

MAKING IDEAS HAPPEN

OVERCOMING THE
OBSTACLES BETWEEN
VISION & REALITY

SIX SELECT EXCERPTS FROM THE BOOK

Presented by Behance

BUY THE BOOK: www.MakingIdeasHappen.com

SCOTT BELSKY

FOUNDER & CEO OF BEHANCE

Buy the book: www.makingideashappen.com

Contents

INTRODUCTION: Making Ideas Happen	1
Making This Book Happen	4
Why Most Ideas Never Happen	8
The Forces That Make Ideas Happen	14
A Final Note As We Begin	18
1 ORGANIZATION AND EXECUTION	21
THE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE OF ORGANIZATION	25
Your Approach to Organization and the Destiny of Your Ideas	26
THE ACTION METHOD: Work and Life with a Bias Toward Action	30
Reconsider How You Manage Projects	32
Breaking Projects into Primary Elements	34
The Importance of Action Steps	37
Maintaining a Backburner	43
References Are Worth Storing, Not Revering	45
Practicing the Action Method	49
Capture and Make Time for Processing	51

PRIORITIZATION: Managing Your Energy Across Life's Projects	58
Keep an Eye on Your Energy Line	58
Reconciling Urgent vs. Important	61
Darwinian Prioritization	67
EXECUTION: Always Moving the Ball Forward	70
Act Without Conviction	72
Kill Ideas Liberally	75
Measure Meetings with Action	78
The Biology and Psychology of Completion	81
The Tao of the Follow-up	84
Seek Constraints	86
Have a Tempered Tolerance for Change	89
Progress Begets Progress	91
Visual Organization and Advertising Action to Yourself	93
MENTAL LOYALTY: Maintaining Attention and Resolve	98
Rituals for Perspiration	99
Reconsider Your Work Space	102
Reduce Your Amount of "Insecurity Work"	104
2 THE FORCES OF COMMUNITY	107
HARNESSING THE FORCES AROUND YOU	111
The Dreamers, the Doers, and the Incrementalists	112
Seldom Is Anything Accomplished Alone	116
Share Ideas Liberally	120
Capitalize on Feedback	124
Transparency Boosts Communal Forces	128
Communal Forces Are Best Channeled in Circles	131
Seek Competition	135

Commit Yourself in Order to Commit Others	138
Create Systems for Accountability	139
The Pressure of the Spotlight	140
The Power of the Network	142
The Benefits of a Shared Work Space	143
Seeking Stimulation from Serendipity	145
PUSHING IDEAS OUT TO YOUR COMMUNITY	147
Overcome the Stigma of Self-Marketing	148
Effective Self-Marketing Builds Respect	151
Find Your Own Frequency, Then Tune in to Engage Others	155
Ground Your Ideas Outside Your Community	158
Recognize When You Are No Longer a Solo Show	159
3 LEADERSHIP CAPABILITY	163
THE REWARDS OVERHAUL	167
Short-Circuiting the Rewards System	168
The Motivational Reward of Play	172
The Reward of Recognition	175
THE CHEMISTRY OF THE CREATIVE TEAM	177
Engage Initiators in Your Creative Pursuits	178
Cultivate Complementary Skill Sets	179
Provide Flexibility for Productivity	180
Foster an Immune System That Kills Ideas	183
Fight Your Way to Breakthroughs	184
Don't Become Burdened by Consensus	186
MANAGING THE CREATIVE TEAM	190
Share Ownership of Your Ideas	191
Leaders Should Talk Last	193

Judge and Be Judged Amidst Conflict	194
Develop Others Through the Power of Appreciation	195
Seek the Hot Spots	199
SELF-LEADERSHIP	202
Find a Path to Self-Awareness	203
Develop a Tolerance for Ambiguity	204
Capture the Benefits of Failure	206
Avoid the Trap of Visionary's Narcissism	207
Combating Conventional Wisdom with Contrarianism	209
Consider Yourself an Entrepreneur	211
Be Willing to Be a Deviant	213
Keep an Eye on the Backward Clock	214
The Love Conundrum	216
AN OPPORTUNITY AND A RESPONSIBILITY	219
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	221
Appendix 1: Tips for Practicing the Action Method	225
Appendix 2: The Purple Santa Experiment	227
Appendix 3: Overview of the Behance Network	231
INDEX	233

INTRODUCTION:

Making Ideas Happen

IDEAS DON'T HAPPEN because they are great—or by accident. The misconception that great ideas inevitably lead to success has prevailed for too long. Whether you have the perfect solution for an everyday problem or a bold new concept for a creative masterpiece, you must transform vision into reality. Far from being some stroke of creative genius, this capacity to make ideas happen can be developed by anyone. You just need to modify your organizational habits, engage a broader community, and develop your leadership capability.

This book aims to take pie-in-the-sky notions of how the creative process unfolds and bring them down to earth. Creative people are known for winging it: improvising and acting on intuition is, in some way, the haloed essence of what we do and who we are. However, when we closely analyze how the most successful and productive creatives, entrepreneurs, and businesspeople truly make ideas happen, it turns out that “having the idea” is just a small part of the process, perhaps only 1 percent of the journey.

Thomas Edison once famously quipped, “Genius is 1 percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration.” For the creative mind, inspiration comes easily. But what makes up the other 99 percent of making ideas happen? Read on for a surprisingly pragmatic set of insights and tips that have emerged from over six years spent studying the behaviors and skill sets of those who make their ideas happen again and again.

A QUICK PRIMER: Making Your Ideas Happen

In the sections ahead, we will discuss the methods behind spectacular achievements—ideas that have overcome the odds and become realities. But before we do, here’s a primer on a few terms I use throughout the book and some assumptions I make about you (and your ideas)!

You have ideas that you want to make happen. Whatever your business or industry, success is dependent on developing and executing new ideas. We’re not just talking about new products, new business ideas, or your vision for the next great American novel. You likely come up with creative solutions to problems every day. Unfortunately, regardless of how great your ideas may be, most of them will never happen. Most ideas get lost in what I call the “project plateau,” a period of intense execution where your natural creative tendencies turn against you. As a leader in your industry (and the leader of your life), you must learn to defy these tendencies.

You can develop the capacity to make ideas happen. From years of researching creative individuals and teams, I will share the practices used to make ideas happen, time and time again.

(continued)

Making ideas happen = Ideas + Organization + Communal forces +

Leadership capability. There is a framework for all of the insights and methods we will discuss. Aside from generating ideas (which we will not discuss), the capacity to make ideas happen is a combination of the forces of organization, community, and leadership. We will dive into each of these forces and discuss how you should use them in your own creative pursuits.

Organization enables you to manage and ultimately execute your ideas. In the modern world of information overload and constant connectivity, you must manage your energy wisely. Otherwise, you will fall into a state of “reactionary work flow,” where you act impulsively (rather than proactively) and simply try to stay afloat. Everything in life should be approached as a project. Every project can be broken down into just three things: Action Steps, Backburner Items, and References. The “Action Method,” which we will discuss in the first section of the book, is a composite of the best practices for productivity shared by creative leaders. The Action Method helps those of us with creative tendencies live and work with a bias toward action. With an understanding of this methodology, we will delve deeply into prioritization, managing your energy and attention, and fully executing your ideas.

The forces of community are invaluable and readily available. Ideas don’t happen in isolation. You must embrace opportunities to broadcast and then refine your ideas through the energy of those around you. In the second section of this book, we will break down the communal forces that cause ideas to gain traction.

Fruitful innovation requires a unique capacity to lead. Leading any sort of creative pursuit requires an overhaul of how we motivate others and ourselves. The most admired leaders are able to build

(continued)

and manage teams that can overcome the obstacles faced in creative projects. There is also a mind-set we must achieve to withstand (and capitalize on) the doubts and pressures we face along the way.

While the tendency to generate ideas is rather natural, the path to making them happen is tumultuous. This book is intended to outfit you with the methods and insights that build your capacity to defy the odds and make your ideas happen.

Making This Book Happen

I have always been a bit frustrated with creativity. I would get impatient watching colleagues and friends come up with great ideas, only to become distracted by other ideas and the general demands of life. I found the poor odds that anyone would actually follow through with an idea very upsetting. After a series of jobs and a graduate degree, my frustration turned into fascination and subsequently a career aspiration.

Believe it or not, it all started at Goldman Sachs, the investment bank. After an exceedingly dry finance job working with European equities, I was invited to join a group in the firm's executive office known as Pine Street—a small team of professionals dedicated to leadership development and organizational improvement. My focus was on developing the potential of innovative leaders both within the firm and at large clients, including hedge funds and other high-growth companies. This position provided me with a precious opportunity to study (and spread) the best practices of those leaders who were the most effective at executing their ideas.

THE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE OF ORGANIZATION

ORGANIZATION IS ALL about applying order to the many elements of a creative project. There are concepts you hope to retain, resources you want to utilize, and then the components of the project itself—stuff that needs to get done and other stuff that needs to be referred back to. There are also external elements like deadlines, budgets, clients, and other constraints. All of these elements combine (or collide) as you seek to create, develop, and execute ideas.

These elements exist in any creative project, but we don't always acknowledge them. Often we try to work around them (or ignore them). Of course, doing so decreases the odds that our ideas will ever happen.

The most important, and most often neglected, organizational element is structure. We tend to shun structure as a way of protecting the free-flowing nature of ideas. But without structure, our ideas fail to build upon one another. Structure enables us to capture our ideas and arrange them in a way that helps us (and others) relate to them.

Without structure, we can't focus long enough on any particular idea to find its weaknesses. Ideas that should be killed will linger, and others that require development may be forgotten. Structure helps us achieve a tangible outcome from our ideas.

Structure and organization are worthy of serious discussion because they provide a competitive advantage. Only through organization can we seize the benefits from bursts of creativity. If you develop the capacity to organize yourself and those around you, you can beat the odds.

Your Approach to Organization and the Destiny of Your Ideas

Supply chain management is a heavily logistical aspect of business that seldom attracts much fanfare. Companies like Wal-Mart and Toyota are legendary for how well they distribute and manage inventory. There is no debate that the mechanics of a company—especially its supply chain management practices—help determine the costs, quality, and availability of the product. There are consulting firms and executive-level positions within companies dedicated entirely to managing the supply chain—the embodiment of organization within a company. At the same time, many of us don't really associate such tasks with creativity and ideas.

Since 2004, AMR Research, a leading authority on supply chain research that serves numerous Fortune 500 companies, has published an annual list of the twenty-five companies with the best supply chain management. You might be surprised to learn that Apple debuted on the list at No. 2 in 2007, and overtook companies such as Anheuser-Busch, Wal-Mart, Procter & Gamble, and Toyota to take the No. 1 slot in 2008.

Why would Apple, a company known for new ideas and its ability to “think different,” also be one of the most organized companies on

the planet? The answer is that—like it or not—organization is a major force for making ideas happen.

Organization is just as important as ideas when it comes to making an impact. Consider the following equation:

CREATIVITY X ORGANIZATION = IMPACT

If the impact of our ideas is, in fact, largely determined by our ability to stay organized, then we would observe that those with tons of creativity but little to no organization yield, on average, nothing. Let's imagine a wildly creative but totally disorganized thinker; the equation would be:

100 X 0 = 0

Does this bring someone to mind? Someone who has loads of ideas but is so disorganized that no one particular idea is ever fully realized? You could argue that someone with half the creativity and just a little more organizational ability would make a great deal more impact:

50 X 2 = 100

The equation helps us understand why some “less-creative” artists might produce more work than their talented and inventive peers. A shocking and perhaps unfortunate realization emerges: someone with average creativity but stellar organizational skills will make a greater impact than the disorganized creative geniuses among us. I'll ask you to re-examine artistic judgment while we consider a few examples.

If you have ever passed through a resort town in America (and, increasingly, abroad), you may have come across a storefront gallery for Thomas Kinkade, “Painter of Light.” Similarly, if you are an avid reader, air traveler, or subscriber to fiction book clubs, you have likely

come across one of the many novels by James Patterson. Both Kinkade and Patterson are examples of creatives who have generated impressively large bodies of work. It is known that both Kinkade and Patterson employ many people to assist in the production and distribution of their work. In this regard, they are leaders of large enterprises. However, while Kinkade and Patterson have large fan bases, they are also consistently maligned by critics in their industries for being particularly unimaginative and productive to a fault.

Patterson holds the *New York Times* Best Sellers record with thirty-nine best-selling titles. His Web site notes that in 2007, one out of every fifteen hardcover novels sold was a Patterson book. The author has sold over 150 million copies of his books worldwide. His abundant outreach campaigns include marketing programs such as the “James Patterson PageTurner Awards,” and many of his dozens of published books have been optioned for television series and movies. Not surprisingly, he has started his own firm, James Patterson Entertainment, and is known to work on more than five novels at once.

In the industry newsletter *Publishers Lunch*, it was noted that if Patterson were treated as his own publishing house, “he’d be tied for fourth for most #1 bestsellers in 2006—ahead of HarperCollins, a major publisher.” It is no surprise that critics have likened Patterson’s creative process to a factory. Patrick Anderson, a well-known critic for the *Washington Post*, described Patterson in one review as “the absolute pits, the lowest common denominator of cynical, skuzzy, assembly-line writing.” Other critics have lambasted the similarity of the plots of his novels.

As for Patterson’s take on his success, he attributes it to a “golden gut—an ability to sense what’s going to appeal to a lot of people.” Patterson’s stunning productivity may stem from his previous life. Before authoring his first novel, Patterson was the CEO of J. Walter Thompson, one of the world’s top ad agencies. Climbing the ladder to CEO, he developed the strengths as a leader and organizer that

have distinguished his performance as a writer. Regardless of what the critics say, Patterson makes ideas happen at an almost alarming rate. And despite what you may think of his ideas, he is undeniably prolific and consistent. In our Creativity \times Organization equation, he is either a 50×100 or a 100×100 , and his impact is nothing short of remarkable.

Thomas Kinkade is similarly prolific. The sheer number of paintings coming out of Kinkade's studio is bewildering. In Kinkade's case, some may argue that many of his pieces look the same or are reused for different purposes. Kinkade's work is described in one book, *The Rebel Sell*, as "so awful it must be seen to be believed." There are even comedy Web sites that parody the work for being cliché and mass produced. One might argue that Kinkade's work is short on fresh ideas, but it is produced, marketed, and distributed efficiently and successfully.

In our Creativity \times Organization = Impact equation, both Patterson and Kinkade are exceptionally high on the organization side and have made an incredible impact in their respective industries as a result. From this you can see that the "organization" side of the equation deserves as much focus as the "creativity" side. Why? Because ultimately you want to make an impact with your ideas.

Apple, Kinkade, and Patterson are just a few examples of the power of the organization part of the equation. Amidst the joy of generating ideas, it is worth taking the time to develop your ability to organize them—and the resources required to stay organized.

The notion of spending energy moving stuff around rather than creating new stuff is understandably unappealing to the creative mind. Rather than forcing something that is not natural, we must understand the value of organization and develop creative approaches to it.

[END OF EXCERPT]

about your work and latest projects will subscribe to that information. You will receive more feedback because everyone who cares enough to have an opinion will be tuned into your progress. And the countless connections that arise circumstantially will make all the difference in your projects. Although the process can be uncomfortable, you are more likely to focus and make incremental progress when an expectant group of colleagues, friends, and fans is watching.

Communal Forces Are Best Channeled in Circles

If you don't normally work within a group, you may want to create your own. Writers' circles are groups of writers who meet on a weekly basis to benchmark each other's progress and keep each other motivated. But such "circles" aren't limited to the literary world.

For instance, Claude Monet is often recognized as the founder of Impressionist painting, but the Impressionist movement, which was quite radical during its day, arose from a group of friends and fellow artists. The original circle included Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Frédéric Bazille, and Alfred Sisley; it later expanded to include Camille Pissarro, Edouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Émile Zola, and Paul Cézanne. At the beginning, the original four friends often lived and worked together, pooling resources, inspiring each other to take risks, and learning from each other's mistakes. Monet crystallized the importance of the Impressionist circle in an interview from the era:

It wasn't until 1869 that I saw Manet again, but we became close friends at once, as soon as we met. He invited me to come and see him each evening in a café in the Batignolle district where he and his friends met when the day's work

in the studio was over. There I met . . . Cézanne, Degas who had just returned from a trip to Italy, the art critic Durany, Emile Zola who was then making his debut in literature, and several others as well. I myself brought along Sisley, Bazille, and Renoir. Nothing could be more interesting than the talks we had with their perpetual clashes of opinion. Your mind was held in suspense all the time, you spurred the others on to sincere, disinterested inquiry and were spurred on yourself, you laid in a stock of enthusiasm that kept you going for weeks on end until you could give final form to the idea you had in mind. You always went home afterwards better steeled for the fray, with a new sense of purpose and a clearer head.*

Despite prevailing notions of the lone genius, this story of how the Impressionists, a circle of friends, spurred each other on to achieve major breakthroughs in the world of painting is more common than you might think. Circles like this play a critical role in making ideas happen across creative industries. In some cases, the use of circles has been institutionalized, while in others, formal circles are nonexistent. Regardless, circles are relevant and hugely beneficial for all leaders with ideas.

In the world of business, the Young Presidents' Organization (YPO) is known for its "Forum" system. While the broader organization has many thousands of members, individuals are assigned to groups of eight to ten peers who meet ten times per year "in an atmosphere of confidentiality, trust, and openness to share in each other's business, family, and personal experiences." According to YPO, "A CEO's job is often characterized as being 'lonely at the top.'

* Michael P. Farrell, "The Life Course of a Collaborative Circle: The French Impressionists," in *Collaborative Circles: Friendship Dynamics & Creative Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 27–67.

The Forum serves as an antidote to that isolation.” For business leaders involved with YPO, Forums provide the kind of advice, motivation, and accountability that you would expect from a circle.

A small leadership development network at Cornell University has employed a similar construct. Originally spawned from a 118-year-old “senior society,” a group of younger alumni started gathering in small groups to share career aspirations and personal challenges. What started years ago as a small experiment for alums to stay in touch has become a little-known global network of hundreds of emerging leaders who meet in small groups—and all together annually—for the sole purpose of sharing ideas, exchanging candid feedback, and fostering a sense of accountability.

While most young professionals struggle to depart the security of a traditional career, the membership of this particular network of Cornell University graduates has a strong track record of defying the status quo to launch start-up businesses, found nonprofits, and run for political office much earlier than most. “This network has helped provide me more guts and more guidance,” remarks one member. Like the Forums in YPO, the small regional groups that meet often in this network are yet another example of the power of circles and how they motivate us to take risks and then follow through.

Regardless of your interest or industry, there are some key success factors for circles. I have come to call them the “Rules of Circles,” and would make the case that circles should be conceived, managed, and sometimes abandoned with these rules in mind. As you develop a formal circle or push a current group of like-minded professionals to function more as a circle, consider implementing these guidelines:

Limit circles to fifteen members or less. When groups get much bigger than that, people feel accountable to a collective rather than to each other as individuals, which is less effective. The other reason

for this size is purely logistical: it becomes too difficult to coordinate and host more than fifteen people. Also, when it comes to online forums and e-mail chains, groups larger than this become too impersonal and make it difficult for members to speak freely.

Establish a clear and consistent schedule for meeting. Circles can be ongoing or they can be one-offs that meet a set number of times and then end. There are reasons you might want to consider either option: a group of screenwriters might assemble a one-off circle to track the development of a single screenplay apiece, while a group of young entrepreneurs might create an ongoing circle to discuss business problems and solutions.

Meet frequently and stay accountable. For people's personalities to break through, one-off circles should meet for a minimum of five times. For ongoing circles, the most common practice is to meet either monthly or biweekly. Regardless of frequency, it is critical that all participants are held accountable for attendance and timeliness. Circles should have agreed-upon expectations for attendance, because the goal is increased familiarity among members over time. If a member has more than the allowed number of absences, he or she should be asked to leave, since consistency of attendance can make or break a circle's system of shared accountability.

Assign a leader. Every circle needs someone to oversee scheduling and to confront members with inconsistent attendance who need to be pushed. Some members of a circle will be more apt to participate than others. The best circle leaders can engage those who are tuning out or struggling to get involved. In addition, leaders should facilitate the start and end of conversation while always keeping an eye on time.

Extend your circle online. With the latest advancements in social technology, circles can and should use online tools. However, purely virtual circles are at a disadvantage. Without eye contact and set meetings that start and end on time, it is difficult to uphold the commitment and level of candidness that exists only in a physical and intimate experience. Nevertheless, every leader should consider taking aspects of their circle online—whether through online “drop boxes” that store files (helpful for writing circles that require the prereading of work), or online discussion boards that can enable offline conversations to continue online.

Regardless of your industry or level of experience, circles can support creative pursuits. Your contributions to your fellow circle participants will strengthen the collective value of the circle experience. Like most other relationships in life, the benefits you reap from circles are a function of what you contribute.

Another interesting dynamic that may arise within a circle—or elsewhere in your life—is competition. Among peers within the same industry, you will start to feel pressure to further pursue and refine your ideas as others share their own progress. These competitive vibes can act as positive motivators.

Seek Competition

Six years is 2,190 days. While spectacular creative achievements take time, Noah Kalina’s “Everyday” project was unique in the consistency required and the forces that made it a worldwide sensation. Kalina is the first to admit that his idea to take one picture of himself every day—now for nine years running—was neither bold nor ambitious.

Every night, Kalina would snap two self-portraits with a digital

[END OF EXCERPT]

MANAGING THE CREATIVE TEAM

Leadership is the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to do it.

—President Dwight D. Eisenhower

CREATIVE JOURNEYS ALL begin with a spark in one person's mind. From day one, the challenge is to get others to understand and support the idea as though it were their own. But leadership is not about making people do things. Leadership is about instilling a genuine desire in the hearts and minds of others to take ownership of their work on a project. Only then can we act together, motivated by a shared purpose.

Sound leadership in the creative world is all too rare. Creative minds flee their teams at an alarming rate, and attrition is a common challenge. And when creative people do leave, it is seldom for a higher salary. Complaints from creatives who feel that their ideas are underutilized (or unheard) abound, as do stories of micromanaging leaders who demand that everything be done their way.

Across industries, I have found much in common among creative leaders who are able to consistently motivate a team to push ideas to fruition. These admired leaders are able to share ownership of their ideas, operate amidst adversity, and identify and develop high-

potential team members. Through your own experiences managing others or being managed, you must develop your capacity to manage a creative team through the long, challenging pursuit to make ideas happen.

Share Ownership of Your Ideas

The more people who lie awake in bed thinking about your idea, the better. But people only obsess about ideas when they feel a sense of ownership. Alas, sharing ownership is easier said than done. More frequently than not, creative leaders struggle to surrender enough control over their ideas to truly allow their employees, partners, and other constituents to feel ownership.

Author and *Wired* editor in chief Chris Anderson, mentioned earlier, is a big proponent of sharing ownership of ideas. In fact, Anderson gauges the worth of an idea on whether or not anyone else is enthusiastic about owning it.

“When I have ideas within the magazine, I don’t say, ‘You, you, and you, act on this idea,’” he explains. “What I do is I say, ‘Here’s an idea. Who’s interested?’ And, you know, I articulate it to the best of my ability and I evangelize and I get people all enthusiastic and do as good a selling job as I can, and very quickly people might say, ‘Man, that’s exactly what I was thinking about!’ … Or they’re like ‘meh’ and in those cases I drop it. I don’t push it through.”

Getting people excited about your idea, however, is just the first phase of sharing ownership. The second and much more challenging part is empowering team members to push the idea forward rather than micromanaging them every step of the way.

Ultimately, truly sharing ownership of ideas means permitting your team members, the people you have entrusted with the fate of the project, to make meaningful decisions—even decisions that you

might have made differently. The best creative leaders are able to recognize that the cost of variation from their original vision is often outweighed by the benefits of shared ownership and the scalability that it provides. You want your collaborators to stay up at night thinking about how to execute the ideas at hand—in their own way.

One seasoned creative leader who understands shared ownership of ideas is Peter Rojas. Originally the editorial director of the technology blog Gizmodo, Rojas went on to cofound the hugely popular tech/gadget site Engadget and become the chief strategy officer for Weblogs, Inc. In 2007, Rojas cofounded RCRD LBL, a forward-thinking online record label and blog, which became profitable after just fourteen months.

During our conversation, Rojas expressed his approach to shared ownership as largely pragmatic. “Leaders tend to want to put their hands on everything—but it is not productive [to do so].... Engadget would have never functioned properly if I was that hands-on.... My approach is to hire people that I trust and let them do their thing. And if I don’t trust them, I’ll get someone else.”

Trusting someone’s judgment does not mean that everything is being done the way you would do it. Different people will make different decisions. The question, as Rojas points out, is: Did their alternate approach make a material difference? As long as the desired outcome is achieved, controlling how it is achieved shouldn’t be that important to you.

The problem among especially passionate leaders is that their vision—and their obsession with perfection (or control)—often allows micromanagement to get the better of them. This happens for the best of reasons: We care deeply about both the process and the end product.

The problem is compounded for many leaders in the artistic sphere—such as fashion designers, architects, and photographers—

because their names are often part of the end product. Understandably, sharing ownership can become even more painful when your name and reputation are literally on the product.

However, the benefits of having your team feel collective ownership—waking with the impulse to improve the product and falling asleep generating new ideas to make the product succeed—will often outweigh the costs of having particular parts of the project develop differently than you may have intended.

Leaders Should Talk Last

Jack Welch, the legendary former CEO of General Electric, was known to walk into a boardroom full of his top deputies—all gathered to solve a problem—and proclaim, “Here’s what I think we should do.” Welch would explain his vision and reasoning. Then, after sharing his solution for the problem at hand, he would say, “Okay, now what do you think?” It is no surprise that Welch would get many nods of support and not much in the way of disagreement or bold, new ideas. Those who disagreed (and had the guts to say so) might share alternative ideas, but only in a context relative to what Welch had proposed.

Welch’s good intentions were likely heartfelt. He was a seasoned executive with tremendous experience. However, even if he had the right solution in mind, he was still failing to fully engage—and develop—his team. And perhaps he didn’t always have the right answer!

The tendency to talk first is a common flaw among visionary leaders. After many years in an industry, visionary leaders become revered by others and convince themselves that they have seen it all before. As a result, these leaders are liable to talk first, act quickly,

Combating Conventional Wisdom with Contrarianism

As you harness the lessons of the past, you must also question them. Of course, nobody should willfully disregard good advice and fall victim to visionary's narcissism. But as creative professionals, we cannot become imprisoned by the status quo.

Yet another conundrum arises: how should we reconcile our tendency to seek the advice of experts with our desire to do things differently—and perhaps better? We should be wary that “best practices”—the tried and true ways of doing things—often become conventional wisdom, and conventional wisdom is often wrong.

There is a somewhat healthy tendency in every discipline to defer to the knowledge of elders. From the apprenticeships of the pre-Industrial Age to the traditional corporate hierarchies that permeate our life today, societies are built on collective wisdom from the past. Major conferences around the world gather industry experts to share their wisdom. We painstakingly listen to our elders’ projections as if they were coming from an oracle.

However, for the small portion of society that is tasked with innovation and pushing the envelope, a reliance on conventional wisdom is damning. We have to temper advice with a dose of skepticism, and we must always consider the merits of developing new platforms rather than more and more derivatives.

An early theme that emerged in my interviews with creative professionals was the practice of “contrarianism,” or the act of purposely thinking against the grain when approaching problems and brainstorming new ideas. Contrarians are willing to manage (if not embrace) the uncertainties and risks inherent in thinking differently. And by questioning the norms, they are bound to either find better approaches or to feel more confidence in the old ways of doing things.

The following are a few tips for engaging in the practice of con-

trarianism and navigating the terrain of conventional wisdom. Needless to say, consider them with a dose of skepticism!

Don't revere someone based on age. There is an inherent prejudice against young people—or people who are new to our industries—because we question how much they could possibly know given their relative lack of experience. However, novices have very legitimate advantages when it comes to detecting trends, adopting new technology, and attempting risky undertakings that more experienced creatives would shy away from. When working with novices, you should pass judgment on their raw interests and skills rather than their age or number of years in the industry.

Reconsider your approach to mentoring. Your tendency may be to look to those above you for guidance, connections, and opportunities. Yet your greatest advisers, partners, colleagues, and financiers are likely sitting around you rather than standing in front of you at the podium. While society may suggest that you have the most to learn from those at the top, you must make an effort to look around and below you as well. View mentoring less as an act of graciousness and more as a strategy to capture the benefits—through relationships or otherwise—that are likely to transpire for you as well.

Distinguish past accomplishments from present knowledge. We all have a tendency to “rest on our laurels,” but cutting-edge knowledge becomes antiquated very quickly. The brilliant expert from yesterday may have little insight that is relevant today. In fact, such experts may be too biased by their own past experiences and success to see how the times have changed. As such, you should question the correlation between one’s past accomplishments and present knowledge.

Aspire to better practices, not the best. Rather than default to the way things have already been done, recognize that anything can be done better. While it is certainly worthy to find and follow time-tested methods as we pursue projects, it is dangerous to passively accept advice. All conventional wisdom and “best practices” should be taken with a grain of salt and built upon as we aspire to “better practices.” (This applies just as much to the advice in this book!)

Consider Yourself an Entrepreneur

You have a responsibility to make your ideas sustainable. For an idea to thrive over time, it must be treated as an enterprise. Whether you work in a large corporation or on your own, when it comes to leading ideas, ultimately you are an entrepreneur.

“Entrepreneurs are not the ones with the best ideas,” says Andrew Weinreich, a trailblazing serial entrepreneur. “They’re just the ones willing to jump off a cliff without the answers.” Weinreich created one of the earliest social networks, SixDegrees.com, which he eventually sold in January 2000 for \$125 million. Most recently, he has founded Xtify.com, which offers free location-based services for mobile phones and Web apps, and MeetMoi.com, a mobile dating service. In all of these ventures, Weinreich has played the role of founder and leader.

Weinreich’s business escapades did not start with thoughtful strategy and business planning. He graduated from law school with over \$100,000 in debt. But he had ideas and grand visions of what they might become. “You can live longer off passion than off money,” Weinreich explains to me. But when he took the plunge on his first venture, he didn’t see a finish line—and he thinks it is wrong to have one in mind. Instead, he believes that entrepreneurs should just try “to stay in the fifth inning forever”—meaning they should focus more

PRAISE FOR MAKING IDEAS HAPPEN

“Everyone has great ideas. Just a few people ship. The difference? Most people give in to fear and the resistance, and a few follow the ideas in this book. Either you have an action method or you’re irrelevant. The ideas in this book can quite simply change your life.”

—SETH GODIN // author of *Linchpin*

“From his years spent understanding how the most productive entrepreneurs and creative minds operate, Scott Belsky provides a compendium of the knowledge one needs to turn a great idea into something tangible. This is a book about execution, and when it comes to going from an idea to a real business, execution is everything.”

—JOHN BATTELLE // co-founder of *Wired* and Boing Boing, founder of Federated Media

“If your creative team or organization struggles to implement their best ideas, or if you find that your own creative projects languish unfinished, you need *Making Ideas Happen*. ”

—TERESA AMABILE // professor of Business Administration, director of research, Harvard Business School

“In just one volume, Belsky shows how to execute simply, boldly, powerfully. He reveals the forces and methods that push projects to completion—and how they are accessible to all of us. Practical and perfect ways to implement your ideas with peace of mind.”

—LEO BABAUTA // author of *ZenHabits.net* and *The Power of Less*

“I hear people talking all the time about great ideas that never come to life. This book is like a Swiss Army knife for ideas. It offers step-by-step tools to turn ideas into action, and is full of wonderful and enlightening stories of those who have made their ideas happen.”

—JI LEE // creative director at Google Creative Lab and founder of the Bubble Project

“Scott Belsky has observed how designers think and has created a way to help them make the complex clear—and the actionable achievable—within the rush of creativity that defines their mind’s workspace. His ideas provide an effective way to manage ideation, iteration, and execution.”

—RICHARD GREFÉ // CEO of AIGA

“Belsky’s approach has made my life even simpler. *Making Ideas Happen* demonstrates that ideas of any magnitude are achievable by simply taking one step at a time. Belsky offers an illustrated map to get to the destination of your great ideas.”

—SCOTT THOMAS // design director, Obama Presidential Campaign

“There are techniques in this book that can turn disorganized creative prima donnas into organized creative prima donnas. It’s full of terrific lessons in how to keep great ideas alive.”

—CHUCK PORTER // co-chairman, Crispin Porter + Bogusky

ISBN 978-1-59184-312-2



5 2 5 9 5 >



9 7 8 1 5 9 1 1 8 4 3 1 2 2

Buy the book: www.makingideashappen.com