

ALIEN Thinking

What's in it for me? Make great ideas a habit.

Having good ideas is fun. There's nothing quite like that feeling you get when inspiration strikes, and you suddenly notice that everything in your mind has fallen perfectly into place. If only it happened more often – right? Well, that's where these blinks come in. They lay out a five-step plan designed to help you have brilliant ideas at will. Combining insightful anecdotes from the world of business with practical and easy-to-follow advice, these blinks lay bare the thinking styles that underpin all creative leaps. By adding them to your mental repertoire, you can learn to make inspiration a habit. In these blinks, you'll learn

what a rich Renaissance family can teach us about imagination; how the CEO of Logitech cultivates disruptive ideas; and what edible cutlery can tell us about paying attention.

Approach problems with fresh eyes.

India was facing a problem, and it wasn't proving easy to solve: in the end, it all came down to numbers. The country was using far more groundwater than it could afford to. But where, exactly, was the water going? And what was it being used for? That was the question Narayana Peesapaty asked himself. The answer was simple, as it turned out. Thanks to government subsidies, Indian farmers paid next to nothing for electricity – meaning that there was no real reason for them to turn their water pumps off. More water led to greater yields of rice, and water was cheap, so it made little sense for them to try to use less. So what could be done about the groundwater shortage? How could Peesapaty resolve this enduring problem? This is the key message: Approach problems with fresh eyes. What Peesapaty did was to look at the problem in a new way. He realized that the key reason farmers were using so much water was that it increased their yields of rice. Anyone else would have lobbied the government to promote less demanding crops like millet – but not Peesapaty. He recognized that the market had created this issue, and he was determined to make the market solve it. After nine years, Peesapaty found a way of turning millet into cutlery that could be eaten at the end of a meal; instead of just trying to encourage farmers to grow millet instead of rice, he had actively incentivized growing millet by developing a marketable new product. What distinguished Peesapaty's approach was the freshness of his vision. So how can the rest of us, whose insights have been dulled by weekly meetings and daily routines, cultivate this ability to pay fresh, renewed attention to existing problems? There are a couple of strategies. One of the most important things we can do is to approach the problem from multiple angles. After all, Peesapaty only came to fully understand India's water and rice problem when he traveled around, meeting farmers and trying to understand their predicaments. In an established firm rather than a start-up, this might mean paying attention to your most innovative and "extreme" customers. IKEA's designers, inspired by their creative and dedicated customers, often take part in furniture hackathons – striving to create the best new products out of existing pieces. The insights they glean from these sessions are a key factor in the fresh attention they bring to IKEA'S offerings season after season.

Stepping away from a problem allows you to approach it from a new perspective.

In 2006, Dr. Mathias Döpfner, CEO of German media conglomerate Axel Springer, announced a bold new vision for his company: within a decade, he wanted digital revenue to account for over 50 percent of the firm's total turnover. At the time, this seemed very far-fetched – digital sales made up only a single-figure percentage of Axel Springer's total revenues. Many were understandably skeptical about Döpfner's plans, and enthusiasm was low. Fast forward six years to 2012, and senior management was still stuck in its old ways of thinking. So what was to be done? How could Döpfner inspire executives and managers to see things from his point of view? Here's the key message: Stepping away from a problem allows you to approach it from a new perspective. Döpfner settled on an unorthodox solution. He could have just called senior management in for a lecture. He could have threatened their pay or hired new managers to take their places. But Döpfner chose an entirely different approach. He sent his top executives on a trip to California. In Silicon Valley, Döpfner arranged for his hand-picked team to rub shoulders with some movers and shakers in young and upcoming industries, hoping their enthusiasm and flexibility would inspire the Axel Springer team. His bet paid off. The trip was such a success that it became a regular excursion for the firm's top brass. What's more, Döpfner ended up organizing a big, rough-around-the-edges company trip to San Francisco, in an attempt to shake up employees' thinking. It might sound unusual, but the success of this approach was clear. Within ten years, digital income made up 60 percent of Axel Springer's revenues and profits. So what's the takeaway here? Well, we can't all fly to California

every time we need a good idea. But we can make use of well-timed and well-designed breaks, to reshape our normal frames of reference and encourage innovation. This needn't involve anything more than fully engaging the moments of reflection that your schedule already affords you. Have you got 30 minutes' quiet time on your morning commute? Use it to reflect on an issue that you normally wouldn't think about in that context – you might be surprised by the insights that arise.

Experimentation is key to developing breakthrough ideas.

As children, we all possessed imagination in abundance. Back then, we ran around our backyards for hours on end, pretending to be astronauts and firefighters, mothers and fathers, doctors and nurses. But something happened. Over the course of our schooling, rote memorization became more important than the ability to generate new ideas or exercise our imaginations – so, over time, our ability to imagine things got weaker. We learned that imagination was childish and unimportant, and we turned our attention to other things. And now we're paying the price. At least, that was the case for Scandinavian paper giant Stora Enso back in 2011. Thanks to the rise of online media, print had taken a hit – and the company was struggling to adapt to the change in circumstances. They needed to envision some new and exciting ventures, but the firm was stumped. The key message here? Rediscover the power of your imagination, and unleash your creativity. Jouko Karvinen, then the CEO, realized that the company's thinking had gone stale. The boardroom was too homogenous and old-fashioned; they needed new ideas and new ways of envisioning the future. In short, they needed imagination. So what could they do? Well, Karvinen got in touch with the authors, and together they concluded that the firm's senior management had exhausted its imaginative potential. They needed to bring new people on board – they needed the Medici Effect. The Medici Effect is a term coined by author and entrepreneur Frans Johansson, to describe the way ideas proliferate when diverse and brilliant minds are brought together. The Medicis were a rich and sophisticated noble family in Renaissance Italy, and their patronage of the arts and sciences was a key factor in that period's outpouring of genius. Under the right circumstances, something similar can happen in organizations. That's why Stora Enso set up their Pathfinder program. They put together a strikingly diverse team, picking candidates from all levels of experience within the firm, and set them on a six-week-long trip to locations as different as China, India, Latin America, and the US. They were told to come back not with Powerpoint presentations, but with nothing less than a revolution. And somehow, they succeeded. The Pathfinder team encouraged company leaders to double down on sustainability as a key area of growth – and their imaginative advice proved far-sighted. These days, Stora Enso isn't primarily a paper-making firm: it's a global renewable materials company. By bringing together diverse, stimulated minds, this old-fashioned organization discovered a new lease of life.

“To overcome the conditioning that values memorization over discovery, you need techniques that promote and revitalize your imagination.”

Innovative ideas are always in need of protection.

If you've ever taken a train across France, chances are it was with a company called SNCF. They're the giant firm in control of the country's railways – but that doesn't mean that they can afford to be complacent. On the contrary, back in 2014 SNCF was facing a tricky situation. In brief, the train journeys on offer to travelers had ceased to be competitive. Seen as overpriced and old-fashioned, the railway company was losing customers in droves to cheap flights, intercity buses, and even carpooling. The future of France's railways seemed to be failing. It was at this point that SNCF reached out to the authors. They realized something needed to change, but they weren't sure where to begin. How could they go about reversing their losses? The key message here is: Experimentation is key to developing breakthrough ideas. The biggest problem facing SNCF was that it had become slow and bloated, no longer able to respond quickly to market threats and opportunities. It had also lost the will and the ability to try new things. It had simply stopped experimenting. To fix this, the authors gathered the group's top 650 executives for a two-day event, and spent the entire time promoting new, experimental ideas. After getting feedback from their colleagues, the executives had six months to develop and refine their ideas into proposals. The main purpose of this event wasn't to generate hundreds of new ideas. What was more valuable was fostering a spirit of experimentation in a company that desperately needed it. And it worked. One new idea was a service called TGV Max, which was inspired by the unlimited-access plans offered by cell phone companies. For a monthly fee of €79, young people could make use of unlimited off-peak travel on high-speed trains. So what's the lesson? To experiment. Come up with as many ideas and hypothetical plans as you can, and consider them all – but, having consulted customers, experts, and simple facts, be ready to discard any ideas that don't stack up.

“Make every failure count.”

Use the ALIEN techniques in tandem to generate great ideas any time.

It's easy to imagine that having a good idea is all it takes to succeed. You sit down with your pen and paper, brainstorm a little, have a eureka moment and – hey presto – you're an overnight success! Unfortunately, in the real world, things tend not to work out like that very often. You see, ideas are delicate things – often just as delicate as they are daring. You can't just throw an idea into the world undefended – in other words, without protection from criticism or the benefit of powerful advocacy – and expect it to fend for itself. You need to be sure that you give it a good shot at being taken seriously. Here's the key message: Innovative ideas are always in need of protection. When Bracken Darrell took the reins at Logitech, he was well aware of the barriers that innovative ideas have to overcome in established organizations – and he made it his business to tear those barriers down completely. He called one of these obstacles “the pull of organizational gravity.” In other words, the force within a company that keeps new ideas from taking flight – the power of the status quo. To overcome this stifling gravity, Darrell broke the company up into 27 smaller business units modeled on start-ups. Whereas ideas can struggle to get a hearing in sprawling, anonymous companies, the start-up model encourages creativity, innovation, and initiative-taking. What's more, Darrell went out of his way to listen to innovators' and disruptors' ideas. Organizational gravity is often based on the employees' sense that their proposals will be ignored. Not at Logitech, however – there, Darrell has cultivated an environment in which workers know their innovative ideas will be listened to. Instead of erecting barriers to innovation, Logitech has opened the floodgates. If you're not lucky enough to work in such a supportive environment, then there are still steps you can take to give your proposals a better chance of meeting widespread acceptance. One trick is to stress the factors that link your idea to the organization's past – as well as its current aims and ethos. That way, you can “disguise” a radical idea as something firmly rooted in the firm's identity.

Use the ALIEN techniques in tandem to generate great ideas any time.

So far, we've touched on a few strategies for generating and implementing creative ideas – and putting them all together, you get the ALIEN technique. Why ALIEN? Well, it's an acronym. A is for attention – the ability to see the world with fresh eyes; L is for levitation – removing yourself from a situation, and approaching it again from a different perspective. I stands for imagination – envisioning future possibilities based on current situations. Experimentation gives us the E; and finally the N stands for navigation – in other words, helping your precious ideas navigate a sometimes indifferent world. We've seen these techniques in isolation, but do they work in tandem? The key message here is: Use the ALIEN techniques in tandem to generate great ideas any time. The ALIEN framework isn't magic, but it does offer a toolkit that can be used to generate novel ideas in any situation. True, maybe not all of your new proposals will revolutionize the world. But if you practice using the tools we've explored, over time you'll find that you have more ideas – and those ideas will be of a higher quality. It's worth bearing in mind that every part of the ALIEN method is designed to help you overcome existing prejudices and narrow ways of thinking. The goal isn't to teach you to tap into some kind of otherworldly realm where ingenious ideas are ripe for picking – the aim is simply to allow you to rediscover the abilities you already possess, but have neglected in favor of easier, more mundane ways of thinking. You might face some internal resistance when you try to shake up your habitual ways of thinking. You might even feel some fear. That's natural: if you're worried about failing, you can channel that energy into finding any flaws in your idea. The point is to leverage your fear. Instead of letting it prevent you from acting on your ideas, let it help you hone your plans. Make any anxiety or trepidation an extra tool – not an extra obstacle.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: You don't have to wait for inspiration to strike. By using the ALIEN technique, you can disrupt your everyday ways of thinking, see past your blind spots, and make having great ideas feel like second nature to you. Actionable advice: Leverage technology and data to overcome your biases. Biases in our ways of seeing the world can stop us from identifying problems, generating solutions, and putting great ideas into practice effectively. One way you can overcome your own blind spots is by partially removing yourself from the equation. To do this, rely on objective data and technology to form hypotheses and reality-test your assumptions. It's better to realize that you had things wrong when the data doesn't add up at an early stage, rather than months or years down the line! Got feedback? We'd love to hear what you think about our content!

Just drop an email to with ALIEN Thinking as the subject line and share your thoughts!