



Entrepreneur

EVERYDAY INNOVATION

Hacks, tricks and tips to get creative
juices flowing and innovation flourishing.

Presented
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CHALLENGE 1:

The brainstorming session that wasn't.

We've all been there. You sit in on a brainstorming session but the ideas aren't flowing. Maybe you're just rushed. Maybe you hesitate to share the ideas you think won't be supported. And in the end, when all the ideas are posted to the whiteboard, you don't feel like any bring your team closer to the right solution.

THE PROBLEM:

Judith Glaser, an organizational anthropologist and the CEO of Benchmark Communications, says that traditional brainstorming can't overcome three forces that stand in the way of new thinking, among them:

Our need to feel included. She says, "Real innovation requires divergence and expanding our ideas into the far recesses of our brain that may be less comfortable or familiar."

Our need to be right. Notes Glaser, "Thinking we know the "correct" answer reinforces feelings of intelligence and good judgment."

Our established patterns of thinking. Thinking repetitive thoughts etches "grooves" into the brain, according to Glaser. "The brain then reinforces what it knows, perhaps at the expense of what is new and novel."

THE SOLUTION:

To break out of these patterns, change your habits to change your brain's pathways. Try the following:

Get primed. Think of trigger words related to the problem at hand and then go for a walk. Later, list the words in two columns and think of non-obvious connections between those words. Brainstorm after this exercise, with your brain set to think differently.

Think of the worst idea. Research shows that what appears after 'the worst idea' can become a trigger for the best ideas no one has thought of before.

Let your ideas flow. Don't worry about what's right or wrong or even what's good or bad. She says, "If you are feeling anxious, uncomfortable, or lost in uncharted territory, know you are on the right track."

Plan sessions that work. Challenge everyone to share their ideas before meetings begin so everyone has time to reflect without outside criticism, according to Art Markman, cognitive psychologist and author of *Smart Thinking*. A more focused meeting can also prevent exhaustion and the pressure to move forward with a sub-par idea.

"Think left and think right and think low and think high. Oh, the thinks you can think up if only you try!"

- Dr. Suess

CHALLENGE 2:

You're in a creative rut.

You need a big idea and you're struggling to find one. It's not like you're not ready to work but inspiration hasn't found you.

THE PROBLEM:

Scientists have found that creativity can depend on context. In other words, certain people may be able to offer fresher perspectives depending on the situation or the environment.



THE SOLUTION:

It's time to change your context to boost your brainstorms.

Look outside your industry. Make a list of innovators you admire. Now think about how those lessons and their solutions could inform and change your project.

Pretend you're from space. Imagine that you are looking at your problem from far away. According to scientists from Indiana University at Bloomington, psychological distance boosts creativity by fostering your ability to think in the abstract.

Ask three people. New perspectives bring new approaches. Challenge yourself to find people who don't think exactly like you and learn from their ideas. At the very least, you'll remind yourself of the myriad possibilities that exist.

Think like a genius. Would Steve Jobs handle this project or this problem differently? Imagine the people you think are the smartest, the most creative and the most intriguing. What would they do?

Remember the luggage wheel. Both wheels and luggage existed for decades before they were combined and the result was a revelation.

Sometimes the most game-changing solutions are the ones that build on classics.

Daydream & doodle. Let yourself play and discover. Divergent thinking comes from exploration.

Unplug and unwind. A recent study by researchers at the University of London found that a 4-day tech-free hike in nature boosted problem solving and creativity by 50 percent in one test group.

Fix your surroundings. White walls inhibit creative thinking, but colors like blue and green promote brainstorming and creative thinking, respectively. An inspiring poster never hurts either. Researchers at Tufts University have found that just a photo of a light bulb can boost spatial, verbal and mathematical problem solving.

Get a plant. Better aromas, like those from flowers, make people set higher goals for themselves. In some studies, scent even helped people learn more quickly.

Eat avocados. They're high in tyrosine, an amino acid that research says promotes divergent thinking. They're also a good source of fatty acids that are critical to brain function.

Have a cold one. Research shows a couple of beers frees you from the usual rules and assumptions and lets you fall back on your intuition. (To actually get the work done, pour yourself a cup of coffee).

Drink some water. Getting hydrated can give some thirsty people a mental lift.

"Logic will get you from A to B. Imagination will get you everywhere else."

- Albert Einstein



Wasting Time

CHALLENGE 3: You're procrastinating.

Of course, there's innovating to do, but the phone is ringing. Or your inbox needs tending. It doesn't matter anyway, because you work best when you're inspired, right?

THE PROBLEM:

If you wait for your muse, you could wait forever. Sometimes, when you can't quite get moving, it's because you don't know where you're going. Create a roadmap for yourself to make thinking creatively more manageable.

✓ THE SOLUTION:

Give yourself something productive to do that will help feed your creativity.

Get researching. You might not know enough about your problem to solve it. Maybe you need to learn more about your market, your audience or what you can offer that no one else does. Dive headfirst into learning more about your problem or your subject.

Step back. When you think about the big picture, you actually engage both sides of your brain and are better able to make new, divergent connections.

Question everything. Consider testing your idea or your solution now, with only what you've developed so far. Even if it's not ready to launch, feedback might help guide you on improving your idea and help you think about next steps.

Make a smaller bet. Big problems can be hard to solve. Break that larger problem into several smaller problems, and attack just one thing at a time.

Identify your goals. What do you need? What do you want? What does success look like? Find the answers and get organized. If you're writing a blog post, brainstorm one day, write on the second day and edit on a third day. Developing your idea will come more easily with an easy-to-implement plan and you'll get a boost from completing a task.

Find silence. Noise from open-plan offices can distract you from focused work. Find a place to concentrate or ask chatty colleagues if they'll adjust their volume levels. Spaces with ambient noise, like coffee shops, can be ideal for creative thinking.

"You can't wait for inspiration, you have to go after it with a club."

- Jack London



CHALLENGE 4: You're too busy.

Overscheduling is death for innovation. Late nights, early mornings, working vacations and constantly swiping your phone for new messages and tasks leave you too tired to innovate. It's no way to build, improve or lead.

THE PROBLEM:

There are likely tasks that are distracting you from thinking creatively and being the innovative leader you need to be. You need to take back your time.

✓ THE SOLUTION:

You want to do everything, and you can, just not all at once.

Focus. Force yourself to take projects one at a time so each gets the attention it deserves. Consider a block schedule where you work on certain projects during certain times of the day, week or month, so you can truly concentrate.

Delegate. Think about the things that you think only you can do and think about training someone else to do them. By not doing those tasks, you'll discover two things: a. the world doesn't end, and b. that someone else can actually do them better, since they'll be focusing more time on that project than you currently can.

Find the zombie hours. Chances are, you're mindlessly walking through some tasks in your day, from wading through red tape or sitting in on meetings you don't need to attend. At home, you might find yourself keeping up with T.V. shows you long-ago stopped enjoying or handling chores you could outsource. Reclaim parts of your day and use the hours to work on what's really important to you.

"Creativity is a habit, and the best creativity is the result of good work habits."

- Twyla Tharp



CHALLENGE 5:

You don't think you're ready.

Your inner critic keeps telling you that your ideas aren't quite baked. They're not good enough, unique enough and they certainly won't move the needle.

THE PROBLEM:

You're suffering a crisis of confidence. This self-doubt is natural, but it can inhibit the creative process.

✓ THE SOLUTION:

Free yourself from the rules you've been setting. The best innovators and entrepreneurs weren't always the smartest or the most talented. They were, however, the ones who didn't allow a fear to get in their way.

Forget perfect. Act more, judge less. It's uncomfortable to not know if the direction you're taking is the right one. But following your instincts makes you better able to experiment and explore, essential to creative thinking.

Say 'maybe.' Make it part of your process to be open to possibility.

Write it down. Track your brainstorm. Keep an idea file. Give yourself the opportunity to see that you do have great ideas and build upon them.

Call a friend. New ventures need supportive networks.

Practice, practice, practice. Talent is no substitute for hard work. Daily, consistent work can unlock genius — and pull you ahead of more gifted people who aren't as dedicated.

"If you think you can, or if you think you can't, you are right."

- Henry Ford



CHALLENGE 6:

You don't think change is possible.

Sometimes it seems like only you understand the value of your great ideas. You know they're great, but everyone around you isn't so sure.

THE PROBLEM:

Change is hard — especially for groups. Doing things as we've always done them can provide a sense of comfort and inclusion. Unfortunately, it can also stifle new thinking and prevent new ideas from taking root, a lesson that's key for individuals, leaders and teams.

✓ THE SOLUTION:

Real innovation requires insights — and buy-in — from a range a people. Create an environment where innovation can flourish. Key to this is trust. Real innovation requires insights — and buy-in — from a range a people. Get your team together and build the trust that turns great ideas into realities.

Listen more. Ask more questions. Say less. Allow other people to share their perspectives and make sure you're not just barking orders or talking at the people you need most.

Eat together. Snacks, group meals and communal tables bring staff from across the company together. Casual conversation will make innovation and ideas flow more smoothly. Have lunch together or get a drink after work to build the relationships projects depend on.

Get in front of your team. Ideally, you and your team can see each other easily, since this will make it easier to chat and work together, with spaces nearby for collaboration as well as quiet areas for focused projects. If it's in your power, nestle small groups of six within a larger community. Studies suggest this tactic avoids power struggles and helps staffers work for a common interest.

Start small. Through tiny wins, you'll win detractors over and change ingrained habits and expectations.

"Innovation distinguishes between a leader and a follower."

– Steve Jobs



CHALLENGE 7:

You've failed — and don't want to fail again.

There's a hundred reasons why your idea won't work.

THE PROBLEM:

Fear of failure is really a fear of risk. You're afraid you'll lose time, money or even personal credibility should your idea not work the way you envision.



THE SOLUTION:

Spend more time innovating and less time worrying. Change how you think about failure and remember it's just a natural step in any innovation process.

Pass the Champagne. Some companies celebrate when projects are killed, understanding that dead ends are part of innovation's discovery process. A party brings your team together to show that failure is normal. It also provides the space to speak openly about what might work instead.

Change your vocabulary. Replace "failure" with words like "learning" or "evolution." Think more like a scientist experimenting in a lab.

Be honest. Ask "Why?" until you understand how the project came apart. Until you understand what went wrong, you can't brainstorm for new approaches.

"If I find 10,000 ways something won't work, I haven't failed. I am not discouraged, because every wrong attempt discarded is another step forward."

- Thomas A. Edison