

IDEA-LINKS

the

new

creativity

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JIM LINK



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To all . . .

creative people who feel misunderstood.

*“noncreative” people who’ve been misdiagnosed
or given the wrong prescription.*

*leaders and managers who are struggling to
make their teams more creative.*

I hope this helps.

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Introduction

Can You *Really* Become More Creative?

What if I told you that much of what you've heard about creativity has sent you down the wrong path? That getting to the “Eureka!” or “Aha!” moment you've been searching for isn't the result of fun, or play, or some magical unleashing. Instead, it's the result of two simple disciplines that creative people have followed most of their lives. And what if I told you I could teach you and your team how to become more creative by following these two simple disciplines? Would you think it's possible? If you're skeptical, I understand.

Say Goodbye to Wacky

When I speak to corporate audiences, I often ask people to rate how much they think their creativity has improved over the last five, ten, or fifteen years. Most admit to no gain. A small number think they've gotten a little better—an equal number, a little worse. Some believe their organizations have become more innovative, but not because of any increase in

their personal creativity. It's not for lack of trying. Companies and individuals spend billions of dollars each year on creativity books, creativity training, and motivational speakers, but a 2010 *Newsweek* cover story concluded we're actually much less creative than twenty years ago.¹ So what gives? Why aren't all the books and training and speakers making us more creative?

The most common creativity books contain exhaustive lists of creative exercises, all recycling similar approaches and calling them something different. If you picked up this book hoping you or your team could become more creative, there's a good chance you own a few creative exercise books as well. I own a bunch. Here's the problem with creative exercise books: The exercises will work, but people rarely use them. I know the exercises in these books can work because I use variations of them when I run my own ideation sessions. I know they're rarely used, because the people I work with tell me so. Unless you're a professional ideation moderator, there are too many exercises and never enough time to find the right one for the problem at hand. So the exercise books adorn bookshelves, gather dust, and create the illusion of greater personal creativity.

The other shortcoming of creative exercise books is that they don't actually make you a more creative person. They are to creativity what joke books are to humor. If you recite a joke from a joke book and people laugh, you're funny at that moment. But you aren't any funnier as a person. Creativity exercises are like that—if you manage to find the right exercise and use it properly, it may help you create an idea. But it won't make you any more creative as a person, once the book is back on the shelf.

Beyond the creative exercise books are speakers and seminars, many of which are very energizing and fun. Some teach you to use improvisational humor; others advise you to suppress your inner critic, or forgive your third-grade teacher for laughing at your science-fair project. “Be playful and wacky and the ideas will come,” some say.

I don’t want to sound harsh; some creativity books and seminars serve an important role. Without question, innovation improves when you’re more open to other people’s ideas and less critical of your own. And who can argue with having fun? On the other hand, are you more creative than you were before the workshop, before you wore that silly hat . . . ? My informal poll of those who attend these learn-to-be-more-playful seminars would suggest the answer is no. Acting goofy and tossing toys around a room only succeeds in moving toys from one place to another. The needle on your creativity meter remains static. It’s time to kiss wackiness good-bye.

How Ideas Really Happen

Twenty-five years spent generating ideas and helping others generate them across hundreds of product and service categories has opened my eyes to how ideas really happen. On the surface, the process seems impossibly random, as if an idea is mysteriously channeled to its inventor like a thunderbolt from above—the fabled eureka moment. Yet, it seems, many ideas come from the same people, over and over again. But what’s under the surface? Is there something we’re not seeing? What gives these “idea people” the apparent ability to generate ideas at will? And, if eureka moments are serendipitous, why do some people experience

more of them than others? More importantly, if we uncover whatever it is they're doing differently, can "it" be taught to others? Is it possible for someone to become more creative?

One theory posits that some people just have it and others don't. Another is that everyone's blessed with innate creative ability that's just waiting to be unleashed. I say it's something else altogether.

I tackled this mystery in 2007, when I agreed to prepare a speech on the topic, "How Can I Become a More Creative Person?" even though I wasn't entirely sure of the answer. At one point, uncomfortable with the prospect of leading my audience through a bunch of creative exercises I knew they wouldn't use, I nearly gave up, ready to fall back on the old some-people-have-it-and-some-people-don't explanation. While the statement is partially true, the fear of giving an eight-word speech motivated me to dig deeper, to really think about the creative people I've worked with the past twenty-five years, and to figure out what they're doing differently.

Here's the great news: It didn't turn into an eight-word speech, and nobody had to memorize fifty exercises. I've cracked a critical piece of creative code and I will show you—as I've shown others since that speech—how you can increase your current level of creativity. But first, you'll need to let go of the notion that creative ability is an innate skill, latent in all of us, and just waiting to be unleashed through goofy play or driving to work a new way. Second, you'll need to accept that waiting around for standing-in-the-shower eureka moments to occur isn't a viable strategy either. If it were, every office, cube, and conference room would sport a working showerhead. Instead, you'll need to acquire creativity in the same ordinary way you'd develop

any other skill: By learning and applying specific disciplines consistently over time.

When it comes to being creative, there is no free lunch. You can't and won't become more creative overnight, and if someone tells you otherwise, cover your wallet or purse. But I promise that the disciplines you'll learn aren't as painful as they sound. With time and practice, you'll become proficient and the whole process will become second nature. Maybe even fun.


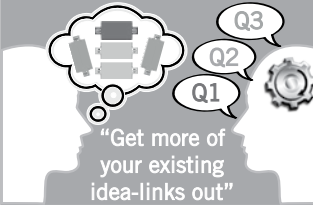
No, there's no magical unleashing. And what a relief! You don't have to endure another kooky workshop; you don't have to wait for a thunderbolt; you just have to put in the work. If you're truly committed to becoming more creative or to increasing the collective creativity of your team or company, I welcome you to the rest of the book. Yes, you really can become more creative.

Visual Overview of the Book

For all you visual thinkers, here's a handy framework instead of a table of contents. Parts one and two explain and teach you the two important disciplines you'll need to become more creative. Part three incorporates these disciplines into a plan so you can more effectively utilize them as a team or throughout your organization.

Along the way, you're going to adopt new behaviors and acquire new tools and techniques that will help you burn these two new disciplines into your everyday thinking. Put them all together and the book looks like this:

IDEA-LINKS

| | | |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | PART 1 | PART 2 |
| Disciplines | MAKING IDEA-LINKS  “Put new idea-links in” | CREATIVE REFRAMING  “Get more of your existing idea-links out” |
| New Behavior | NOTICE → ANALYZE → STORE | ASK DIFFERENT QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR PROBLEM |
| Helpers to Adopt New Behavior | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BreakDown Process • Idea-Link Map | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Twenty Questions • What-If Format • STAB Question Stimulator • Strategic Lenses |
| | PART 3 | |
| Plan | SHARED PROCESS & LANGUAGE | |

While the visual rendering won’t make sense at first, as you progress it will help you see how all the pieces fit together and relate to each other, and serve as a “you are here” marker as you navigate the book.

We begin our journey by rethinking creativity and seeing how the allure of the fabled eureka moment actually distracts us from focusing on the important work that leads us there.