Book Review - Upstream

Upstream by Dan Heath (Penguin 2020)

When I first heard about this book and read its synopsis, I was eager to get my hands on it. I've enjoyed Dan Heath's earlier works, and this was no exception.

The premise of the book is a principle that few would disagree with, that prevention is better than cure. Through well-chosen social and business case studies, the book delves into the challenges of both identifying upstream causes of complex problems and redesigning systems to rectify them before they happen.

The book explains how we can become blind to exploring upstream interventions and how systems naturally resist these types of changes. It offers ideas for approaching complex problems from a pre-emptive perspective and explores second-order effects.

The early chapters on barriers to upstream thinking, problem blindness, a lack of ownership and tunneling were excellent and very thought provoking.

The book is easy to read and although I had come across some of the case examples in other similar business books, I found the arguments well-made and the suggestions useful.

Upstream should be an addition to your reading list if only to increase your own awareness of why we don't seek preventative solutions more frequently than we do.

Section headings:
1. The Three Barriers to Upstream Thinking
2. Seven Questions for Upstream Leaders
3. Far Upstream

Favorite quote (on the issue of Tunneling, which is when we focus too heavily on short term goals):

"When we create organizations, we're doing it to give people focus. We're essentially giving them license to be myopic." Mark Okerstrom, CEO of Expedia.

Personal Takeaway:
To succeed in upstream efforts, you need to "surround the problem", attract all the key people onto your team who can address all the dimensions of the problem and give them a role.

Recommended? Yes

4/5*