

# The Inspiration Discipline



**By Andy Stefanovich**

A common scenario in corporate headquarters these days features the Chief Innovation Officer having a meeting with her Innovation Council in the recently completed, state-of-the-art Innovation Room, frowning at the results of their efforts to create a “culture of innovation.” Why don’t they have it? Why aren’t they getting the output they need?

The answer is counterintuitive. They are focusing on the intended output when they should be focusing on the input. This flawed—and all too common approach—has created the need to apply a new equation: *Inspiration + creativity = innovation*.

Think of inspiration as a fuel that is fed into the processes that organizations have invested time and energy to build. Powerful ideas come from the combination of inspiration and creativity and will go on to become innovations that inspire individuals, teams, the larger organization, and, in turn, the world. It’s an elegant cycle based on the simple proposition that you need new input if you hope to gain new output.

And inspiration is a discipline that requires deliberate practice. Inspiration as a discipline? Absolutely.

Intentional, focused inspiration is the necessary complement to phenomenally successful initiatives that target efficiencies—Six Sigma, ISO, Lean, and a host of others. They have taken business a long way and provided billions of dollars in returns, but they can only take us so far. It takes inspiration to fully engage others and ourselves.

There are three reasons why focusing on inspiration is the right thing to do in today’s tough economic climate. First, it’s a natural resource—one that happens to be renewable. We don’t have to create something out of thin air. We just need to learn where to look for it. Second, inspiration is people-centered. Once we have achieved maximum efficiency and cut our costs, the only thing left is our people. Inspiration makes innovation personal. And finally, inspiration is fiscally responsible because it is a way to get more out of the investments we have already made in innovation process and systems. We don’t have to scrap them. We need to reenergize them.

The key to practicing strategic business inspiration is dissecting the experience of inspiration itself. It’s something that everyone understands. It’s refreshing, engaging, and universal. And it can be harnessed in a variety of ways for business leaders.

Think of inspiration as having five distinct modes: serendipity, recreation, intentional distraction, forced connection, and targeted discovery. By practicing each, inspiration becomes easier to achieve and more rewarding over time.

## **Serendipity**

An unexpected moment of inspiration. That’s true serendipity. It could be the accidental combination of two chemicals in a lab that creates a revolutionary reaction. It could be someone’s strange T-shirt on the bus. We don’t seek it out, but serendipitous inspiration stops us in our tracks and demands inquiry. This form of inspiration can’t be engineered, but can serve as a common denominator for individuals developing their inspiration capabilities. And likely sources can be found in museums. We have a specific mentality when we go to a museum. We expect to be inspired. It’s when we walk out the door that we put our blinders back on. Leave the blinders behind and you’ll be amazed by the surprises that await you.

## **Recreation**

Recreational inspiration is common, just unrecognized. Its sole function is to release the conscious mind from its standard routine or set of direct concerns. Sports. Music. Hobbies. Exercise. Watching TV. Surfing the Internet. Solving a puzzle. Playing a game. Taking a nap. People have varying ways of taking their minds off work, worries, and problems. This form has no predictable benefits, but it is key to more advanced modes of inspiration. In fact, research from the University of Amsterdam shows that your unconscious mind is far more effective at solving complex problems than your conscious mind, so recreational inspiration is essential to thinking differently and, above all, maintaining good mental health. As they say, all work and no play makes Jack (and Jill) dull. Make time for fun and your inspiration skills will sharpen.

## **Intentional Distraction**

Consider this form a slight twist on recreational inspiration. How many times have you had a tune in your head that you can’t quite place? Or found the name of an important contact elusive? When you stop thinking about it, five minutes or five days later, it comes to you suddenly. Once you moved on to something else, your unconscious mind eventually provided you with the answer you needed.

Unfortunately, we are trained to keep working and push through our confusion and desperation to develop better solutions, equating the time spent on a challenge with the quality of the outcome. Nothing could be further from the truth. Researchers

at the University of Amsterdam gave two groups complicated problems to solve. After working for a few minutes, one group was asked to instead work on a short brainteaser. The other group had more time to keep thinking about the problem. When both groups were told to stop and offer answers the group working on the puzzle found the solution to the original challenge more often.

Sometimes you need to step away and intentionally focus elsewhere. Intentional distraction in small doses makes it feel less uncomfortable. Go outside your office. Take a walk. Go get lost. It's not a license for slacking, but it's a valuable tool for unleashing the part of your brain that does the heavy lifting.

### **Forced Connection**

Once you feel confident with intentional distraction, move on to forced connection. This is the first step in applying inspiration to a specific real-time objective, and it's a skill that requires development. How can the glass of water in front of you help your sales team? How can an overheard conversation in public lend you a new perspective on your company's brand? Results may lead to the next transformational innovation—or nowhere at all.

On a recent walk with a client who needed leadership coaching, I stopped in front of a street lamp and asked him, "What does this street lamp tell you about leadership?" Stunned at first, he said nothing. I offered up some ideas without caring about where it would take the conversation. It shines from above. It is dark during the day. Its historical nature fits in with the very old warehouses around it. Then I asked, "Does your management team wear suits like you while the operational side of the business dresses casually? Do you fit in with your surroundings when you visit those departments or do you stand out?" These perspectives gave us a new entry point for considering how people in the organization view their managers, and, ultimately, what leadership can be at that company.

Forcing connections can be awkward, but there's a payoff to developing the discipline for finding relationships between focused objectives and seemingly tangential sources of inspiration. Push yourself. And take notes.

### **Targeted Discovery**

Once you hone your divergent thinking skills through forced connection, you can try targeted discovery. This mode pushes you to seek out sources of inspiration that will strategically stretch your thinking, challenge your assumptions, and create new connections—all with a specific real-time objective in mind. What can a five-star hotel manager learn from a zoo? What can a marketing team learn from a hostage negotiator? What new ideas will come to an emergency room doctor after he works in a fast food drive-thru for an hour?

Ask yourself, "What business am I in?" Forget about your specific product or business. What is the value that you really provide to your customers? Is it convenience, reliability, or creativity? What other organizations or individuals make the same promise? And what can you learn from them?

Selecting sources for targeted discovery requires experience, discipline, and resources. This mode of inspiration is the engine of innovation for business because it is the quintessential new input that's needed to get new outputs.

You might think that I am, well, insane. You have too much work to do to stop and get inspired. You can't take your eye off the bottom line. You are probably thinking, "Inspiration is for artists, musicians, and cult leaders."

I often ask clients, "What's the definition of insanity?" Without fail, one person in every group will offer up, "Doing the same thing over and over again, expecting different results." Exactly. Inspiration is the new input that can break this cycle, return sanity to innovation, and create a sustainable pipeline for ideas of impact.

What are you waiting for? Take a moment and look around you. What do you have to lose?

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