

Creative Confidence: The Path From Blank Page to Insight

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Two thought leaders (and brothers) from the intersection of design thinking and innovation describe what can happen when you start to believe in your own creative abilities.

by **Tom Kelley and David Kelley**

WHEN YOU HEAR THE WORD ‘CREATIVITY’, what do you think of next? If you are like many people, your mind immediately leaps to artistic endeavours like sculpture, drawing, music or dance. You may believe that architects and designers are paid to be creative thinkers, but CEOs, lawyers and doctors are not. Or you may feel that being creative is a fixed trait, like having brown eyes—either you’re born with creative genes or you’re not.

As brothers who have worked together for 30 years at the forefront of innovation, we have come to see this set of misconceptions as ‘the creativity myth.’ Our latest book — *Creative Confidence: Unleashing the Creative Potential Within Us All* — is about the opposite of that myth: it’s about what we call ‘creative confidence’. And at its foundation is the belief that we are all creative.

In the book, we present eight effective strategies to help you get from ‘blank page’ to insight. In this article we will present two of them, in hopes of helping you increase your own creative contributions and thereby, your creative confidence.

Strategy #1: Think Like a Traveler

Ever travel to a foreign city? We’ve all heard that ‘travel broadens the mind,’ but beneath this cliché lies a deep truth: things stand out because they’re different so we notice every detail, from street signs to mailboxes to how you pay at a restaurant. We learn a lot when we travel not because we are any smarter on the road, but because we pay such close attention. On a trip, we become our own version of Sherlock Holmes, intensely observing the environment around us. We are continuously trying to figure out a world that is foreign and new. Too often, we go through day to-day life on cruise control, oblivious to huge swaths of our surroundings. To notice friction points — and therefore opportunities to do things better — it helps to see the world with fresh eyes.

When you meet creative people with lots of ideas constantly bubbling to the surface, you often come away feeling that they are operating on a different frequency. And they are, most of the time. They have all their receptors on—and frequently turned up to 11. But the fact is, we are all capable of operating in this mode.

At the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design (aka the Stanford d.school), to demonstrate the power of rediscovering the familiar, we often take executives to places like a gas station or the airport. They assume they know exactly what an airport is like. So we have them sit down and watch how the passengers are lining up, how they get their bags off the carousel, how they talk to the airline representatives. Most leave the airport feeling

surprised at what they have noticed for the first time. Like the passengers sitting alone at a gate who had arrived for their flight four hours early 'just in case'. Or the busy mom who is paying all her bills as boarding begins. Or the 'safety rituals' people perform, like tapping the side of the plane three times as they step on board.

Rediscovering the familiar is a powerful example of how looking at something closely can affect what you see. So apply a 'beginner's mind' to something you do or see every day: commuting to work, eating dinner, or preparing for a meeting. Look for new insights about familiar things. Think of it as a treasure hunt.

By adopting the eyes of a traveler and a beginner's mindset, you will notice a lot of details that you normally might have overlooked. In this receptive mode, you're ready to start actively searching out inspiration. And when it comes to inspiration, quantity matters. For example, part of what makes venture capitalists so business-savvy — and ultimately so successful — is that they see a lot more ideas than ordinary people. Young, enthusiastic entrepreneurs come to them every day with new-to-the-world business ideas in search of funding. In the VC business, it's called 'deal flow'. All other things being equal, the better your deal flow, the more successful your venture capital firm will be.

What's true of deal flow for venture capital firms is true of *idea* flow, too: the more fresh new ideas that cross your field of vision each day, the greater your insights will be. The more ideas you brush up against, or even butt heads with, the more you can give yourself the venture capitalist's leverage of seeing a lot of ideas so that you invest in only the very best. Ask yourself, What can I do to increase my 'deal flow' of new ideas? When was the last time you took a class? Read some unusual magazines or blogs? Listened to new kinds of music? Travelled a different route to work? Had coffee with a friend or colleague who can teach you something new? Connected to 'big idea' people via social media?

To keep your thinking fresh, constantly seek out new sources of information. For example, we watch dozens of TED Talks a year, scan our favourite news aggregator every morning, and subscribe to expertly-curated newsletters like *Cool News of the Day*. We also have more than 600 IDEO folks in 12 countries selectively sharing new ideas they think are 'too good to miss'. If all that sounds overwhelming, it's not. Once you've found the right data streams for you, it can be incredibly energizing.

Another place to find inspiration is to look for new ideas from different cultures or organizations. This kind of cross-pollination between departments, companies and industries can be particularly useful for individuals who have been working at the same job for a while. Even if you have kept up with the industry blogs and trade publications or studied up on the best of class, it's hard to gain competitive advantage if you and your competitors are consuming all the same data. So why not keep an eye out for new sources of information and learning?

For example, the head of the pediatric intensive care unit at London's Great Ormond Street Hospital got inspiration from watching a Formula One pit crew on television. He was amazed at the precisely-sequenced performance of the well-orchestrated team as they serviced a race car in a matter of seconds. In contrast, the hospital had been

struggling with chaotic patient hand-offs from surgery to the intensive care unit. So he took the extraordinary step of asking a Ferrari pit crew to coach his staff members.

Amazingly, the doctors and nurses translated the pit crew's techniques into new behaviours. For example, they now map out tasks and timing for every role in order to minimize the need for conversation. And they step through a checklist to relay key patient information. As reported in the *Wall Street Journal*, the Ferrari-inspired changes have reduced technical errors by 42 per cent and information errors by 49 per cent.

When ideas are in short supply, it's tempting to become possessive or territorial and limit your options. If you only have a few ideas in your idea bank, you're more likely to settle on one of the few you have, and defend it fiercely, even if it's not optimal. But when ideas are plentiful and easy — if you (or your team) have a dozen a day — then there's no need to become territorial about them. And if an idea you had gets blended with others, it's not a problem. The whole group shares the credit. After all, there are more ideas where that one came from. Business guru Stephen Covey called this attitude an 'abundance mentality', and if you or your team has one, you'll find it much easier to go from blank page to insight.

Strategy #2: Empathize With Your End User

In organizations with millions of customers, or in industries serving the broad public, there is a temptation to stereotype or depersonalize customers. They become numbers, transactions, data points on a bell curve, or parts of a composite character built on market segmentation data. That type of shortcut might seem useful for understanding the data, but we've found that it doesn't work well when designing for real people.

The notions of empathy and human-centeredness are still not widely practiced in many corporations. Business people rarely navigate their own websites or watch how people use their products in a real-world setting. And if you do a word association with a business person, the word *empathy* doesn't come up much. What do we mean by empathy in terms of creativity and innovation? For us, it's the ability to see an experience through another person's eyes, to recognize why people do what they do. It's when you go into the field and watch people interact with products and services in real time.

Gaining empathy takes some time and resourcefulness, but there is nothing like observing the person you're creating something for to spark new insights. And when you specifically set out to empathize with your end user, you get your own ego out of the way. We've found that figuring out what other people actually *need* leads to the most significant innovations. In other words, empathy is a gateway to better and sometimes surprising insights that can help distinguish your idea or approach. You can use this kind of anthropological research in the field to gather inspiration at the beginning of a project, to validate concepts and prototypes generated throughout the design process, and to rekindle momentum when ideas or energy are running low.

At IDEO and the d.school, we like to observe people in their homes or where they work or play. We watch them interact with products and services, and sometimes we interview them to better understand their thoughts and feelings. This kind of hands-on research can even change your understanding of who your end user is, as it did for one

of our teams when they changed their approach from designing for hospitals and clinics to designing for rural mothers in their villages.

We often hire design researchers with social science backgrounds and advanced degrees in fields like Cognitive Psychology, Anthropology or Linguistics — people who are sophisticated at gathering and synthesizing insights from interviews and observations. But you don't need an advanced degree to get out into the field. Usually every team member on a project at IDEO or the d.school takes part in such fieldwork, because the final concept benefits as a result. As cultural anthropologist Grant McCracken says, "Anthropology is too important to be left to the anthropologists." Everyone can improve their empathy skills with a little practice. You may find you'll get some of your best ideas by doing so.

Many organizations or teams use benchmarking when they want to innovate. They check out what their competitors are doing and pick what they consider 'best practices'. In other words, without questioning current ways of doing things or seeking new insights, they 'copy and paste'. In 2007, when PNC Financial Services was striving to appeal to younger customers, it could have just followed the competition, hiked up interest rates on its chequing accounts by half a per cent and promoted them with a marketing campaign. Instead, it created a new kind of account for young people, attracting 14,000 new customers in the first two months alone. PNC's story started with seeking to understand the customers it wanted to attract, and then committing to improving its relationship with them. PNC provides retail banking, corporate and institutional banking, and asset management services to more than six million people across the United States. It was looking to reach a new demographic, 'Generation Y', the first generation of digital natives, roughly ranging from college age to their midthirties. When the team at PNC started getting to know Gen Y'ers through interviews, it became clear that while tech savvy and adept at weaving technology seamlessly into their lives, they were far from literate when it came to banking and managing their finances. Even people who were making more than enough to live comfortably were often overdrawn on their account because they would pay bills before their paycheque went through.

The team realized that Gen Y would benefit from tools to better manage its money. With greater control over their assets, customers could save more and not overspend, avoiding overdraft charges. As Mark Jones, the service designer on the project, describes it, "For the person living hand to mouth, struggling with money management, the key is to let things be more visible, let them get access, let them tweak back and forth between accounts very easily." Bank customers love the idea of avoiding overdraft fees, but it takes courage for a bank to create such products, given how highly profitable they are. At the time, banks were collecting over \$30 billion a year in overdraft income, and young adults are especially prone to incurring those fees. But PNC decided to build better long-term customer relationships by supporting healthier financial behaviour.

The PNC Virtual Wallet is a family of banking products that provides customers with digital access to their finances and enables them to have better control of their money. Instead of a ledger, a calendar view helps customers visualize their balance, with estimated future cash flow based on when they get paid and when they pay bills. The view highlights 'Danger Days', when customers might overdraw their account, so they

can reschedule bill payments, promoting better planning. A money sidebar graphically indicates and controls fund allocation between Spend, Reserve and Growth. With the Savings Engine, customers can set their own rules, such as automatically transferring money to savings when they get paid.

The new direction has paid off with greater deposit growth, making up for whatever revenue may have been lost from bounced cheque and overdraft fees. One customer described his experience, saying, “I’m just out of college and have a lot more things going in and out than I can keep track of. With Virtual Wallet, I was able to save some, pay all my bills, and know exactly where all my cash went. I have never felt more in control of my money in my life.”

Virtual Wallet was a departure from ‘business as usual’ for PNC. But the confidence to go in this direction came from its customers. By getting to know Gen Y and understanding its needs, PNC gained faith in the long-term success of the product.

Whenever we bring corporate executives to observe, meet with and talk to customers, the experience makes a lasting impression. “Rather than developing and then testing, we now begin projects with customers, to incorporate their thinking earlier and more effectively,” says Frederick Leichter, the chief customer experience officer at Fidelity Investments.

In closing

When you unleash your creative confidence, you will start to see new ways to improve on the status quo — from how to throw a dinner party to how to run a meeting. And once you become aware of those opportunities, you will want to start seizing them.

The place to start is with you, as an individual. Even if you ultimately want to instill creative confidence in your group or organization, we suggest you start by focusing on your own. If you can unleash your creativity and lead by example, it will be much more persuasive than just trying to talk others into changing their behaviour. At its core, creative confidence is about believing in your ability to create change in the world around you. It is the conviction that you can achieve what you set out to do. We think this self-assurance — a belief in your creative capacity — lies at the very heart of innovation.

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