

CHALLENGE ASSUMPTIONS,
OVERCOME OBSTACLES,
MITIGATE RISK

BREAK

THE

RULES!



Counter-

The **6¹** Conventional
Mindsets of Entrepreneurs

THAT CAN HELP ANYONE CHANGE THE WORLD

JOHN MULLINS, PhD

WILEY

What thought leaders and investors are saying about *Break the Rules!*

“Stunning! The mindset guide for entrepreneurs who want to stand out from the rest of business leaders and make a difference in their team culture. A must-read!”

—**Daniel Marcos**

Co-Founder and CEO, Growth Institute

“I’ve often said that you can’t teach a person to be an entrepreneur, but John Mullins’s book comes as close as you’ll get to doing just that by uncovering the mindsets that lead to entrepreneurial actions. By focusing on these mindsets, Mullins suggests ways to bring out the entrepreneur in many of us.”

—**Rob Johnson**

Visiting Professor, IESE Business School

“The ‘entrepreneurial mindset’ is an enigma. To the uninitiated it is a mystery how some people just seem to have the knack for recognizing opportunity, attracting talent, and initiating focused, driven collaboration that creates value for customers, and potentially fortunes, for their team, their investors, and themselves. With *Break the Rules!*, John Mullins has decoded the mystery. He pulls back the curtain to reveal six key behaviors that entrepreneurs use to “break the rules” and go where others have feared to tread. With this guide to the entrepreneurial mindset, we have a roadmap that can guide future entrepreneurs and innovators, in big companies as well as startups, to move from insight to action, from idea to impact.”

—**Jerome Engel**

Adjunct Professor (Emeritus),

Haas School of Business, UC Berkeley

Founding Executive Director,

Lester Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation

Co-Author, *Clusters of Innovation in the Age of Disruption*

“*Break the Rules!* is a highly accessible book that provides crucial insights that will increase the chance of success as an entrepreneur. John Mullins is both a gifted storyteller and an astute observer of the unique attributes and mindsets of those rare individuals who can give birth to major new companies. If you don’t have the good fortune of taking one of John’s classes, do yourself a favor and read this book.”

—**Bruce Golden**
Partner, Accel

“Research shows that successful entrepreneurs respond differently to events and circumstances than do other decision makers in business. In this insightful and fun-to-read book, best-selling author and business school professor John Mullins uncovers six key elements that constitute the mindset of entrepreneurs, thereby making their unconventional, counterintuitive way of thinking accessible to everyone. With a little reflection and practice you can improve your own entrepreneurial skills!”

—**Marc Gruber, PhD**
Vice President for Innovation, École Polytechnique Fédérale de
Lausanne (EPFL)
Co-Author, *Where to Play*

“It is often said that it isn’t about the cards you were dealt or how the game changes while you play it, but rather how you approach it that matters most. In this, his latest book, Professor Mullins accurately captures the biggest weapon an entrepreneur has: their mindset. He outlines the key ingredients of an entrepreneurial mindset in a form that’s applicable to current/aspiring entrepreneurs and corporate innovators alike and provides an inspiring set of applied examples to help you, the reader, transform how you approach the inevitable obstacles that will stand in your way.”

—**Carlos Eduardo Espinal**
Managing Partner, Seedcamp
Author, *Fundraising Field Guide*

“*Break the Rules!* does for the entrepreneurial mindset what *Getting to Plan B* and *The Customer-Funded Business* have done for startup founders who need a large dose of reality to succeed at creating sustainable, scalable ventures. Especially noteworthy is the inclusion of both ethical challenges and corporate innovation. The “lessons learned” sections are a treasure trove of invaluable insights gleaned by Mullins’s razor-sharp (and always pragmatic) perspectives.”

—**Lisa Getzler**
Executive Director, Baker Institute for Entrepreneurship, Creativity &
Innovation, Lehigh University

“*Break the Rules!* illustrates that changing the world through entrepreneurship requires new ways of thinking and less obvious ways of acting. We are living in a time where we can no longer rely on the big companies to create the future. Everything big starts small, and small is where the magic happens. Mullins reminds us how to create the magic.”

—**Heidi Neck, PhD**

Timmons Professor of Entrepreneurship, Babson College
Chief Education Officer and Co-Founder, Venture Blocks

“As a venture capitalist, I prefer backing mission-driven entrepreneurs who are so passionate about the problem they are solving that it becomes their life’s work. But I never thought about segmenting problem-first from product-first. That’s a remarkably useful insight. I must admit that I’ve been blinded by product, especially these days when achieving product-market fit is a celebrated milestone. As always, John’s frameworks are actionable, even for an industry veteran like me.”

—**Hussein Kanji**

Partner, Hoxton Ventures

“John Mullins is the easiest-to-understand contrarian in entrepreneurship. Whether it is *Getting to Plan B* or creating *The Customer-Funded Business*, John excels at identifying and teaching us the best and least-traveled paths to success. This volume builds on his approach, providing six ways to think and act like entrepreneurs, and create value for yourself and others. If you read only one John Mullins book, make it this one.”

—**Jerome Katz, PhD**

Brockhaus Chair of Entrepreneurship, Saint Louis University
Author, *Entrepreneurial Small Business*

“Mullins has done it again! In this brilliant book he has captured the essence of the entrepreneurial mindset. His six principles emerge from careful study of scores of successful entrepreneurs across the globe. His practical but counterintuitive advice will drive value in every business.”

—**Murray Low, PhD**

Faculty of Executive Education, Columbia Business School

“What a wonderful read. I truly enjoyed learning about so many interesting cases from all around the world, some well known and highly successful,

others less known or ultimately unsuccessful. John Mullins, drawing upon his entrepreneurial and academic experience, has been able to distil important lessons from these cases. Some lessons are intuitive but not always straightforward to implement, others go against conventional wisdom. At the very least, every entrepreneur should carefully consider how these lessons can be used to enhance their own venture.”

—**Sophie Manigart, PhD**

Professor of Corporate Finance and Faculty Dean, Vlerick Business School

“While there is lots of talk about how entrepreneurs *act* differently, the book shows how it all starts with *thinking* differently! The book shows how to think—and act—like an entrepreneur.”

—**Henning Piezunka, PhD**

Associate Professor, INSEAD

“In *Break the Rules! The Six Counter-Conventional Mindsets of Entrepreneurs*, John Mullins brings to bear his decades of experience as an entrepreneur and entrepreneurship educator to distill the six most important mindsets start-up founders and corporate entrepreneurs need to acquire in order to enhance their chances of survival and growth. These mindsets, explained simply and powerfully, emphasize customer centricity, focus, frugality, and proactiveness. The explanation of the mindsets, rightly labeled counter-conventional, is enriched with compelling examples of how entrepreneurs from different countries applied these mindsets to overcome difficulties and build successful organizations.”

—**S. Ramakrishna Velamuri, PhD**

Professor and Dean, Mahindra University School of Management

“John Mullins has done it again! Could not put the book down. Matching takeaways with real-life examples to learn from successes and, equally importantly, failures. Simple, powerful, pragmatic. A must-read.”

—**Anastasios Economou**

Global Chairman, Young Presidents’ Organization (YPO)

“In this special book, Mullins has tapped into the essence of entrepreneurship and its power to change people’s lives. He translates the entrepreneurial mindset from vague concept to practical guide, showing us how to think and

act if we want to launch new things. Through stories and practical examples, he demonstrates how this mindset is not one thing, but six different approaches to making change happen. In the process, he dispels the myths and removes the mystery from what it actually means to *be entrepreneurial*.”

—**Michael Morris, PhD**

University of Notre Dame

Co-Author, *What Do Entrepreneurs Create?*

“John Mullins’s experiences as entrepreneur, educator, and author already attest to both the breadth and depth of his true understanding of how entrepreneurship works on the ground and how that can be brought into classrooms. As an entrepreneur and academic who studies mindsets of expert entrepreneurs, I find the six simple rules that John suggests breaking to be delightful, useful, and actionable. From an intellectual perspective, each of these are components of the invaluable “bias for action” that is well attested to in research. In a world in which entrepreneurship education continues to exhibit a misguided bias for analysis and hypothesis testing rather than a quicker move into cocreative action and speedy reaction that characterizes the entrepreneurial mindset, this book serves to get our students and all entrepreneurs ‘moving’ in the right direction.”

—**Saras Sarasvathy, PhD**

Paul M. Hammaker Professor of Business Administration, The Darden School, University of Virginia

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The insights in this book are drawn from more than 20 years of field research, some of which provided the basis for my earlier journal article, “The Counter-Conventional Mindsets of Entrepreneurs,” *Business Horizons* (2017) 60, 597–601.

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Acknowledgments

As I've often said to my students, entrepreneurship played to win is a team sport, not a solo sport, notwithstanding the mythology to the contrary. The same can be said of the creation of a book like the one you now hold in your hands. There are people too numerous to mention—most of them entrepreneurs—from whom I've learned the many lessons that comprise the heart of this book. I thank all of them profusely. Over my three decades as an academic, I've learned above all that wisdom resides mostly outside, not inside, our hallowed halls or our faculty offices or classrooms. Wisdom about what makes entrepreneurs “entrepreneurial” has been out there to be discovered, and the discovery process that's led to this book has been a richly rewarding one.

My thanks must begin with my incredibly able research partner Christina Brant, whose dogged pursuit of every lead and every published article about many of the entrepreneurs and their companies profiled in this book literally made the book possible. Thank you, Christina! Equally important are my past London Business School students and others who collaborated with me in developing the original case studies from which my discovery of these six break-the-rules mindsets arose: Alessandro Ananias and Brian Forde (SubWay Link); Tiffany Putimahtama (MOVE Guides); Darice Gubbins and John Walker (Simon Cohen); David Prinster (Apex Ski Boots); Elizabeth Philp (Pandora); Hicham Sharara (Visual Optical); Shira Conradi (Budgetplaces.com); Ambika Patni and Shreedhar Munshi (The Loot); and Payne Miller and Qusai Kanchwalla (TeamLease).

Without the development of those case studies, the idea for writing this book would have never materialized. And without the incredibly rich learning platform that London Business School has provided to my students and so many others like them from around the world—and to me—we'd all be worse off, for sure. Thank you, LBS, and thanks for the research funding and for our robust intellectual climate, too!

Of course, my thanks go out to the protagonists in these and my many other case studies, the founders, investors, and others who so generously opened their doors, and often their books, so that I might have compelling, real-world teaching materials in my portfolio to enable the next generation of entrepreneurs to learn from the challenges they encountered and their successes and failures of one kind or another: Arnold Correia (SubWay Link); Brynne Kennedy and Steve Black (MOVE Guides); Simon Cohen (Simon Cohen); John Murphy (Apex Ski Boots); Martin Høyer-Hansen, Nikolaj Vejlsgaard, and Per Enevoldsen (Pandora); Aziz Mebarek and Karim Trad (Visual Optical); John Erceg (Budgetplaces.com); Jay Gupta (The Loot); Tristram and Rebecca Mayhew (GoApe!); and Manish Sabharwal and Ashok Reddy (TeamLease). Thank you all.

Thank you to the Young Presidents' Organization and the Entrepreneurs' Organization for trusting me and my London Business School colleagues to develop and deliver impactful annual learning experiences for YPO and EO members since 2003. The learning from which I have benefited has, for me, been exceptional. Most of whatever useful insights and ideas appear in this book are the direct result of conversations with my many YPO and EO friends—whether in their offices or in classroom settings—about their journeys. Any errors in interpreting or understanding the insights, ideas, and the lessons they hold are, of course, mine alone.

The research and the learning, though, is only the start of what makes a book like this possible. The encouragement of the

wonderful Eloise Cook and former *Business Horizons* editor Jeffery McMullen (who published my earlier and much more succinct journal-article-length treatment of these ideas) convinced me that the effort to turn my earlier observations into a book were going to be worth the time and effort. Thank you, Eloise and Jeff.

Wiley's Richard Narramore was instrumental in helping me envision who the audience for this book might be. His belief that the six mindsets hold promise for pretty much any businessperson—not just entrepreneurs—has shaped the book in many ways. Thanks, Richard, for your insights and your focus on the importance of identifying and articulating the benefits that this book might deliver.

As was the case in publishing my first Wiley book, *The Customer-Funded Business*, the entire Wiley team has been a joy to work with. Kim Wimpsett, my developmental editor, brought keen insights to much of the prose and, in particular, to the titles and subtitles we've given each chapter. Details like these matter. Thank you, Kim! The work of the Straive design team and Paul McCarthy's work on the book's cover were superb. I love the broken pencil, Paul! Last but not least, managing editor Debbie Schindlar and the incredibly well-organized Jessica Filippo helped us all keep the trains running on time! Thanks to all of you and your colleagues at Wiley!

Finally, my heartfelt thanks go to my family. My parents, the late Jack and Alice Mullins, who instilled in me from an early age a love of learning and of writing, too. My wife Donna, whose love and patience have sustained our relationship for nearly 50 years. Every time I embark on writing a book, Donna worries that she will see “a lot of the back of my head” as I focus for months on end with bringing a book like this one into being. And she was right—again! Though Donna might like me to slow down just a little, at least sometime soon, the words “slow” and “stop” just don't seem to be part of my lexicon. The fact that

I love writing and I love my work—as much as I love Colorado’s great outdoors and London’s incredible vitality and cultural diversity—makes me a fortunate person, indeed, sometimes to Donna’s chagrin. Thank you, Donna, for sharing with me all the adventures we’ve had together over so many years, book-writing among them.

I’ll close by thanking all the entrepreneurs whose creative and tireless efforts, often against long odds, have made our world a better place to live, to work, and to play. It is they who create the vast majority of the net new jobs around the world. It is they who provide opportunities for their employees to work, learn, and grow—and perhaps adopt their own entrepreneurial mindsets, too. It’s they, more than anyone else, in my view, who hold the key to our collective future. I hope you, my readers, will bring *your* entrepreneurial talent and energy—and your new entrepreneurial mindset—to the party and join them!

John Mullins

Summer 2022

www.johnwmullins.com

www.break-the-rules.net

Preface: Why This Book?

These days, it seems, just about everybody wants to be an entrepreneur or part of a fast-growing entrepreneurial venture. Most large companies say they want to be more entrepreneurial, too, though most don't like the risk and uncertainty that comes with the territory. Sadly, however, most entrepreneurial ventures fail—some sooner, some later—so the entrepreneurial path, whether for those who lead the journey or those who participate therein, is typically rocky at best.

With that reality in mind, a couple of years ago, I was taking stock of what I'd learned over my many years of both having been an entrepreneur—with a win, a draw, and a loss to my name—and having studied entrepreneurs of all shapes,

“Entrepreneurs and the counter-conventional mindsets they embrace are different from most other businesspeople in some fundamental ways—six ways, as it turns out.”

sizes, and aspirations during this, my second career as a business school professor. A picture—an epiphany, perhaps—emerged: Entrepreneurs are different from the rest of their peers in the business world. I'd seen it. I'd heard it. I'd felt it. You may know it to be true, too. Duh! Entrepreneurs and the counter-conventional mindsets they embrace are different from most other businesspeople in some fundamental ways—six ways, as it turns out. But, so what? Why might my discovery be of interest to a reader like you?

My Epiphany: It's Your Mindset That Can Take You Where You Want to Go

From my ringside seat, I've observed closely how many of the world's most successful entrepreneurs think and act. How they take in information and what they do with it. How they respond to circumstances that come their way. In short, I've observed that what's different about successful entrepreneurs is not their drive, as most are no more or no less driven than many leaders in the corporate world are. It's not their personalities, as they are all as different as you are from me. It's not their willingness to take risk, because what the good ones do is find ways to offload the ever-present risk onto others or mitigate it. They manage risk. They don't take risk, at least not willingly.

So, what's the difference? It's their *mindsets* that cause entrepreneurs to think and act fundamentally differently from many of their peers in large, well-established businesses. Moreover, these mindsets fly in the face of much of what we teach—and have taught for decades—in business schools. They fly in the face of what we have come to accept as near-universal truths about how business works. They fly in the face of what most people think one should do to lead and manage a successful business. In short, they break the conventional rules.

“These mindsets fly in the face of much of what we teach—and have taught for decades—in business schools.”

Thus, in this book, you'll read about these counter-conventional, break-the-rules mindsets, six of them, to be exact. They will be brought to life by the stories of well-known and iconic entrepreneurs like Tesla's Elon Musk, Bharti AirTel's Sunil Bharti Mittal, Amazon's Jeff Bezos, and others. They'll also be brought to life, perhaps surprisingly, by the stories of inspiring entrepreneurs who are much like you. Men and women who have created and led unsung, little-known entrepreneurial ventures

to sometimes modest, sometimes astonishing levels of success. Even people who have broken the conventional rules to get things done inside large established businesses like Nestlé.

A book was needed to bring the mindsets they so viscerally demonstrate to life so you, too, can put their lessons into your entrepreneurial persona, so the world can benefit from what you create and deliver. With your new mindset in hand, you'll be well prepared to embark on or ramp up an entrepreneurial journey to wherever you'd like to go, whether your journey begins in a co-working space, in your kitchen or garage, or deep inside an established organization!

Making *Their* Mindsets *Yours*

I'll introduce the book in Chapter 1, where I'll tell one such story and provide an overview of the six counter-conventional, break-the-rules mindsets that characterize some of yesterday's, today's, and I expect tomorrow's most inspiring entrepreneurs. In Chapters 2 through 7, I'll then dig deeply into each of the six mindsets, one chapter and one mindset at a time, drawing from these remarkable case studies the lessons that readers like you can learn and put into practice.

Happily, in my work with thousands of entrepreneurs from all over the world, I've discovered that the six mindsets can be taught, and, even better, they can be learned and applied in business and other organizational settings of all sizes and kinds. Breaking the conventional rules is not rocket science. It's an attitude. A mindset. It's what's enabled so many entrepreneurs to transform the way we live, work, and play today. Their mindsets—and *yours*—hold the key that can sometimes make the impossible possible.

“Breaking the conventional rules is not rocket science. It's an attitude. A mindset.”

Who Should Read This Book?

If you are someone who wants to start or grow your own entrepreneurial venture or work in a fast-growing company, one that's going to make the world just a bit better in one way or another, this book is for you.

Similarly, if you're the leader of a larger and more established, and perhaps slower-growing, business and you're trying to find people who are—or teach people to be—more “entrepreneurial” than the sometimes set-in-their-ways employees who make change so difficult to carry out in organizations like yours, this book is for you, too.

As observer Bill Joy noted nearly two decades ago, in describing what was happening in large companies at that time in a short but profound op-ed piece in *Fortune* magazine, “Innovation is happening everywhere. But mostly elsewhere.”¹

So, let me be clear. Who is this book for?

- Aspiring entrepreneurs of any age and any level of business experience who are considering setting forth on an entrepreneurial journey into what is always the unknown. I don't have to tell you that you'll face long odds. This book will help you confront them.
- Those already walking the entrepreneurial path with dreams of scaling up. The sad reality is that most start-ups remain small forever. They simply don't scale, for one reason or another. This book's insights will help *you* be among those whose businesses do.
- Anyone else in business, anywhere, who wants to make their part of the business—or all of it, if you're its leader—more “entrepreneurial.” And, in so doing, change the world, or at least your small part of it.

Why John Mullins?

For more than 30 years, I've had the good fortune to rigorously study what makes entrepreneurs tick and their ventures thrive—or fail. I've done this in three ways, each of which has served as an important source of the insights into entrepreneurs and their mindsets that this book delivers.

The first way is by having researched and written three trade books, each chock-full of captivating and insightful case studies, from which I've learned so much. Each of those books focused on one crucial aspect of the entrepreneurial journey: assessing opportunities, so you pursue an attractive one and don't waste your time on the pursuit of a no-hoper (*The New Business Road Test*); figuring out a business model that will actually work (*Getting to Plan B*); and finding a way to finance your venture without selling your soul—and your freedom and control—to business angels or venture capital investors (*The Customer-Funded Business*). These three books, taken together, have set the stage for the insights in this one.

The second source of my “entrepreneurs are different” epiphany and the insights that comprise it, and the one to which I've devoted most of my research and writing time, is the case studies I've developed on more than 50 entrepreneurial companies and their founders. The process of developing all these case studies has afforded me an intimate ringside seat into what's driven their entrepreneurial journeys—some phenomenally successful, others less so.

“**The process of developing all these case studies has afforded me an intimate ringside seat.**”

The third source, and perhaps the richest, is the opportunity to have led engaging case discussions with thousands of highly motivated, high-powered entrepreneurs over the past 20 years. Thanks to my role as an entrepreneurship professor at one of the world's top business schools, I've been privileged to

develop and deliver executive education programs for members of the Young Presidents' Organization (YPO) and the Entrepreneurs' Organization (EO) annually since 2003.

The learning that goes on within such learning communities—whether peer to peer, professor to participants, or, most importantly, in the creation of this book, participants to professor—is a highlight of my work, year after year. This book would not exist without the knowledge I've gained from and about so many YPOers and EOers. It's their embodiment of these six counter-conventional, break-the-rules mindsets that we can thank for whatever lessons you take away from this book.

Off You Go!

If you are among those who are eager to be a leader and change maker, whether in a new venture of your own choosing, in a fast-growing start-up that looks like it might be on a glide path to the moon, or in a much larger enterprise that's seeking to become more entrepreneurial, adopting any of these six mindsets into who *you* will be well worth your time and effort. I promise. Are you intrigued? Turn the page and get started on breaking the rules!

JWM, Summer 2022