For example, Covid-19 has imposed lockdowns and social-distancing requirements, preventing people from coming together. Furthermore, it has imposed budgetary pressures, forcing organizations to question the costs and benefits of each activity. So, each company must look at every business practice from a fresh perspective, even if it was considered innate part of doing business not so long ago. For example, do we really need to fly internationally to conduct a business meeting or visit a vendor's factory on a different continent before entering into a supply agreement?

Universities also face similar exigencies in COVID-19 times. First, there are increased budgetary pressures because of reduced state subsidies, lower enrolments, and a reduced number of international students. Second, both students and professors are reluctant to conduct in-person physical classes. Given these forces, university administrators have no choice but to revisit their assumptions about whether they need a massive and costly

infrastructure to carry out the university's main job, which is teaching. For example, do universities need an infrastructure comprised of lecture theaters, laboratories, performance theaters, dormitories, study rooms, cafeterias, museums, football stadiums, athletic programs, administrative buildings, fraternities and sororities, faculty housing, hospitals, gymnasiums, swimming pools, tennis courts, and libraries?

3. Creating Space and Time for Experimentation

Some ideas come quick; others take time. Some ideas can be launched immediately, others need gradual adjustment. Some ideas can be launched without affecting the ongoing business, others require a pause and a fresh start. An important condition for successful unlearning is that people have space and time to experiment while not being blamed for slowing down the ongoing business. You can't change an aircraft engine during the flight, or change the tire while the car is still driving. Similarly, you can't fault your employees for not giving up old practices, when they remain accountable for meeting every day's production, sales, or profit targets. COVID-19 has given that leeway, that breather, that space and time, because many businesses have paused or even come to a standstill. Now the aircraft engine and the tire can be changed.

For many universities, COVID-19-driven slowdown during the summer semester was that pause, when professors could change their course offering and administrators could relook at delivery expectations from instructors. Even in the upcoming semesters, universities' administrators can rethink the classes that require group meetings. Can we create a new model for choir practice, for example?

4. Encouraging Feedback Across All Levels of the Organization

Unlearning is often driven by new, shocking information, which shows that old ways don't work anymore or that superior alternatives have emerged. Recognizing, acknowledging, discussing, and circulating information that opposes established norms facilitates

unlearning. However, this process is extremely difficult and requires deft handling in organizations driven by decorum and dogma. Multigenerational and multicultural faculty and students work together in a university. They not only have different mindsets, expectations, and beliefs, they are also expected to be role models for each other, especially in expressing their views on sensitive subjects. In that context, questioning the accepted dogmas in a university, whether it should own a football stadium and run a football program for example, could be considered sacrilegious. Thus, while embracing the open feedback and communication is often essential for identifying and unlearning dysfunctional practices, that process must be handled deftly. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that university stakeholders can discuss sensitive issues in a respectful and progressive manner.

In summary, COVID-19 has imposed a massive need for evolution for many organizations. We emphasize that it has also provided a unique opportunity to selectively unlearn past practices. Our four-point model should enable organizations to successfully unlearn dysfunctional practices, to free up resources for, and to better focus on value-added transformation and innovations.



Vijay Govindarajan [Follow](#)

Vijay Govindarajan is the Coxe Distinguished Professor at Dartmouth's Tuck School of Business and Faculty Partner at the Silicon Valley incubator Mach 49. He is the author of The Three Box Solution. Govindarajan is one of the world's leading experts on strategy and innovation and a two-time winner of the prestigious McKinsey Award for the best article published in the Harvard Business Review.



Anup Srivastava [Follow](#)

Anup Srivastava holds the Canada Research Chair at Haskayne School of Business, University of Calgary. He is one of the foremost experts on valuation and financial reporting of digital companies.



Thomas Grisold [Follow](#)

Thomas Grisold is an Assistant Professor with the Institute of Information Systems at the University of Liechtenstein. He studies how digital technologies enable new ways of organizing.



Adrian Klammer [Follow](#)

Adrian Klammer is an Assistant Professor at the University of Liechtenstein's Institute of Entrepreneurship. He examines organizational learning and unlearning in strategic contexts.