



Impossible Thinking, by Yoram Wind

Until 1954, the four minute mile was something beyond human comprehension, and thus beyond human achievement. It was believed to

be a real physical limit for a human being to run a mile in four minutes or less. "The four minute mile was the goal that athletes and sportsmen had talked of and dreamt about for so many years," wrote British runner, Roger Bannister. Like climbing Mount Everest before Hillary, Bannister wrote, runners "used to think it was quite impossible, and beyond the reach of any runner." It seemed to be as absolute a limit as the waterfalls cascading off the edge of the Earth were to early mariners. And it proved to be just as much a mirage. In May 1954, on an Oxford track, Bannister shattered this barrier, running the mile in 3 minutes 59.4 seconds. Two months later, in Finland, Bannister's "miracle mile" was again broken by Australian rival John Landy, who achieved a time of 3 minutes 56 seconds. Within three years, 16 other runners had also broken this record. What happened in those three years? Was there a sudden growth spurt in human evolution? Was there a genetic engineering experiment that created a new race of super runners? No, the basic human equipment was

the same. What changed was the mental model. The runners of the past had been held back by a mindset that said they could not surpass the four minute mile. When that limit was broken, the others saw that they could do something they had previously thought impossible.

Transforming our world begins with changing the way we think about it. The more we understand the role of mental models in this process, and the better able we are to recognize these models, the better we can examine the strengths of our models and their limitations. We can sustain the models that allow us to act effectively in the world and get ride of those that constrain us unnecessarily. If Roger Bannister had accepted the barrier of the four-minute mile as a real, physical limitation, he might never have tried to surpass it. As Bannister writes, "No one can say, 'You must not run faster than this, or jump higher than that.' The human spirit is indomitable." --Yoram Wind and Colin Crook

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