Visible Thinking

Unlocking Causal Mapping for Practical Business Results

John M. Bryson
Fran Ackermann
Colin Eden
Charles B. Finn

John Wiley & Sons, Ltd
Visible Thinking

Unlocking Causal Mapping for Practical Business Results
Visible Thinking

Unlocking Causal Mapping for Practical Business Results

John M. Bryson
Fran Ackermann
Colin Eden
Charles B. Finn

John Wiley & Sons, Ltd
To all those who have helped us develop causal mapping as a technique, and to all those who will benefit from using it in the future.
## Contents

About the Authors

Preface: Creating the Future You Want – Causal Mapping for Individuals and Groups

### Part I  What Mapping Is and Why and How It Works

1. What to Do When Thinking Matters 3
2. How and Why Mapping Works 21

### Part II  What Do I Think? A Guide to Cognitive Mapping

3. How not to Miss the Boat 45
4. House of the Rising Fun 63
5. It’s a Bummer to Be JB 87

### Part III  What Do We Think? A Guide to Oval Mapping

6. To Merge or not to Merge – That Is the Question! 125
Part IV  Summary and Conclusions  

10  Learning from the Chapters, or How Does This all Fit together and How Can I Make Use of It?  

11  Benefits, Limitations and the Future of Mapping  

Resource A  Glossary of Terms not Defined in the Text  

Resource B  Analysing Causal Maps  

Resource C  A Brief and Selective History of Causal Mapping for Facilitating Thinking and Other Commonly Used Mapping Techniques  

Resource D  Additional Resources  

Resource E  Listing of Process Guidelines  

Index
About the Authors

**John M. Bryson** is a professor of planning and public affairs at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, MN (USA), and has held visiting appointments at the London Business School, University of Strathclyde, University of Oxford and Oxford Brookes University. His research, teaching and consulting interests focus on leadership, strategic management and the design of participation processes. He uses causal mapping in much of this work. Professor Bryson has published ten books and over 80 scholarly articles and book chapters. He consults widely in the US and UK.

**Fran Ackermann** is a professor of strategy and information systems at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow (UK). She is interested in working with groups (public or private, multinationals, or small and medium-sized enterprises) on messy, complex, strategic problems and sees causal mapping as a fundamental aspect of this work. She has consulted widely both within the UK and in Europe, Australia and the USA. She is co-developer (with Colin Eden) of causal mapping software – both for individual use and for groups – and continues to explore means of supporting group working through IT. She has written extensively in the area, having published three books and over 70 scholarly articles.

**Colin Eden** is a professor of strategic management and management science at the University of Strathclyde. His major interests are in: (1) the processes of strategy making in senior management teams, and (2) the success and failure of large projects. He has consulted with the senior management teams of a wide range of public and private organizations in Europe and North America. In all of these activities he uses causal mapping as a part of the process. He is the author of seven books and over 150 scholarly articles in management science and strategic management.
Charles B. Finn is a management professor at the College of Saint Rose, Albany, New York (USA). He has held teaching and management positions at the University of Minnesota and State University of New York. He has worked as a consultant to private, public and non-profit organizations at local, state and federal levels within the USA and has taught and consulted internationally. He has two interests in mapping: (1) how large, diffuse systems can organize for everyday challenges and do the necessary strategic thinking to realize competitive advantages, and (2) how to use mapping to encourage personal and organizational learning and development.
Preface: Creating the Future You Want – Causal Mapping for Individuals and Groups

We all face situations in which **thinking really matters** – either as an individual or as a group – if we are to create the future we want. For example, have you had trouble figuring out what was bothering you, making you anxious or keeping you awake at night? If some parts of your life have not turned out well, do you wonder why? Have you puzzled about how to make your job more satisfying, get the raise you want or acquire the resources you need? Have you wondered about how to make the most persuasive case to your boss, staff or customers? Have you pondered how you might create more satisfied clients or customers? Or maybe your organization, church or community group needs to rethink its strategy. Have you wondered about what the content of the strategy should be and how you might go about developing it with the help of others? Would you like more assurance about your decisions, to be more comfortable with your relationships and generally more in control of your life?

These are all examples of situations where – in order to create the future you want – **thinking really matters**. The questions and answers are important and all have to do with our ability or inability to make reasonable sense of the world. They involve *complex, interconnected issues* in which everything seems to be linked to everything else – and that is part of the problem! Indeed, getting clear about what the issues *are* is at least half the battle. Developing effective responses to the issues involves thoughtful exploration of a number of elements, including **goals**, **strategies** and **actions** to address the issues. The
answers are *not necessarily obvious* and careful thought might even lead to *surprising outcomes*. In circumstances such as these, typically individuals and groups must *talk things out* in order to know what they should want, why they should want it and how they might achieve it.

The purpose of *Visible Thinking* is to help you understand and use the tool of *causal mapping* to make sense of challenging situations, to get more of what you want out of them and less of what you don’t want. Causal mapping is a simple and useful technique for addressing situations where thinking – as an individual or as a group – matters. A causal map is a word-and-arrow diagram in which ideas and actions are causally linked with one another through the use of arrows. The arrows indicate how one idea or action leads to another. Causal mapping makes it possible to articulate a large number of ideas and their interconnections in such a way that people can know *what* to do in an area of concern, *how* to do it and *why*, because the arrows indicate the causes and consequences of an idea or action.

Causal mapping is therefore a technique for linking strategic thinking and acting, helping make sense of complex problems, and communicating to oneself and others what might be done about them. With practice, the use of causal mapping can assist you in moving from “winging it” when thinking matters to a more concrete and rigorous approach that helps you and others achieve success in an easy and far more reliable way.

*Visible Thinking* is the first book to put the power of causal mapping at the disposal of a general management audience. The book helps people understand the theory and practice of causal mapping. It shows how managers can use and benefit from causal mapping in an almost limitless number of areas – indeed, in almost any area where thinking matters!

When an individual uses causal mapping to help clarify their own thinking, we call this technique *cognitive mapping*, because it is related to personal thinking or cognition. When a group maps their own ideas, we call it *oval mapping*, because we often use oval-shaped cards to record individuals’ ideas so that they can be arranged into a group’s map. Cognitive maps and oval maps can be used to create a
strategic plan, because the maps include goals, strategies and actions, just like strategic plans.

Part I of the book uses several examples to present an overview of the theory and practice of mapping. Part II then focuses on cognitive mapping, while Part III shows how to do oval mapping. Part IV pulls the previous sections together, provides guidance on how to do mapping, and summarizes the benefits and limitations of mapping. All parts of the book are built around cases in which the authors have been involved, so the connection with real-life practice should be immediately apparent. A number of resource sections are also included at the end of the book.

Scope

*Visible Thinking* therefore introduces the theory and practice of causal mapping and provides practical guidance on how to do it individually and in groups. The book is based on three important premises. The first premise is that *most people do not know for sure what they think about many important matters*. They know that these matters are complex and important, but they do not know what, if anything, to conclude about them. This can be a cause for discomfort, anxiety, opting out or, in the extreme, alienation. Let us be clear that this premise is meant to be a descriptive and not a pejorative statement. We ourselves do not know what we think about many issues: John and Chuck, who are Americans, are not sure what they think about any number of matters ranging from the societal to the personal. For example, they are unsure what to think about the US federal debt, the best way to stop terrorism, or their respective employers’ most recent annual budgets. They also are not sure what their local neighborhood groups should do, where their families should go on vacation next year, whether to move from the family home to a condominium (John), how to remodel the family home (Chuck) and so on. Similarly, Fran and Colin, who are Brits living in Scotland, are not sure what they think about the Labour Party, the future of their National Health Service, Scottish independence, European Union decision making, the ideal strategy