Episode 53: Embrace the Chaos

Introduction

To many of us, the desire to bring order to chaos can be nearly irresistible. It’s a desire that extends to many aspects of our lives: Managers tell employees to get organized. Politicians are elected on promises to clean up Washington. Parents tell their children to clean their room.

But economist and writer Tim Harford thinks we’re underestimating the value of disorder. In this episode of Hidden Brain, we talk with Harford about his new book, *Messy*, and how an embrace of chaos is beneficial to musicians, speechmakers, politicians – and the rest of us.

Study Guide Questions

Tim Harford describes a study about clean desk policies and office environments. In this study, the researchers separate participants into four different groups and have them do office work in a different office environment.

Describe the experimental methods and each of the four groups.

Describe the results (e.g. which group was the most productive). Be sure to discuss what happened with the fourth group.
Offer an explanation for these findings.

Harford and Shankar then turn their attention to politics, specifically the Brexit vote and Donald Trump’s campaign. Harford states that “Trump is a master of using chaos to his advantage.” Describe what he means by that. Be sure to point to “chaotic” moments in the Trump campaign. How might these have been different from similar moments in campaigns of other politicians (including Clinton’s campaign)?

They also discuss the Brexit vote. Describe the dynamics between the two “leave” campaigns and how these dynamics ended up benefiting the pro-Brexit side of the debate. After describing Harford’s argument, find another example of chaos in a political campaign. Did it help or hurt the campaign? Why?