

BOOK

Subtract: The Untapped Science of Less

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SYNOPSIS [From the publisher]

We pile on “to-dos” but don’t consider “stop-doings.” We create incentives for good behavior, but don’t get rid of obstacles to it. We collect new-and-improved ideas, but don’t prune the outdated ones. Every day, across challenges big and small, we neglect a basic way to make things better: we don’t subtract. Leidy Klotz’s pioneering research shows us what is true whether we’re building Lego models, cities, grilled-cheese sandwiches, or strategic plans: Our minds tend to add before taking away, and this is holding us back.

But we have a choice—our blind spot need not go on taking its toll. Subtract arms us with the science of less and empowers us to revolutionize our day-to-day lives and shift how we move through the world. More or less.

“Do your resolutions more often start with “I should do more of...” than with “I should do less of...”?”

“Are you busier today than you were three years ago?”

“In our striving to improve our lives, our work, and our society, we overwhelmingly add. As we’ll see in the pages to come, there are many interwoven reasons for this — cultural, economic, historical, and even biological. As we’ll also see, it doesn’t have to be this way.”

“The problem is that we neglect subtraction. Compared to changes that add, those that subtract are harder to think of (quite literally, as we’ll see in the next chapter). Even when we do manage to think of it, subtracting can be harder to implement. But we have a choice. We don’t have to let this oversight go on taking its toll on our cities, our institutions, and our minds. And, make no mistake, overlooking an entire category of change takes a toll.”

“Subtracting is an action. Less is an end state. Sometimes less results from subtraction; other times, less results from not doing anything. There is a world of difference between the two types of less, and it is only by subtraction that we can get to the much rarer and more rewarding type.”

In other words, subtraction is the act of getting to less, but it is not the same as doing less. In fact, getting to less often means doing, or at least thinking, more.”

“Neglecting subtraction is harmful in our households, which now commonly contain more than a quarter of a million items. Someone has to organize and keep track of all those juicers, ill-fitting clothes, Legos, and long-since-deflated monkey balloons from family trips to San Francisco. That’s a lot to pay for and to think

about, and it represents a lot of our time, time that is only getting scarcer, especially when we overlook subtraction as a way to relieve our obviously overbooked schedules.”

“Neglecting subtraction is bad for the planet. As Dr. Seuss recognized nearly half a century ago in his environmentalist classic *The Lorax*, if we hope to leave options, we need to subtract stuff. Now, when there is more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere than is safe, we can’t just add it more slowly (though that would be a good start). We also need to subtract some.”

“I’m not the first to notice the power of taking away. There is plenty of advice that works because it brings us to less: computer scientist Cal Newport preaches digital minimalism; chef Jamie Oliver distills recipes down to five ingredients, and the tidying savant Marie Kondo declutters homes. Each of these gurus guides us to specific ways we can subtract to improve. And their counterintuitive advice brings joy... But why does this advice remain surprising? And why did I need to read three different books to fix the same basic problem in my computing, cooking, and cleaning? It’s been five centuries since Da Vinci defined perfection as when there is nothing left to take away; seven centuries since William of Ockham noted that it is “in vain to do with more what can be done with less,” and two and a half millennia since Lao Tzu advised: “To attain knowledge, add things every day. To attain wisdom, subtract things every day.”

“The COVID-19 pandemic, at horrific cost, has given us a singular chance for change. It has forced us to rethink our daily schedules, our streets and cities, and our society. In our climate commons, the pandemic has so changed travel and consumption that carbon dioxide emissions are veering downward for the first time. What will we do with this blip in our selfish herding? Will we choose to lock in some of the pandemic-imposed less? At the very least, can we agree to permanently subtract the conferences and commuting we haven’t missed?”

“If subtracting is as useful as addition yet is used less often, then there is untapped potential: people are consistently neglecting a basic way to make a change. Such neglect would have something to say about everything from the difficulty San Franciscans had removing their freeway, to our tendencies to clutter our homes, schedules, and minds.”

“We overlook less, whether we’re building or cooking, thinking or composing. When we’re organizing our companies, days, and ideas. Whenever we try to change how things are to how we want them to be. And until we do something about it, we’re missing ways to make our lives more fulfilling, our institutions more effective, and our planet more livable.”

“For many of us, life no longer revolves around a quest for food, and health can even depend on eating less. But we still enjoy eating. Across our long history of chasing calories, eating helped us survive and pass on our genes. Much as I struggle to override it, this evolutionary instinct is what I blame whenever I polish off an entire bag of chips even though I am already full.”

“Evolution itself is a marvelous model of balancing adding and subtraction. In finding adaptations that make us more likely to pass down our genes, natural selection does plenty of downsizing. Our modern brains are smaller than Neanderthals’, for example, but better for us. Sure, the brain centers for language, social behavior, and decision-making (including to envision change) have gotten bigger. But other parts have gotten smaller.”

“Warnings against too much are a common theme across all the major religious texts. For some sects – Franciscans and Calvinists, Zen Buddhists and Hindu ascetics – spirituality meant active disdain for worldly accumulation.”

“Loss aversion is powerful, widespread, and well-publicized. But loss aversion should not excuse our subtraction neglect. The subtraction we are after is an improvement – and improvement is not a loss, even

when it comes via less.”

“Like emergency room doctors, we now have a checklist that gives us room to act and adapt.

- Subtract before improving (e.g., triage)
- Make subtracting first (e.g., Jenga)
- Persist to noticeable less (e.g., Springsteen’s Darkness)
- Reuse your subtractions (e.g., doughnut holes)

“We need to prioritize. If it’s true for construction projects and catheter insertions, it absolutely has to be true for the Anthropocene. There simply are not enough human resources to devote to every possible response to climate change. We can’t do it all. We need to do what will make the most progress.”

“Whether in our bookshelves, in-boxes, or brains, intentional and regular subtraction of information is far better than the alternative. If we don’t sleep, which is when our synapses get pruned, our brains get overloaded and slow down. And if we don’t consciously select information when we are awake, we end up with pulped classics, anxiety from information overload, and smart professors sending email about email making professors dumber.”

“The good news is that when we subtract information from our mental storerooms, our processing speeds up like a computer after closing a memory-intensive program that has been running in the background. Working at full capacity, we can create new knowledge – and perhaps even distill it into wisdom.”

“Less is harder for us to imagine, whether in Legos, grids, or words. Even if we do manage to think of subtracting, innate adding leads to Collyer hoarding; instincts to show competence bring useless subfolders; cultures built by temples make freeways seem sacred; and modern more-ality favors addition to our homes and to our schedules.”

“Invert: Try less before more. Subtract detail even before you act, as with triage. Then, once you are ready to make changes, put subtracting first – play Jenga. And remember, just because we now appreciate that less is not a loss, that does not mean that your audience and customers do. So, tell them about this book and, in the meantime, don’t “subtract.” Instead, clean, carve and reveal. Add a unit of transformation.”

“Expand: Think add and subtract. Nature and Maya Lin show us that these are complementary approaches to change. Adding should cue subtracting, not rule it out. Try accessing a different multitude. The father might see what the bicycle designer misses. If you run out of multitudes, hire an editor. And don’t forget to zoom out to see the field, because stop-doings and negative numbers are not impossible. Plus, the field is where the tension is, and removing it is the “good” way to change systems. So sure, add diversity, but subtracting racism is the prize.”

“Distill: Focus in on the people. Bikes do not balance, but toddlers can. Strip down to what sparks joy. Decluttering delights, and so does the psychology of optimal experience. Use your innate sense for relative difference. Taking away a mammoth is a bigger transformation than adding one. Embrace complexity, but then strive for the essence. Forget objects, remember forces – and pass mechanics. Subtract information and accumulate wisdom.”

“Finally, persist: Keep subtracting. Can you make less undeniable? Bruce Springsteen made Darkness visible. Costa Rica made neutrality noticeable. Chip made an empty go-kart funny. Don’t forget that you can reuse your subtractions, like doughnut holes.”