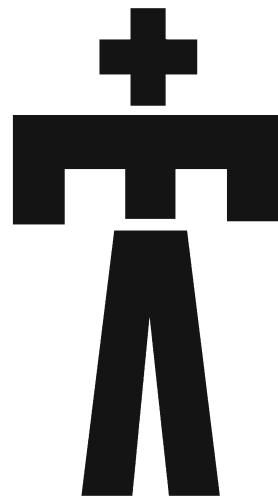


ESCAPE VELOCITY

A System for Liberating
Enterprise Imagination



POSITIVE LAB | positivelab.ai

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Why Your Organisation Cannot Think

Every large organisation employs intelligent people who are capable of having interesting ideas. Most of those people rarely have interesting ideas at work. This is not a failure of talent. It is a failure of environment.

The environments we create in organisations are optimised for execution, not imagination. They reward predictability, punish failure, and filter out the impractical before it can fully form. These are sensible optimisations for running an efficient operation. They are terrible for generating the ideas that might transform that operation.

This book is about creating different environments – temporary spaces where imagination operates under different rules. Not permanently. Not naively. But deliberately and skilfully, so that you can access the creative capacity your people already possess but rarely express.

The methodology in this book has been developed through hundreds of sessions with leadership teams across industries. It draws on cognitive science, design thinking, game theory, and the lived experience of watching clever people become cleverer when the right constraints are removed. It works. And it can be joyful.

If you approach this as another corporate training programme to be endured, it will fail. The methodology requires genuine engagement, including from senior leadership. It requires willingness to appear foolish. It requires faith that your people have good ideas trapped inside conservative habits.

If you are willing – if you're genuinely curious about what your organisation might be capable of if it could think without fear – read on.



The Gravity Problem

Imagine you are standing at the bottom of a gravity well. Every step you take requires effort. Every idea you have is pulled back toward the familiar, the safe, the precedented. You can imagine flying, but you cannot fly. The pull is too strong.

This is how most enterprise thinking works. Not because people lack imagination, but because they operate in environments that systematically constrain it. Over years, these constraints become invisible – they feel like reality rather than choice.

We have identified six forces that create this gravitational pull.

The Expertise Trap

Your expertise – the deep knowledge of your domain that makes you valuable – is also your prison. The more you know about how things work, the harder it becomes to imagine them working differently. Experts see obstacles instantly. This is useful for risk management. It is lethal for innovation.

Consider a surgeon who has performed ten thousand operations. They know, from experience, exactly what can go wrong. This knowledge makes them better surgeons. But it also makes them unlikely to invent a radically different surgical technique. Their expertise creates deep ruts of thinking.

The Sunk Cost Bind

You have invested – money, time, reputation, emotion – in your current approaches. These investments create resistance to alternatives, regardless of their merit. “We’ve already spent two years on this” becomes a reason to continue, even when evidence suggests a different path.

Rationally, sunk costs are irrelevant to future decisions. Psychologically, they dominate. The larger your organisation’s commitment to the current path, the harder it becomes to imagine different paths.



The Feasibility Filter

Before most ideas reach conscious awareness, they are filtered for feasibility. This filtering is so rapid and automatic that you may not realise it's happening. You self-censor before you've properly imagined.

In senior leadership, this filter has been refined over decades. You have learned – painfully, in many cases – what is practical and what is not. This learning is valuable. But it also means that many ideas never get a hearing, even in your own mind.

The Social Constraint

You care what others think. So does everyone. This creates powerful pressure toward conventional ideas – those that won't embarrass you, won't make you look naive, won't threaten your status.

In group settings, this pressure intensifies. Each person assesses what others might think, leading to a race toward the most sensible-sounding idea rather than the most interesting one. The higher the stakes and the more senior the audience, the more powerful this constraint becomes.

The Success Trap

Your past successes have created templates. "This worked before" becomes a mental shortcut, a proof of concept for the future. You repeat what succeeded.

But environments change. Competitors emerge. Technologies shift. What worked before may not work again – or may work less well than alternatives you never considered because you were too busy repeating the past.

The Language Limit

The words you use to describe problems shape the solutions you can see. "How do we increase efficiency?" presupposes that efficiency is the goal. "How do we reduce costs?" presupposes the current cost structure is sound.

Every strategic framework, every business concept, every bit of industry jargon carries assumptions. These assumptions constrain imagination before you've even begun thinking.

The Cumulative Effect

None of these forces is unique to your organisation. They operate everywhere that humans work together on hard problems. But their cumulative effect is devastating: they create a world where ideas that could transform your organisation never get imagined, let alone tested.



The goal is not to permanently eliminate these forces – some of them are useful, at certain times. The goal is to create temporary spaces where they are deliberately suspended, so you can see what ideas emerge when the gravitational field is reduced.



The Mechanics of Liberation

How do you escape a gravity well? In physics, you need velocity – enough speed to overcome the pull. In imagination, you need tools.

The core tools of Escape Velocity are organised around three principles.

Principle One: Deliberate Separation

The mind cannot simultaneously generate possibilities and judge them. The judging function is too powerful – it will filter ideas before they fully form. Therefore, we must create strict separation between imagination mode and evaluation mode.

This separation cannot be achieved through willpower alone. Asking people to “withhold judgement” does not work – the judgement is automatic, often unconscious. Instead, we create structural separations: different times, different spaces, different rules, sometimes different people.

In the game, this separation is enforced through mechanics. Certain phases are designated imagination-only; evaluation language in these phases is literally against the rules. Other phases are explicitly for evaluation and critique. The clear marking of modes helps participants know which mental stance to adopt.

Principle Two: Productive Estrangement

To see familiar problems freshly, we must make them strange. This means disrupting the habitual frameworks through which we perceive our challenges.

Temporal Displacement means viewing your challenge from radically different time periods. How would someone in 1924 see your problem? How might it appear to someone in 2124?

Cross-Domain Translation forces your challenge into another discipline’s language. Describe it using only musical terms, or architectural concepts, or ecological metaphors. The awkwardness of translation reveals hidden assumptions.

Perspective Rotation means inhabiting viewpoints utterly unlike your own. The complete beginner. The alien anthropologist. The inanimate object. Each perspective makes visible what your default perspective hides.



Estrangement is uncomfortable. Our minds are optimised to categorise rapidly, to make the unfamiliar familiar. These techniques interrupt that process, forcing us to see what we normally filter out.

Principle Three: Constraint Manipulation

Constraints shape imagination. By deliberately manipulating them, we can explore different possibility spaces.

This principle is counterintuitive. Most people believe that removing constraints leads to more creative thinking. In fact, the relationship is complex. Removing certain constraints opens new territory that was previously invisible. Adding extreme constraints forces innovation within a narrowed space. Inverting constraints reveals aspects of the problem hidden by default assumptions. Multiplying constraints exposes scalability and robustness issues.

The skill is knowing which manipulation to apply. The game provides a structured way to try different manipulations and observe the results.



Why Games?

Why encode this methodology in a game, rather than a workshop or training programme?

Games are not merely entertaining. They are permission structures. Within a game, behaviours that would be embarrassing or inappropriate in normal contexts become not just acceptable but required.

Consider: a senior executive who would never dance in a boardroom will dance if the game requires it. A cautious manager who never shares half-formed ideas will share them if points are at stake. A competitive operator who usually dominates discussions will hold back if the mechanics reward building on others.

Games create what psychologists call “psychological safety” through the establishment of alternative rules. It is not foolish to suggest an impossible idea if the game rewards impossible ideas. It is not risky to challenge the CEO’s position if the challenge is part of the game’s mechanics.

Games also create joy. When people are laughing, their defences are down. When they are competing playfully, they forget to self-censor. The positive emotional state induced by good game design is itself part of the mechanism.

Finally, games compress learning. Decades of research on serious games shows that game-based learning is faster and stickier than lecture-based learning. The principles of Escape Velocity could be taught in a two-hour presentation. They would be forgotten within a week. Experienced through gameplay, they become embodied – available for future use.



Beyond the Game

The board game creates breakthrough experiences. But breakthroughs fade. Old habits reassert themselves. The gravitational field strengthens again.

This is why Escape Velocity includes tools for ongoing practice.

Daily Prompts

Brief exercises of two to five minutes, delivered through the mobile app. These prompts target the anchors identified in your Gravity Audit, providing regular practice at exactly the kind of thinking you find most difficult.

Examples include: “Describe your biggest current challenge as if you were explaining it to a Martian who knows nothing about human business.” Or: “What would you attempt this week if you knew with certainty it would succeed?” Or: “Record a voice memo describing an idea you’ve never shared because it seemed too strange.”

Weekly Challenges

Longer exercises of fifteen to thirty minutes that can be completed individually or with colleagues. These bring game mechanics into abbreviated form.

Constraint Sabbatical: Pick a constraint and spend fifteen minutes generating ideas as if it didn’t exist.

Perspective Sprint: Adopt an assigned perspective and document observations about your current priorities.

Random Connection: Receive a random input and identify unexpected connections to your work.

Idea Tracking

Not all ideas generated in imagination mode will be implemented. But some will. The Idea Observatory tracks ideas from initial capture through development, testing, and implementation – providing evidence of the methodology’s value and creating a repository of organisational imagination.



The most powerful feature may be the “Impossible to Possible” log – a record of ideas that initially seemed impossible but proved feasible. This log, built over time, normalises ambitious thinking and provides proof that constraints are often less fixed than they appear.



The Organisational Context

Escape Velocity can be deployed by individuals, but its full power emerges when used at organisational level.

Permission from the Top

For the methodology to work, senior leadership must not just permit but actively participate. If the CEO exempts herself from the game, participants will read this as a signal that the exercise is not serious. If the CFO never removes his Feasibility Filter, others will keep theirs firmly in place.

The game mechanics deliberately undermine hierarchy – but they cannot overcome hierarchy that refuses to be undermined. Leadership participation is not optional.

Psychological Safety

Beyond the game's built-in safety mechanisms, organisations must provide broader psychological safety. If people fear that wild ideas in the game will affect their performance reviews, they will not generate wild ideas.

This means explicit statements that ideas in Escape Velocity sessions are exploratory, not commitments. It means protection for ideas that fail when tested. It means celebration of productive failure – failures that taught something valuable. And it means no penalties for challenging convention, even when challenges prove wrong.

Integration with Strategy

Escape Velocity is not a standalone intervention. It should connect to your strategic planning processes. Run sessions before major strategy reviews, to expand the option space. Feed ideas into innovation pipelines. Use Orbit Maintenance to sustain creative thinking between planning cycles. Track implementation of ideas as a strategic capability metric.



Facilitator Development

Initially, you may bring in external facilitators. Over time, develop internal capability. Identify participants who show natural facilitation skill and train them. The methodology scales better with internal facilitators who understand organisational context.



Objections and Responses

“We don’t have time for games.”

If you don’t have time for imagination, you don’t have time for transformation. The question is not whether you can afford a half-day session, but whether you can afford to continue thinking the same thoughts you’ve always thought. For most organisations, the real cost is not the time spent – it’s the opportunities invisible to current thinking.

“Our people are already creative.”

They may well be – outside work. The question is whether your organisational environment allows that creativity to surface. Most do not. The methodology is not about adding creativity to uncreative people; it’s about creating conditions where existing creativity can emerge.

“We’ve tried brainstorming, it doesn’t work.”

Traditional brainstorming often fails because it is inadequately structured. It does not address the six anchors, it does not enforce separation of imagination and evaluation, and it does not create genuine psychological safety. Escape Velocity addresses these failures through game mechanics that make the desired behaviours unavoidable.

“The real constraint is budget, regulation, or the board.”

Perhaps. But how do you know? The point of constraint removal is to test which constraints are genuinely immutable and which are merely assumed. You may find that the budget constraint disappears when you imagine something compelling enough. You may find that regulations are more flexible than believed. You may find that the board is waiting for ambitious proposals. Or you may confirm that the constraint is real – but even then, you’ll know more about its actual boundaries.

“Leadership will never go for this.”

Then start smaller. Run a session with a willing team. Document the ideas generated. Let results make the case. Leadership scepticism often dissolves when they see what emerges – especially if some of those ideas are subsequently implemented successfully.



“This is just another fad.”

The methodology draws on research and practice going back decades – Edward de Bono’s lateral thinking, design thinking’s empathy and prototyping, improv theatre’s “yes, and”, cognitive science’s work on constraints and creativity. The packaging is new; the principles are not. Whether it becomes a “fad” in your organisation depends on whether you integrate it into ongoing practice or treat it as a one-off event.



Beginning

To begin with Escape Velocity:

First, take the Gravity Audit. Understand which anchors most constrain your thinking. This takes fifteen minutes and provides immediate insight.

Second, read this book. Understand the philosophy and methodology. Share it with colleagues who might become allies.

Third, identify a challenge. Something real, important, and genuinely open. Not a problem you've already solved – a problem where you don't know the answer.

Fourth, assemble a team. Six to twelve people with diverse perspectives. Include at least one senior leader who will fully participate.

Fifth, run a session. Use the game. Follow the facilitation guide. See what emerges.

Sixth, follow through. Champion promising ideas. Track progress. Schedule the next session.

Seventh, build the practice. Use Orbit Maintenance. Develop internal facilitators. Make imagination part of how you work, not an occasional exception.



The ideas your organisation needs may already exist in the minds of your people. They are held down by forces that can be identified and temporarily suspended. The methodology provides the tools. The rest is up to you.

“The difficulty lies not so much in developing new ideas as in escaping from old ones.”

— John Maynard Keynes

Think weightlessly first. Return to gravity later. But always know the difference.

