

5 Secrets to Creativity

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Generate More Because Less Is Less. The best predictor of who is viewed by others as creative is the sheer volume of their output. Individuals who are dubbed creative, imaginative, original or inspired almost always come up with more material than their colleagues. They work on generating volumes of creative material which they then sift into a small amount of useable results—and it's true in virtually every endeavor. Consider comedy. Woody Allen explains that early in his career he made up dozens of jokes, and then tested them in small comedy clubs. Then, less than one in ten of his gags made it on to the Carson show. If you watched Woody on the big stage, you'd think: "How does he come up with these gems?" By his own admission, he came up with lots of material, mostly mediocre, and then let the audience cull it. Don't think of creativity as a gift possessed by a lucky few, think of it as the result of hard work—where sheer volume routinely trumps genius.

If It Ain't Broke, Do Fix It. Each time I sit down with my partners to create a new training exercise or video clip I ask: "Is there a new and better way to do what is currently working for us?" I purposely look for different methods—even when what we are currently employing works well for us. That doesn't mean we throw everything out, but we do try to make at least a couple of changes in what we've previously done—on principle alone. Force yourself to make changes, even during good times. It keeps you on the creative edge.

Seek the Common. Imagine that you're brainstorming solutions to a problem (an important act of creativity) and you feel as if you're in a rut. You want to think outside the box, but aren't sure how to do so. First, identify the box by asking: "What do all of our current suggestions have in common?" That common feature comprises your primary mental constraint. Remember the engineering students? All of their ideas used a brick to build a structure. To break the invisible wall you'd ask them: "Can you think of a use other than building a structure? Okay, that's good. Now all of the ideas use the mass of the brick. Is there something that doesn't use the mass?" Whenever you're trapped in a mental box, one question can get you out. "What do all these suggestions have in common?"

Try, Try, Again. Yesterday, I went to a movie that turned out to be a real clunker. The sad truth is that far too many movies aren't all that good because they have to be completely finished before they're shown to the viewing public. Just think of the magnitude of this challenge. The work of dozens of people at the cost of millions of dollars is combined into a finished product, released with a flurry of ads, and if it's accepted, it's accepted; but if not—it's quickly yanked from the big screen.

Contrast this process with a speech you've been asked to give to several audiences. You design and deliver your first speech. Some parts go well, others don't, so you make changes. The second speech goes better. By the time you give the speech the tenth time, it's a polished gem. Here's the point. Treat your creative efforts as speeches, not movies. Quit producing completed and polished work and then testing it with your audience in one grand ta-da! Instead, create and then test sample material with sample audiences. Conduct a half dozen mini-experiments before you even think of working on the finished product.

Swallow Your Pride. This final idea springs out of the previous one. As much as most of us would love to produce a wonderfully novel and successful product all on our own, we'd do well to swallow our pride and quit trying to go it alone. Sure, Isaac Newton, with the release of *Principia*, stunned an entire world through his solo efforts. He alone came up with answers as to why the planets and other heavenly objects act the way they do.

Now, with this example in mind (and this is what people often think of when they talk about creativity with a capital C), consider the following simple fact. The rest of us are not now nor will we ever be an Isaac Newton. We need to drop our standard—our work isn't likely to be world-changing and we're very unlikely to do it alone. So, when coming up with new ideas and methods, seek not solitude, but a crowd. Brainstorm with colleagues. Continually ask people for feedback along the way. Give up on the idea of surprising others with a blazing and unexpected flash of insight. Instead, clunk along, hammer away, talk with others, and continually reshape your work—with a little bit of help from your friends.