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 begins this interview with the story of a famous musician who had to perform a concert with a broken piano. This “messy” situation ended up resulting in beautiful music. This leads Harford to state that “very often we’re faced with the unplayable piano and actually we produce something great out of it.” Here, the *unplayable piano* is used as a metaphor.

Describe what the “unplayable piano” means here in more general terms.

Through this episode, we see that disruptions and surprises can sometimes lead to better results, even though we try to avoid these disruptions. Give some examples from the episode.
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.

The groups are:

1. A group with no decorations in the office
2. A group with some decorations in the office, determined by the researchers.
3. A group that gets to pick their own decorations in the office.
4. A group that at first gets to pick their own decorations but then the researchers change these decorations.

Which group was the most productive?

What happened with the fourth group?

What did this study inspire Harford to do in his own life at home?

Tim Harford and Shankar turn their attention towards politics, specifically the Brexit vote and the Donald Trump campaign.
Harford states that “Trump is a master of using chaos to his advantage.” Explain what he means by this. Do you agree or disagree? Was Trump’s campaign more “chaotic” – or seem more chaotic – than a typical political campaign?

Harford says that there were two different campaigns that wanted Britain to leave the European Union but that these campaigns did not get along with each other. How did this end up working towards the advantage of pro-Brexit groups?

Harford describes other situations in which “chaos [is used] as a weapon.” List two examples.

Harford talked to Brian Eno, a musician and producer who had an interesting strategy for creating new music. Why would music producer Brian Eno put musicians he worked with in stressful situations?