

**Good news-** It is a stimulating book that made me more seriously contemplate the alarming nature of our rapidly changing and crazy world; a world in which uncertainty and indeterminacy are givens, and avalanches, negative cascades and tectonic shifts are ever-present dangers.

**Bad news-** A little "new agey", political, and sometimes fuzzy. I needed a thesaurus to help me several times. It was also difficult to glean some practical applications and tactics.

**Good news-** I worked extra hard on this one to find you those applications and tactics! Hopefully you can put them to use right away.

### Summary:

Joshua Cooper Ramo is the managing director of Kissinger Associates; the controversial "geostrategic advisory firm" founded by the former secretary of state, and was formerly an editor for Time Magazine. In this provocative book, Mr. Ramo argues that today's complex, interconnected, globalized world requires policy makers willing to toss out old assumptions (about cause and effect, deterrence and defense, nation states and balances of power) and embrace creative new approaches. Today's world, he suggests, requires resilient pragmatists who, like the most talented Silicon Valley venture capitalists on the one hand or the survival-minded leadership of Hezbollah on the other, possess both an intuitive ability to see problems in a larger context and a willingness to realign their organizations continually to grapple with ever-shifting challenges and circumstances. He assesses the precarious state of today's post-cold-war world in which nation states face asymmetric threats from the likes of terrorists, drug cartels and computer hackers.

The central image that the author uses to evoke what he calls this "age of surprise" is Per Bak's sand pile. Danish-American physicist, Per Bak, argued two decades ago that if grains of sand were dropped on a pile one at a time, the pile, at some point, would enter a critical state in which another grain of sand could cause a large avalanche, or nothing at all. It is a hypothesis that shows that a small event can have momentous consequences and that seemingly stable systems can behave in highly unpredictable ways.

It is also a hypothesis that Ramo employs in this book as a metaphor for a complex world in which changes in politics, ecosystems or financial markets take place not in smooth, linear progressions but as sequences of fast, sometimes catastrophic events. Real-life sand-pile avalanches, like the collapse of the Soviet Union or the 1929 crash of the stock market, the author declares, demand "a complete remapping of the world". Policymakers must dump a lot of their old thinking to cope with this unpredictable new order.

As Ramo observes, "Theories that involve only armies and diplomats don't have much use" when "confronted with the peculiar nature of a financially interconnected world, where danger, risk and profit are linked in ways that can be impossible to spot and manage" ...and complex systems "tend to become more complex as time goes on"

And the systems never get simpler. "There was no moment at which they would evaporate or condense into a single, easy-to-spot target such as the U.S.S.R. The 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, for example, was a single very knotty event that, in turn, gave birth to hundreds of jihadist groups, each of which developed different methods of terror, particular techniques of attack and destruction, which themselves were always changing and evolving."

In this sand-pile world, a small group of terrorists armed with box cutters can inflict a terrible blow on a superpower as Al Qaeda did on 9/11/2001,

just as bands of insurgents in Iraq managed to keep the mighty United States military at bay for years.

Iraq, Ramo notes, is a war that showcased all of America's most "maladaptive" tendencies. It was inaugurated on the premise of flawed thinking and planning: that it would have "a clean, fast end" and would lead to a democratic regime that would transform the Middle East in a positive fashion. And the certainty of administration officials not only led to incorrect assumptions (like the bet that "the 'ecosystem' of Iraq would settle into something stable that could be left to run itself") but also resulted in an ill-planned and rigid occupation that was "incapable of the speedy refiguring that life in a war zone" inevitably requires.

As Ramo states, "we live in a revolutionary age," defined by problems whose complexity, unpredictability and interconnectedness increasingly defy our efforts at control (consider: terrorism, global warming, pandemics, and financial meltdowns). States no longer dominate, "new actors" abound, and the day belongs to the fleet and adaptive. These threatening new dynamics demand, in Ramo's view, nothing less than "a complete reinvention of our ideas of security," even the reversal of "a couple of millennia of Western intellectual habits." Outmoded notions like deterrence and balance of power must give way to the new "defining concept" of "resilience." We must "innovate" and "keep learning," as a society and in our dealings with the rest of the world.

## Applications:

**So how should leaders cope with the sand-pile world?** How can they learn to “ride the earthquake” and protect their countries from the worst fallout of such tremors? Mr. Ramo suggests that they must learn to build resilient societies with strong immune systems: instead of undertaking the impossible task of trying to prepare for every possible contingency, they ought to focus on things like “national health care (oops), construction of a better transport infrastructure and investment in education.”

He suggests that leaders should develop ways of looking at problems that focus more on context than on reductive answers. And he talks about people learning to become gardeners instead of architects, of embracing Eastern ideas of indirection instead of Western patterns of confrontation, of seeing “threats as systems, and not objects.” **So.....**

### 1. Get smarter and think differently

Really think out of the box in planning, problem solving and more. Your competitors are.

Read more about new ways of thinking. Google interesting and new topics highlighted in this BVC Opinion.

### 2. Change and Lead Change More Quickly Than Ever

The pace will never slow down. It will only get faster. So understand it, benefit from it and help others understand it and benefit from it too.

### 3. Connect Rather Than Alienating, Isolating or Striking Back

This is a tough one, but as I have taught for years, in the face of conflict we all have options and all are appropriate at times. We can:

- Avoid
- Accommodate
- Compete
- Compromise or
- Collaborate

This author certainly leans toward compromise and collaboration and a bit more of that would certainly be helpful in this “unthinkable” new age.

### 4. Do Unthinkably Decent Things

Use your imagination in the workplace, at home, in other walks of life to make a POSITIVE difference. If not you, who and if not now, when?

### 5. Step Up, Be Bold, Be Courageous

And answer this question posed by the author: What does this new age demand of me?

## And Finally:

I work with many clients on Decision Making, Communication, Team Building, Conflict, Executive Coaching and Organization Change issues and have already put aspects of this book to use with some of them. I intend to continue using what I learn about this topic with more clients in the future. If you want more thoughts about this book, or want to add your own, check out my blog. You can visit it at <http://richsteel.blogspot.com/> This opinion and others are posted on my web site: [www.rsbc.com](http://www.rsbc.com) To talk more about this and other topics, e-mail me (Rich Steel) at [rsbc@aol.com](mailto:rsbc@aol.com) or call me at my office on 610 388 3680 or on my cell at 610 324 8466.