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where do creative ideas come from?

people like you.

[and here's how to discover them]





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the problem with tomorrow.

Tomorrow has a way of expanding to never. I admit that I'm frequently too fast in doing things, but I'd opt for this "get the ball rolling" approach over the prolonged procrastination that kills many creative ideas. There's a lot to be said for momentum and initial enthusiasm, and when harnessed, it can lead to surprising things. I'm not suggesting that you act so hastily that you haven't thought things through, just that you don't wait for "perfect", because that's a moving target you'll never hit.

Get going.



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have a map, but not a guide.

Think about the difference between a trip taken with a tour guide and one where you head out in your car, map in hand. On a guided tour, you end up where you're supposed to, a designated place. With a map, there's the possibility of an interesting side road where you say, "let's look there," and discover something terrific.

Why even have a map, you might be thinking. Because to get started, you have to be headed somewhere, but that doesn't have to be where you end up. Be willing to arrive at a place you weren't headed for. See where things lead.

Welcome detours. Often that's where the good stuff is.



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the benefits of considering, maybe they're right.

Naturally we all look at things from our particular point of view. Unfortunately, that generally means that most people don't give adequate consideration to things that contradict their thinking. This is particularly acute, and potentially deadly, when it comes to government. But it's not a productive attitude in business or life either. I think truly smart people, and definitely creative people, are open to changing their mind.

A good question to ask yourself when someone is telling you something you don't agree with is, "What if that's right?". Just consider the possibilities of where accepting that thinking might lead. Or even just a piece off it. If you're not willing to change your mind and/or update your thinking, you probably won't end up with many innovative solutions.



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listen actively.

Hearing between the lines is a valuable skill. There is generally much more to what people are telling you than what they might be saying. I try to be an active listener, which strangely enough, often involves interrupting. I try not to interrupt too much, but if I stop the conversation right where it is and either probe further, we could get someplace we might not have been. Ending up with an unexpected solution can start with how you listen.

front load your mind.

Learn everything about your challenge. Then forget it. The mind is a mysterious thing and creativity is even harder to understand. But information left to brew and connect in unique ways seems to feed creativity.

I've found time and again that when I can't get a really imaginative solution to a problem I've been hired to solve, it's almost always because I don't have enough information. Ask questions. Do some surfing. Read whatever you can find. The data will then at least be in your mental computer.

The "forget part" is important because this is when your mind is subconsciously working: making connections, coming up with unique solutions. But it can't do its full work if the information isn't stored in the databank.



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start somewhere, anywhere.

If your task involves writing, the way to get going is to get going. Don't wait until you have your thoughts organized or have arrived at the perfect way to express them. Start to write down ideas, half thoughts, sentences without worrying about how they're written. The next day, organize what you have. Then delete a few things and expand on a few more. Look at it a few days later and some edits will become apparent. Before you know it, you'll have a good first draft. It's almost as if your document wrote itself.

Just start.

the smaller the group, the bigger the idea.

One thing I've consistently noticed is that outcomes hardly ever get better with big teams. As a matter of fact, I'd say the more people in the room, the worse the final product or idea. This is especially true when trying to come up with innovative solutions.

The reason for this I think is that it usually goes like this: someone has an idea, maybe someone else makes it better, but after that it starts to get diluted and worried to mediocrity. Someone "has a concern" so the thought is kicked back a little, and it goes down from there.

If you're in charge of organizing a project that requires groundbreaking thinking and innovation, keep it small. I work with many small (maybe 1 or 2 people) teams where the final solution gets better and better at each intersection. Those groups aren't easy to assemble, but that's the goal.

the creative value of a good nap.

I'm sure I'm not the only person who comes up with a good deal of their ideas in the shower, driving, or better yet...napping. I'd say that less than 15% of the solutions I get paid to deliver arrive while I'm at my desk. And even fewer surface when I'm in a meeting.

It's when we're not actively thinking about something that the creative part of our brain goes to work. If I'm frustrated about not being able to come up with, say a marketing concept, I take a nap. Sure it's not guaranteed that I'll wake up with a great idea, but I might. I write things down in the middle of the night that make no sense in the morning. But once I do decode the scribble, I'm often excited to see a unique solution to a problem that had me stumped. Most of the thoughts here began as little scribbles on notecards made mid-nap.

The person who said "let me sleep on it", was on to something.



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sometimes the wrong word is better.

Often the right word can throw people off. For example, I discuss branding, a frequently misunderstood word. So now, instead of talking about branding, I talk about something that can't be misunderstood. I'll refer to the opportunity to create a unique experience that would engage customers and increase sales. This is branding, but it's more easily understood. And It won't be taken for a discussion about a logo.

When making radio commercials or movies, the sound people will use a different sound that sounds more like the real thing than the real sound. I'm just making this part up, but maybe crunched paper sounds more like breaking glass than glass itself. So be creative when you're presently a solution and put yourself in the listener's seat. Use words that can't be misunderstood, even if they're not the right word.

The result will be right, and that's what matters.



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from “why,” to “what if” to “wow.”

Imaginatively defining the problem is the crucial first step of arriving at an effective solution. For example, if my boss tasks my team with finding the answer to $2+2$, we can easily come up with 4. But what if the real question is how much is $3+5$? It's all different then.

The first thing it always helps to wonder is, why? Is the supposed problem really that problem? What if it isn't that, but it's this? Wow, that could be it. Make sure you're working on the right problem if you really want to arrive at a good solution. Creativity isn't just in solving things, but in determining what needs to be solved.

find a way to say “yes.”

When you have an idea, don't ask your friends, gurus, etc. for too much input. It's so easy for people to think of 5 reasons why your idea won't work, but it takes vision and creativity to find ways that it will. When I'm working on concepts for major public companies with teams of lawyers, that's the part where I hold my breath. The really good ones think of ways to be able to support innovative concepts. But it's much easier, and definitely safer on their end, to tell you why you can't say certain things.

When I present work to clients, I always tremendously value their first instinct. If they say, “Wow, I love it.”, then think about it a bit and get to, “But, I'm not sure we should say/do this...”, they've gone from audience to client. I tell them that the only time they can really have a “first impression”, like their market, is the very first minute they look at the idea. After that, they become worried business people

Trust your instincts. They're as good, probably better, than anything.



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now more than ever.

Nothing calls for creative thinking more than daunting seemingly insoluble problems like the ones we as a country have now. Unfortunately fear can have a stifling effect on untested ideas. When the old ideas haven't worked, we need new ideas...we all agree there I'd assume. But the first rule of truly creative thinking is having the room to fail, something world leaders and businesses don't have right now. On the upside, I'd assume that when circumstances are dire, people might be more willing to try something truly new, not just old stuff tweaked to look new.

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feel free to quote anything here. if you do, please mention my name and blog on creativity: **boxless.wordpress.com**

If you try a few of these ideas, would you email me and tell me how they worked for you?

And if you'd like me to work on a project that requires creativity (and what doesn't?),
or to talk to your team about working more creatively, *I'd love to.*