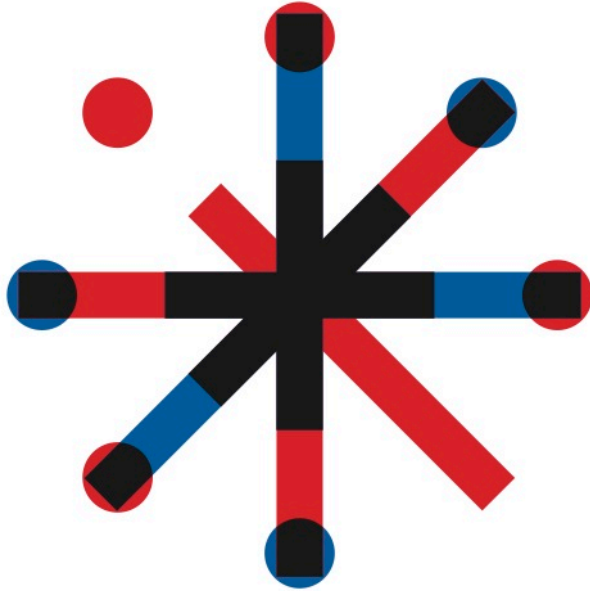


# INNOVATION LEADERSHIP REFRAMING

THNK Article

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## DISCLAIMER

The material in this article has been developed for educational purposes only by [THNK.org](http://THNK.org).

THNK has made its best efforts to give appropriate credit to the various materials used in this handbook, however, in addition, THNK wishes to acknowledge these materials and the respective authors.

## PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT

The purpose of this article is to share THNK's insights and methodology.

## ABOUT THNK

THNK, the Amsterdam School of Creative Leadership is on a mission: to develop the next generation of creative leaders and innovation leaders that will have a significant societal impact in our world. THNK provides an 18-month, part-time, post-graduate program for a carefully selected group of international top talent. THNK Participants are active in social entrepreneurship, commercial entrepreneurship or business innovation.

THNK's creative leadership program starts with several intensive weeks spent on campus in Amsterdam (during the first 6 months) and a major individual challenge completed on the job (the Accelerator).

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# INNOVATION LEADERSHIP TOOLS: REFRAMING

*Karim Benammar, THINK*

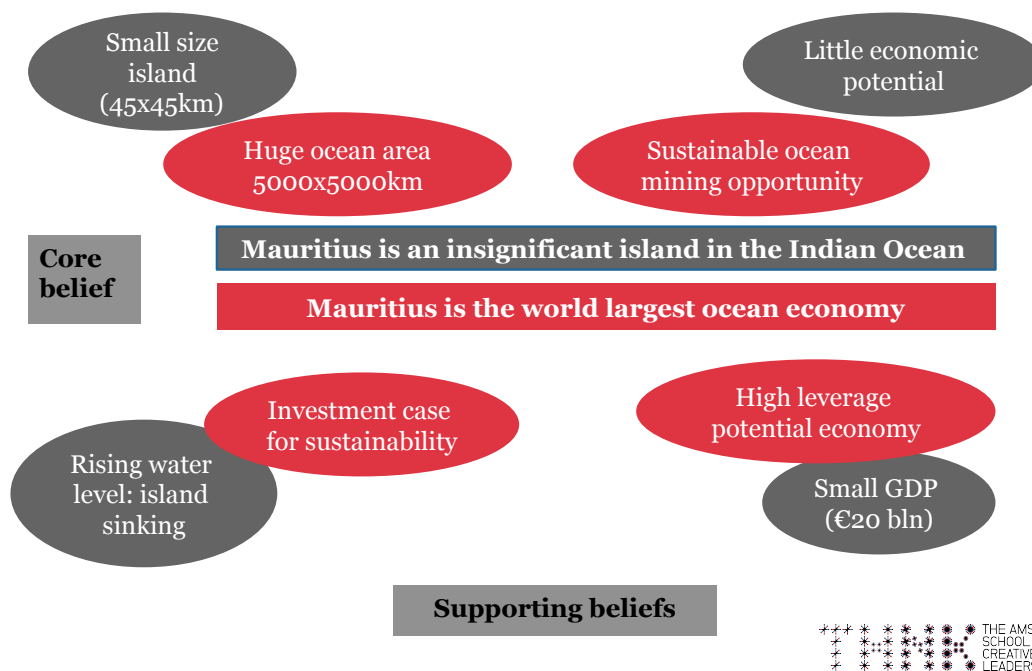
*Berend-Jan Hilberts, THINK*



Photo source: <https://shop.hemamaps.com.au/> Retrieved on December 19, 2013.

An insignificant island in the Indian Ocean can turn out to be the World's largest ocean economy. It's all a matter of perspective, depending on the frame with which we look at the world. The assumptions this frame is based on are usually unexamined, and often wrong. Or, not the only truth. Mauritius may be a small island with a small GDP and little economic potential, facing rising sea levels. But it's also in a huge ocean area with sustainable ocean mining opportunities, and a potential high leverage economy. By challenging the assumptions of our frame we can reframe our initial belief towards a whole new perspective. Why? It helps us see great opportunities for innovative business models and for innovation leadership.





## OVERCOMING TOXIC ASSUMPTIONS

Business as usual is filled with 'toxic assumptions' that have remained unchallenged and stand in the way of progress and innovation. We are often told: "This is the way business has been done around here - don't you dare question it". Yet successful innovation leadership and industry disruptors have done exactly that: unearth the assumptions that seemed true, but in fact were not, and overturned these. IKEA challenged the notion that furniture should be shipped ready-made - so that most of what gets shipped is air - and built its business around the core belief of "assemble it yourself". DELL's disruptive proposition was to assemble your chosen model online rather than buy a complete computer in a physical store.

Innovation leadership that wants to innovate in a disruptive fashion must actively look for assumptions that may not be true anymore, and challenge these dogmas. Sacred cows, conventional wisdom and the majority view very often stand in the way of disruptive innovation. At THINK, we use a technique called [Reframing](#) to uncover, challenge and then overturn assumptions in order to generate a new core proposition that is the seed of disruptive innovative approaches.

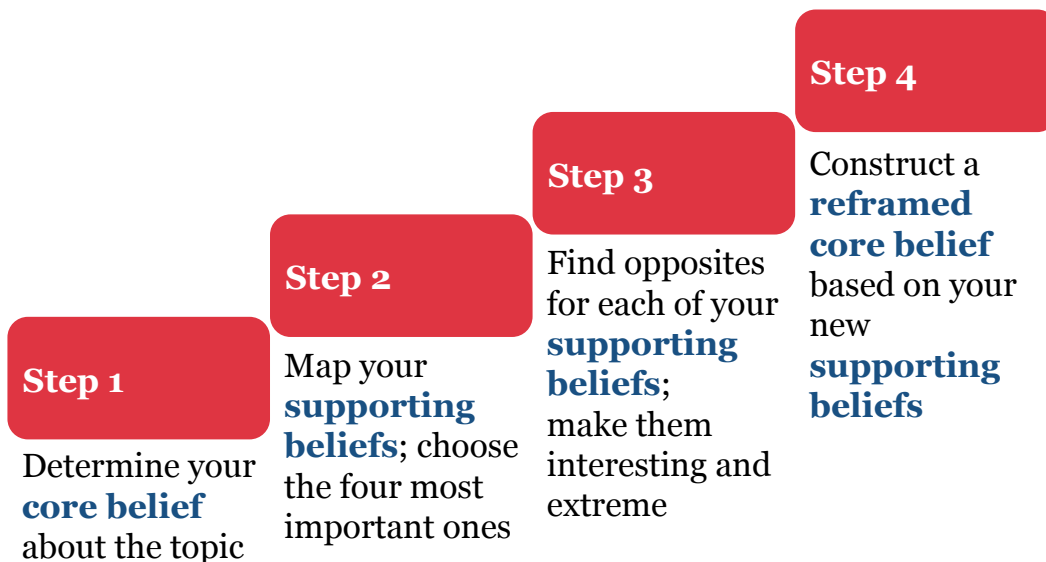


Coming up with something that hasn't been thought of yet, or doing something that hasn't been done before: that is the elusive nature of true innovation. Innovation leadership means always being at least one step ahead of others – that is what it takes to lead. Followers copy ideas, products and processes generated by leaders. Followers are forced to try to beat leaders on cost. Innovation leadership requires being able to take radical new approaches to products and processes.

Developing an attitude of relentless questioning of assumptions is second nature for innovation leadership. There is a limit to adapting or combining already existing ideas. At some point, we have to question the very essence of the structures that we operate in. The crucial aspect of innovation lies in the radical step of thinking what has not yet been thought, in allowing yourself to be baffled. In order to be truly innovative, we should be willing to embrace the laughable and the ridiculous.

## REFRAMING IN FOUR SIMPLE STEPS

# REFRAMING IN FOUR STEPS



The approach of [reframing](#) is a four-step process:

1. Determine what your current position is. This is your core belief.
2. Analyze this core belief: what are the reasons you think that? Come up with 'supporting beliefs', and pick the four most important ones.
3. Force yourself to construct the opposite of these supporting beliefs by finding antonyms and grammatical opposites. This is the artificial element in the technique, the way to jolt your thinking. Come up with variations on these opposites until you find extreme formulations. If these extremes are ludicrous and laughable, you can be certain you have pushed yourself outside of your frame.
4. Consider your opposite supporting beliefs and suspend disbelief by asking what would happen if they were all true. What reframed core belief would this lead to?

The easiest way to try this tool for yourself is to use the online tool at [www.reframe.thnk.org](http://www.reframe.thnk.org). Part of THINK's mission as an innovation leadership school is to make its tools available online. All of the tools are available as part of THINK's online program [Start Innovating Now](#), and also on the [creative leadership tools page](#).



[www.reframe.thnk.org](http://www.reframe.thnk.org)

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ABOUT REFRAMING

HALL OF REFRAMES



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What have we learned about this tool at THINK? It is one of the favorite tools in the toolbox; it feels literally liberating for people to force themselves to think differently. This is especially true for people who are experienced in a certain field or industry, because they have completely internalized underlying assumptions. It is eye-opening and liberating to be asked to take a very different perspective. It makes people feel 'unstuck' where they were previously part of 'conventional wisdom' thinking.

This technique will guarantee an innovative approach: you will force yourself to come up with a radically new perspective. You can use the tool to reframe products, processes, or projects. Reframing can be applied to something small, such as a team project, or to something very large, such as industrial production paradigms. You can reframe your current approach to energy, to logistics, to communication, or to education.

## YOU DON'T REALLY KNOW YOUR CUSTOMER

Applying reframing to business approaches opens up possibilities for innovation leadership on new approaches. A company sales team has as its core belief that customers only want a fixed product at a fixed price. The assumptions are that customers know the features they want, have a fixed budget in mind and want to compare: they want to be in charge of the purchasing process. Upon investigation, none of these





assumptions prove to be very strong. Customers appreciate responding to sales offers, they are happy to buy a product above their budget as long as it is financed, and above all they enjoy getting individual attention and advice. This is a golden opportunity for innovation leadership on a new product and service line.

A telecommunications company used reframing to overturn their assumptions about delivery to their customers. The assumption was that everyone wants their handsets to be delivered as soon as possible. This meant relying exclusively on expensive 24-hour delivery logistics. What if we turned this around? What if the customer was not impatient, but – shock horror – patient? Such heresy can usually not be spoken out loud. But in the spirit of the tool, such an opposite can be taken seriously. A quick investigation led to the surprising result that more than a third of the customers in fact preferred slower delivery: they were much more focused on being able to choose a time slot than on getting it overnight. Again, innovation leadership sees plenty of opportunities based on this new central belief.

## EMBRACE THE ARTIFICIAL

Why does reframing work? How can it help innovation leadership to shatter the frame of unexamined assumptions? We need to be hit by something which is really incongruous, which we hadn't thought of before, which comes from left field. The proverbial eureka moment which strikes when we are taking a shower, or historically, are emerged in a bath. Most of the stories about innovation leadership include such a eureka moment: suddenly, something that had puzzled or eluded us for a long time makes sense. Usually, though, this happens after a lot of gestation. The mind was considering the problem subconsciously, and then when it relaxes, the idea suddenly hits. The circular structure of benzene was suggested to the German chemist Kekulé in a dream of a serpent eating its own tail. The idea comes to mind as if it is coming out of nowhere, which of course it isn't. It was lying in wait all this time. Yet innovation leadership does not want to be at the mercy of an unexpected eureka moment. We want to provoke the incongruous; we want to be able to apply ourselves to thinking differently.

Innovation leadership often wants to be radical instead of progressive. When we try to be innovative, we tend to work by association. The most widely used thinking technique by innovation leadership is brainstorming. In a short period of time, we come up with a large number of associations, no matter how strange or incongruous. Brainstorming is a very useful technique when you know what you want to do and need variations on how to do it. But in our opinion it is misused as a tool for innovative idea *generation*. When we work by association, we still work within our frame. So how do we get out of our frame?

Innovation leadership is about recognizing that our mind is not on our side when we want to think differently. Our mind would like us to stick to our current frames. So we need to short-circuit its usual processes. In reframing, we do this by the artificiality of language and oppositions. This confronts us with the very opposite position of what we normally believe, and causes an immediate shock to the system: why on



earth would we accept the opposite of what we believe? This leads to a lot of resistance. Resistance is the sign that we are getting somewhere. By forcing ourselves to enunciate the opposite, to write it down, and to consider it, we are planting a new seed in our mind. Then we really push ourselves by looking for extreme ways to phrase our opposites. If we can come up with something really ridiculous, if we can make ourselves laugh, we know we will have broken free of our previous frame of thinking.

Artificiality is the key in thinking differently. It allows for radical solutions and true innovation. Other artificial approaches include Edward de Bono's famous lateral thinking, in which we look at a situation from a different perspective, the "lateral" side. One of the techniques that he uses is to come up with a list of random concepts. The jolt that occurs when you have to put two completely unrelated concepts together brings inspiration. The same result comes out of a research project into scientific creativity in which they proposed that creative inspiration occurs through the juxtaposition of two completely unrelated concepts, such as the "serpent spoon".



## A WHOLE NEW WORLD

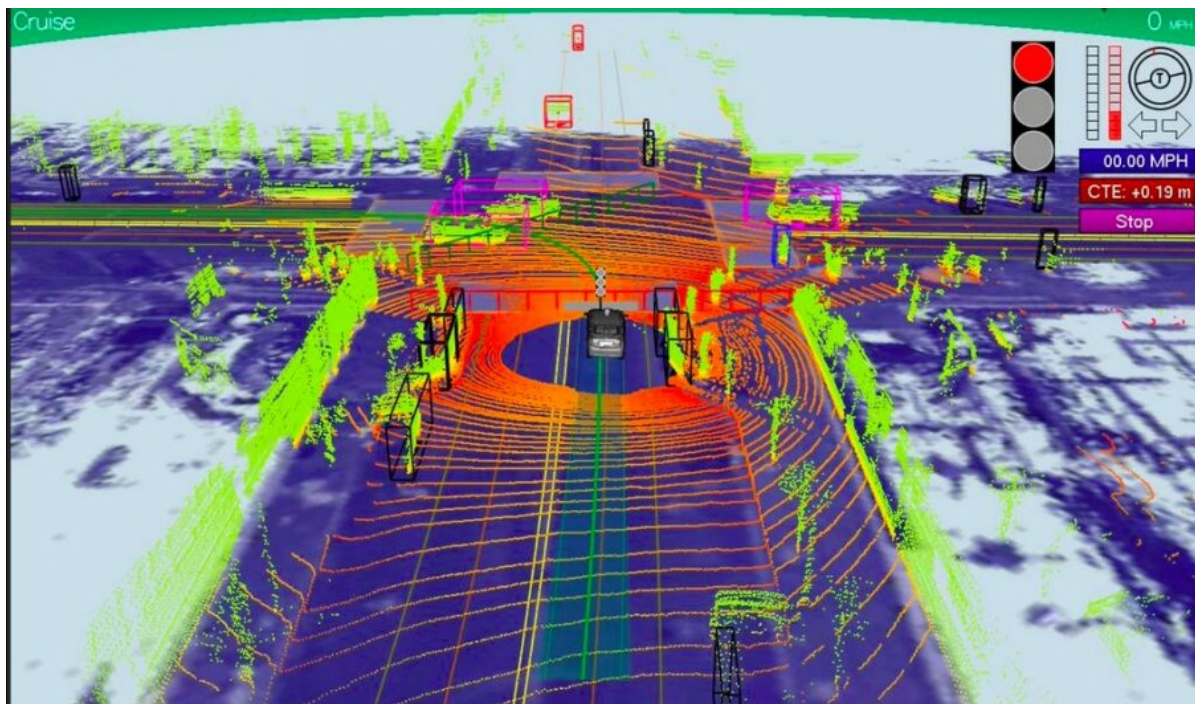


Photo source: <http://www.businessinsider.com/this-is-what-a-google-self-driving-car-sees-at-a-stoplight-2013-4>, Retrieved on December 19, 2013

Innovation leadership is about heralding and giving shape to a whole new world. Once a deep-seated assumption changes, it takes the rest of the frame with it. For example, if we wanted to reframe cars, we could reframe their engines, the road system, or the idea that they are human-driven. Let's take the latter. The concept of the driverless car is an exciting new paradigm, which has been much in the news recently. It has enormous security benefits. There will be far fewer traffic accidents, as these are caused mainly by human error and drunk driving. But driverless cars will disrupt far more than the automobile industry. The advent of driverless cars will also lead to a radically different usage of roads and parking spaces. We will no longer need parking lots, as cars can be continuously on the move, or return home between shifts. The sense of ownership of the automobile will change when we have what are essentially robot-taxis at our beck and call. The trucking industry will change dramatically with delivery-bots. As Brad Templeton explained during a THINK Forum, one radical change in the way we drive will impact many other aspects. All the assumptions about cars, driving, and city planning are ripe for reframing, for disruptive innovation and exciting new business models.

True innovation leadership is about rethinking our current practices; it is about taking the lead in creating something new, something unheard of, something that radically shifts our way of being in the world. In order



to achieve that, we need to challenge the status quo of our life, but also of our mind, of our thinking and our approaches. Innovation leadership means constantly questioning the accepted presuppositions about products, processes and projects. Then you are liberated to create a whole new world.



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As philosopher, trainer in thinking techniques, consultant and former associate professor at Kobe University, Benammar brings an interesting mix of disciplines to the table.

[View Karim's profile](#)



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