Where Good Ideas Come From Summary

1-Sentence-Summary: *Where Good Ideas Come From describes how the process of innovation is similar to evolution and why good ideas have to be shaped over time, build on existing platforms, require connections, luck, and error and how you can turn something old into something new.*

Read in: 4 minutes

Favorite quote from the author:

Evolution really seems to be the theme of the week. First *The Selfish Gene*, then *The Evolution Of Everything* and now this. I had no idea this book would draw so many parallels between the concepts found in biological evolution and how innovative ideas make their way into reality, since it was very much an impulse read.

I'm glad though, because after reading about evolution so much, this made a lot more sense. Author Steven Johnson has written nine books, frequently contributes to The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and The Financial Times, has founded several startups and now runs a TV show about innovation named after one of his many bestsellers: *How We Got To Now*.

Here are 3 lessons from one of his most popular books to help you come up with more great ideas yourself:

1. Platforms function as springboards for innovations.
2. You can make "lucky breaks" more frequent by sharing your ideas with others.
3. Look at old things and think about how you can make them useful again.

Ready for a trip to the fountain of great ideas? Let's take a walk to see*Where Good Ideas Come From*!

Lesson 1: By building innovations on existing platforms, you can leverage accomplishments of the past.

In ecology, there's the concept of *keystone species*. Imagine there's a small forest close to your hometown, which hosts almost no predators. This is a great environment for small mammals like rabbits or rodents, and chances are their population will grow fairly quickly. However, exponential population growth among just one species usually leads to a scarcity of resources quite fast – if the rabbits eat all the plants, there'll soon be nothing left.

If you dropped off just three wolves in the forest, they'd take care of the problem by diminishing the rabbit population back to a healthy level, and plants and other species can grow back, forming a more natural equilibrium of the forest's ecosystem. In this case, the wolves would be the keystone species, because they are of crucial importance to the well-being of the ecosystem as a whole.

Basically, the wolves are a platform for many other species to thrive on. In innovation, the same thing happens. For example, when the GPS (short for Global Positioning System) was released for public use after being developed by the military, many products started to rely on GPS to make new things possible – car navigation systems, Google Maps, restaurant review apps, and, most recently, Pokémon Go. Platforms often lead to multiple levels of innovation too, for example after Pokémon Go's wild success, many apps have been created to help people succeed in the game, building on top of Pokémon Go.

Similarly, Twitter could only be built because the internet existed. Now, countless apps have been built to work only with (or for) people with a Twitter account, thus **stacking innovations on top of each other, thanks to using previously developed platforms**.

Lesson 2: Facilitate "lucky breaks" by sharing your ideas with others in a physical or intellectual space.

Do you know why Google's cafeteria is a place designed to be so much fun you don't wanna leave? It's so you stick around, talk with people and come up with great ideas.

When creative people hang around with each other, good things are bound to happen.**The more ideas collide, the more "lucky breaks" will happen**, where sudden insights take innovations to the next level.

For the same reason, innovators like Charles Darwin or Benjamin Franklin liked to work in something Johnson calls *slow multitasking mode.* In this mode, they worked on several projects simultaneously, but switched only occasionally. For example, if you work on your blog for four weeks straight and then switch to an art project for two weeks, you'll still get a lot done, but can transfer your learnings from one to the other. The other project will stay in the back of your mind, allowing you to subconsciously make new connections.

But remember: Just working on your ideas all by yourself all the time will eventually make you turn around in circles, so be sure to openly share your ideas with others frequently, and you'll break through mental blocks much faster.

Lesson 3: A great way to innovate is to take something old and tinker with it to see if you can make it useful again.

In biology, there's something called *exaptation*. It means a feature that was originally developed to serve one specific purpose is now being used in a completely different context.

For example, birds evolved to have feathers in order to be able to regulate their temperature. They can expose their heads and feet to cool down or hide them beneath their feathers to stay warm. But what are birds most popular for? Flying! Of course they could never do it without their feathers, but funnily, that's not what they developed them for.

Ideas are often repurposed too. **Trying to give something old a new use is one of the best ways to come up with good ideas**.

The World Wide Web was originally just a network for scholars to get easier access to research material. But when people discovered it'd come in handy for shopping, an entirely new use of the network was found. Johannes Gutenberg based his printing press on something that was over 1,000 years old at the time: the wine screw press. As it turned out, the ancient tool used to squeeze juice out of grapes was just as suited to press metal type pieces covered in ink on flat paper surfaces – and voilà – the way is paved for modernity to flourish.

So the next time you come across something old and seemingly useless, stick with it for a while and think about if you could make it useful in an entirely new way.

My personal take-aways

I really like the main analogy *Where Good Ideas Come From* works with. It feels natural to describe innovation this way, because it's, well, based on nature! A really interesting concept, I recommend you give it a go!

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What else can you learn from the blinks?

- What the adjacent possible is
- Why even the biggest epiphanies have really been developed over time
- How carbon is as important to life as connections are to ideas
- The different effects collaboration and competition have on ideas
- Why it's important to have chaos in your brain
- How important inexplicable errors are when trying to innovate

Who would I recommend the Where Good Ideas Come From summary to?

The 31 year old microbiologist, who stares through a microscope all day and often skips his coffee break, the 45 year old app developer, who’s really frustrated because she can’t seem to come up with a great app from scratch, and anyone who recently threw away an old smartphone.