

# **The Innovation Blueprint**

A Step-by-Step Framework for  
Breakthrough Ideas

Bill Stainton

The Innovation Blueprint  
A Step-by-Step Framework for  
Breakthrough Ideas

ISBN 978-0-9797503-5-9

Copyright ©2019 Ovation Consulting Group, Inc. Bill Stainton

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the author. For permission requests, write to the author at the address below.

Little Creek Press  
4522 131<sup>st</sup> Place SW, Mukilteo, WA 98275

Bill@BillStainton.com  
425-741-3972

Interior layout - MiniBük, MiniBuk.com

Typefaces: Franklin Gothic (headlines), Utopia Std (body text)



Manufactured in the US by MiniBük®, a reg. trademark of MiniBük, LLC

# Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	i
A Lot of Emmy Awards.....	i
The Problem with the Experts .....	ii
A Left-Brain Creative .....	iii
The Step-by-Step System.....	iv
Step 1: Ask the Question .....	v
Step 2: Collect the Dots .....	vi
Step 3: Connect the Dots.....	vii
Step 4: Make the Decision .....	viii
Step 5: Do the Thing.....	viii
Ready? .....	ix
<b>The Need for Creative Thinking</b> .....	1
The Benefits of Breakthrough Ideas.....	3
The Link Between Creativity, Innovation, and Profit .....	5
<b>What Creativity Is...and Isn't</b> .....	9
The Secret Truth About Leading Creative Teams.....	11
What Creative Teams REALLY Need.....	13
<b>Step 1: Ask the Question</b> .....	19
So There Was This Guy Named Einstein .....	19
The Invention of Bill Nye the Science Guy.....	22
Why This Matters .....	24
<b>Step 2: Collect the Dots</b> .....	27
Why You Need Multi-Colored Dots .....	27
General Dots and Specific Dots.....	30
What Kills the Cat Strengthens the Leader .....	31
Why You Need a Wacky Neighbor.....	34
Specific Dots and Where to Find Them.....	36
The Magic of the Pyramid.....	36
Ask "Who else?" .....	38

<b>Step 3: Connect the Dots</b> .....	41
Ask Connecting Questions .....	42
Two Other Connecting Questions.....	44
What if? .....	45
How is? .....	46
Venn In Doubt .....	47
Sweet Home Chicago.....	48
Make It a Habit .....	49
The Secret to Coming Up with a Great Idea .....	50
A Few Real-World Connection Examples .....	53
<b>Step 4: Make the Decision</b> .....	57
One: Give Yourself a Deadline .....	57
Two: Be Willing to Let Go .....	58
Three: Waiter, These Ideas are Corked .....	59
Four: Waiter, Reality Check Please.....	61
Five: Get Some Perspective .....	61
Six: Chill Out .....	63
Seven: Commit to the Bit .....	64
<b>Step Five: Do the Thing</b> .....	65
Why Your Idea is Worthless.....	65
How to Finish a Movie .....	67
The Magic Sentence for Getting Stuff Done .....	68
Where to Live .....	69
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	71
Step 1: Ask the Question .....	71
Step 2: Collect the Dots .....	71
Step 3: Connect the Dots.....	71
Step 4: Make the Decision .....	72
Step 5: Do the Thing.....	72
A Few Final Thoughts .....	72
<b>About Bill</b> .....	75

## Introduction

In every industry, **the company with the next great idea wins.**

That means, of course, that in *your* industry, the company with the next great idea wins. The only question is, will that be you, or will it be your competition?

And that brings us to our second question. (I know I said the above question was the only question. I lied. Get over it.) If the company with the next great idea wins, then where do great ideas come from? And since “great ideas” are also “creative ideas,” our question becomes, “Where do creative ideas come from?”

This is a question that I’ve been studying for the past 35 years, give or take.

For fifteen of those years, it was—literally—my job.

### **A Lot of Emmy Awards**

You see, for fifteen years, I was the Executive Producer of Seattle’s legendary comedy TV show *Almost Live!* For fifteen years my job—and the job of my team—was to be creative. On demand. Whether we felt like it or not. Because, much like *Saturday Night Live* (we were their lead-in in Seattle), we had to invent a brand-new show, each and every week.

And we were good at it. (Or, more accurately, we *got* good at it.)

How good? Well, my team members eventually won **over 100 Emmy Awards** for their work. And as a producer, writer, and performer, I won **29 Emmys**. (Tragically, ten of them broke during an earthquake, but that doesn't negate the fact that I won them, fair and square.)

So I feel pretty safe in saying that I know a thing or two about innovation, creativity, and breakthrough thinking. And I'm here to tell you that **it's not as hard as some people make it out to be.**

## **The Problem with the Experts**

Here's the problem with a lot of creativity and innovation experts. They talk about how important creativity and innovation are, they give you lots of examples, they tell you what they've done—and then they tell you to just go out there and do likewise.

**But they don't tell you how to do it.**

Why is this? It's because **they live in the universe of creativity, and they assume you live there too.** They assume that your brain is wired the same as theirs, and that if they can just convince you of the benefits of creativity and innovation, you'll wake up

out of your stupor, slap yourself on the forehead, and say, “Oh, okay! If it’s that important, I guess I’ll start being creative!”

The problem is *not* awareness—you’re already aware of the importance. The problem is in **knowing how**. It’s like the pilot of your airliner calling you into the cockpit, telling you how important it is to land safely, and then turning the controls over to you and saying, “So just land the plane.”

At that point, a couple of lessons would be nice.

Look, like the other experts, I’m also going to tell you how important creativity and innovation are. I’m going to give you lots of examples, and I’m going to tell you what I’ve done.

But then I’m going to break it down for you.

## **A Left-Brain Creative**

I’m going to grossly over-simplify brain science here, so if you’re a cognitive psychologist, you may want to skip this section.

But basically, the right side of the brain is the “creative” side, while the left side of the brain is the “logical” side. Artists are “right-brain;” accountants are “left-brain.” The right brain is where imagination lives; the left brain is more into linear thinking.

And **this is where a lot of the creativity experts lose a lot of the business experts.** Because a lot of the creativity experts live in their right brain, while the business experts are more at home in their left brain. So when the creativity experts say, “Just be creative!” they’re coming from their right brain. Meanwhile you, the business expert (and, more specifically, your left brain) is asking “How?”

This is where I come in. Because while I’m quite comfortable spending time in my right brain, I’m actually more of a left-brain person. I like systems. I like processes. **I like knowing what to do first, second, and third.**

And that’s why I wrote this book. **I wrote it as a Left-Brain Creative.** My goal is to give your left brain the “how to” that will lead to your next breakthrough idea.

## **The Step-by-Step System**

Ultimately, breakthrough thinking is not that complicated. It really comes down to just two things:

- 1. Collecting dots**
- 2. Connecting dots**

That’s it!



If you can just get good at those two things, you'll come up with **enough breakthrough ideas to last you a lifetime**. I'll show you how to do that in chapters 4 and 5.

But in order to make this little book complete, I've added a few more steps. Here's the entire framework, in order:

1. **Ask the Question**
2. **Collect the Dots**
3. **Connect the Dots**
4. **Make the Decision**
5. **Do the Thing**

Each of these steps has its own chapter, but let's break it down briefly right here.

### **Step 1: Ask the Question**

When you and your team are trying to come up with an innovative solution to a challenging problem, the first thing you need to ask yourselves is, "What is it that we're really trying to solve?"

In other words, you need to decide on your **Innovation Intention**.

The answer may seem self-apparent, but if you jump at that first answer, **you may actually be heading down a rabbit hole**. If, instead, you take the time

to get clarity on the question you're trying to answer—which may mean finding the “question behind the question”—your breakthrough ideas will be much more valuable and on target. We'll explore this more in chapter 3.

## Step 2: Collect the Dots

Breakthrough thinking is all about relationships. It's about connecting things that have never been connected before. But in order to connect these things, **you have to be aware of them in the first place.** They have to be on your radar.

To use my vernacular, you have to **collect the dots.**

If creativity is a matter of connecting dots (and it is), then you have to first *collect* the dots. Because—and this shouldn't be too hard to follow—**you can't very well connect dots if you don't even know these dots exist.**

So you need to collect dots. Moreover, you need to collect both *general* dots and *specific* dots. In chapter 4, we'll talk more about this. And here's an added bonus: when you become a great dot collector, you'll also become a more interesting person!

### Step 3: Connect the Dots

Great. Now you have a wonderful, big collection of dots. But you don't have any breakthrough ideas. That's because the dots aren't the ideas. They're just the ingredients. Just like a recipe for a gourmet meal, **the magic lies in the combination of the ingredients.**

So how do you connect these dots? Well, sometimes the connections manifest themselves automatically. You've probably had this experience. It's the "Hey, you know what this reminds me of? That time in Italy..." moment. You see something, read something, smell something, hear something—and it **triggers a connection** in your brain without any conscious effort on your part.

Other times, though, you have to help the connection along. This tends to come naturally to the creative thinker—the right-brain person. But what if you—like me—are more of a left-brainer? I've discovered there are a few questions—I call them **Connecting Questions**—that can help reveal connections that others would miss. When you and your team start asking these questions and finding those connections—well, that's when the breakthroughs happen. I'll show you how to do this in chapter 5.

## Step 4: Make the Decision

So far, what we've been talking about is the “creativity” part of “creativity and innovation.” Here's the difference:

- *Creativity* is coming up with ideas—ideally, lots of ideas.
- *Innovation* is the practical (and profitable) implementation of one or more of those ideas.

See, coming up with creative ideas is fun! It's like playing. There's no judging, no second-guessing, no critiquing (at least, not when you're doing it correctly).

But when you're done, what do you have? You have a bunch of ideas—some great, some good, some terrible.

In order to turn these ideas (the great ones, that is) into profit, now you need to go all left-brain on them (and not before!). Now you have to separate the wheat from the chaff. In short, **you have to decide which ideas rock, and which suck.** I'll give you some tools for making this decision in chapter 6.

## Step 5: Do the Thing

The world of business is littered with great ideas that were never implemented. You've never heard of most of these ideas (and many of the businesses)

because of one key rule, which is that *the universe rewards action*.

### **The universe rewards action.**

Look, you can do each of the first four steps brilliantly—but until you actually press the Go button, that needle ain't gonna move.

It's like the person who looks at an iPhone and says, "Oh, man—I had that idea first!" Okay, let's ignore for a moment the fact that no, you didn't. But even if you did, there's a reason you're not a billionaire. It's because (and this is going to sound like sacrilege) *ideas, by themselves, are essentially worthless*. Until you actually *do* something with the idea (e.g., make a product, write a book, create a meme), it has no power.

### **You give an idea power by combining it with action.**

In other words, you do the thing. And that's chapter 7.

## **Ready?**

So there you have it. The blueprint for breakthrough thinking. Five steps. Five steps that will unlock the creativity and innovation that's already inside you, and inside your team. Your next (or possibly your first) million-dollar idea could be right around the corner!

Let's get started.



## The Need for Creative Thinking

I'm continually astounded by how short-sighted some leaders are (not you, of course; it's the others). Let me tell you what I mean.

Not too long ago, I was booked by the CEO of an organization that wanted me to keynote their annual conference. After we agreed on the details for the keynote program, I asked him, "What do you have on the agenda to help your team think more creatively?" (I have a great hands-on breakout session on this topic that I thought might be a good fit.)

"Oh, we don't need any of that creativity stuff," he said. **"We're not really in a creative business.** Besides, I don't want my people wearing clown noses to work and sitting in beanbag chairs."

Wow.

This CEO—a very successful man—equates "creative thinking" with "wearing clown noses to work." That's sad. But what's even sadder is that this is not an uncommon reaction.

**Many leaders see "creative thinking" as just another disposable "soft skill."**

This, despite the fact that:

- The Tesla Model S was a result of “creative thinking”
- The Hershey bar with almonds was a result of “creative thinking”
- Double-entry bookkeeping was a result of “creative thinking”
- The iPhone was a result of “creative thinking”
- Agriculture (and its by-product, civilization) was a result of “creative thinking.”

I’m pretty sure that neither Elon Musk, Milton Hershey, Amantino Manucci, Steve Jobs, or Thog Thogson wore clown noses (although Musk and Jobs may have sat in beanbag chairs). (Also, although I can’t *prove* that the guy who invented agriculture was named Thog Thogson, *you* can’t prove that he—or she—*wasn’t*.)

The simple fact is that ***everything that has ever created a profit for any company in history has been a result of creative thinking.***

Soft skill? I think creative thinking is **the *core skill!***

And when the pressure’s on—when there are serious consequences on the line—**you want people around you who can think creatively.** Why?

Because things don’t always go right. You’ve heard the adage about the “best-laid plans,” right?



When things don't go right, particularly when the outcome is important, you want—no, you *need*—options. And, just like the iPhone and the Hershey bar, options are a result of “creative thinking.”

But listen, don't take my word for it. Find the movie *Apollo 13* and watch that scene where the engineers in Houston had to improvise a carbon dioxide scrubber interface to keep the stranded astronauts alive. The success of that mission (sorry—spoiler alert!) is what happens when pressure and creativity intersect.

**There is no industry, no organization, and no team on earth (or in space) that can't benefit from creative thinking.**

And there's no leader on earth (or in space) who shouldn't care about creativity.

## **The Benefits of Breakthrough Ideas**

Every breakthrough that made a million dollars, cured a disease, or changed the world was the product of a creative idea.

Every company that exists—or that ever existed—originated with a creative idea.

Every billionaire on the Forbes 400 list is there because of a creative idea. (Sometimes that creative idea happened a generation or two ago.)

Every breakthrough your competition made that kept you up at night came from a creative idea.

**Think about it. If I told you that there was a tool that could...**

- equip you to react effectively to changes in the marketplace, *and at the same time*
- equip you to *proactively initiate* changes in the marketplace, *and at the same time*
- allow you to see patterns in your industry and marketplace that help you predict the future of your business, *and at the same time*
- unlock a virtually endless supply of lucrative products and services, *and at the same time*
- increase employee engagement, attract millennial and Gen-Z talent to your workforce, and reduce turnover

...you'd probably say (to quote Liz Lemon from *30 Rock*), "I want to go there!"

**That tool is creativity.**

Creativity is not a "game" reserved for poets, musicians, and Cirque du Soleil performers.

Creativity—*strategic creativity*—is:

- the ability to find better ways of doing what you're already doing,

- the ability to spot trends ahead of the competition,
- the ability to incorporate best practices from other industries into your own,
- the ability to engage your team with work that challenges and invigorates them,
- the ability to generate profitable ideas—*on demand!*

So please stop thinking of creativity as an option. It's not. Let's be blunt: **If you think of creativity as an option, and your competitor thinks of it as a necessity, your competitor will win—period.**

Get serious about creativity. Because creativity—*strategic creativity*—is serious business.

## **The Link Between Creativity, Innovation, and Profit**

*Turning creativity into money.*

That's how I sometimes described my job as the Executive Producer of that hit comedy TV show in Seattle.

*Turning creativity into money.*

See, our job, week after week, was to be creative—on demand. *But*—**that creativity had to lead to profit.** If what we created—jokes, comedy sketches, parodies—didn't draw an audience that advertisers would

pay to reach, our creativity would have gone nowhere (and our careers would have quickly followed). But we did draw that audience, and the station made a healthy profit. And it all began with our creativity.

**Our creativity was the engine that powered the profits.**

But this doesn't apply just to comedy TV shows. **It applies to your business as well.** (Of course, there may be times when you think your business *is* a comedy TV show—but that's an entirely different issue.)

In 2010, a survey of more than 1,500 CEOs from 60 countries and 33 industries worldwide concluded that **creativity is now the most important leadership quality for success in business.** That being the case, why is it that so many leaders refuse to invest time, money, and/or energy into improving their own creativity and that of their teams? Why won't they invest in the “most important leadership quality for success in business”?

I think it's because when they think of “creativity,” they (like the CEO who began this chapter) form a picture in their minds of hippies in headbands going off into the woods and juggling beanbags while singing about “possibility.”

With this picture (or one like it) firmly in mind, they then say, “We’re not going to have any of that foolishness around *here!*” and go off and hire yet another sales trainer.

They just don’t seem to get that **the road to profits begins with creativity.**

Here’s the sequence: **CREATIVITY leads to INNOVATION which leads to NEW PRODUCTS AND SERVICES which leads to PROFITS.**

Leaders: This is how you stay in business!

Look, I’m not saying you shouldn’t hire the occasional sales trainer. But without continuous creativity, you won’t have anything to sell!

**EVERY product, EVERY service that ever made a dollar (or a million, or a billion, dollars) began with a creative idea.**

*Kill your creativity, kill your business. Grow your creativity, grow your business.*

Pretty simple, isn’t it?

Creativity is *not* a soft skill. Creativity is *not* an expendable option. Creativity is *not* a frivolous game.

**Creativity is the most important leadership quality for success in business.** Start treating it that way. The rest of this book will show you how.



## What Creativity Is...and Isn't

I can't tell you what your next million-dollar idea will be—but I can tell you, with near 100% certainty, where you're going to find it. And it probably won't be where you think.

**In order to understand this, you have to understand what creativity is—and what it isn't. Because your next million-dollar idea will be, by definition, a *creative* idea. And creativity, contrary to popular belief, doesn't come from nowhere.**

Creativity is not the “lightning bolt” that comes out of the blue. And creative ideas aren't formed from nothing. In the vast majority of cases, **creative ideas are found at the intersection of *two or more seemingly unconnected things*.**

You've probably never heard of Robert Palladino, a former Trappist monk. But without him, there's a very good chance that you would also have never heard of the iPhone.

Robert Palladino taught calligraphy at a small liberal arts college in Portland, Oregon. And in 1973, a former student at that college (he had dropped out after just one semester), happened to sit in on Palladino's calligraphy class.

**That student's name was Steve Jobs. In addition to calligraphy, he also dabbled in computers.**

When Steve Jobs and his friend Steve Wozniak decided to create the Apple computer—and later, the Mac—Jobs remembered his calligraphy class, and asked the question, “*What if our computer could do calligraphy?*” This helped set Apple apart, which helped make it (eventually) successful. Really successful. Like, the world's first trillion-dollar company. Successful enough to create other innovations—like the iPhone.

Now here's the thing. Computers already existed. And calligraphy already existed. But, **until Steve Jobs came along, nobody had ever thought of connecting the two.** And if Jobs hadn't happened to walk into that calligraphy class at Reed College, he might not have thought of it either.

Steve Jobs found his million-dollar idea (or, more accurately, *trillion*-dollar idea) at the intersection of computers and calligraphy.

So where will you find your million-dollar idea? You'll find it at the intersection of two or more seemingly different things that already exist. And when you can look at those things and **connect them in a way**



**that nobody else ever has before**—well, that's the *real* lightning bolt.

## The Secret Truth About Leading Creative Teams

**Creativity and innovation are the currencies of the future.** The rate of change has never been as fast as it is today, and it will only get faster. Nobody—not even the so-called "futurists"—*really* knows what's coming around the corner, so the only defense (which is also the best offense) is to nurture and cultivate the creative talent in your organization. **Creativity is the ultimate skill set for dealing with the unknown**, and innovation is the applied use of that creativity to keep you commercially relevant and profitable. As management guru Harold R. McAlindon says:

*The world leaders in innovation and creativity will also be world leaders in everything else.*

The problem, though, is that while we expend tremendous amounts of money, energy, and resources attracting top innovative talent to our organizations, **we really don't know what to do with them when they're there.** We have this amazing tool—a creative team—at our disposal, and then we completely waste its potential. Why? Because **most businesses expend most of their resources *attracting* innovative talent,**

**and virtually none training their leaders on how to lead innovative talent.** And believe me, as somebody who led a highly creative and innovative television comedy team to 10 straight years of #1 ratings, and well over 100 Emmy Awards, leading creative teams is a different skill set! So how do you do it?

Think bowling.

See, the little-known secret is that **you don't really "lead" creative talent.** You give them a goal—a challenge, really—and then gently push them on their way. Think of it as a bowling alley. The bowling ball is your creative team, and the pins are the goal. Now, the pins are your responsibility—you're the one setting the goal. **A creative team needs—and in fact wants—a clear target; they just don't want to be told how to get there.** In my case working on the TV show (and remember, we were a Seattle-based show), the target might be, "I need ten monologue jokes about how crappy Seattle traffic is," or, "I need a two-and-a-half minute sketch that Ken Griffey, Jr. can appear in." This is you setting up the pins. And then you send the bowling ball—your team—on its way.

Now, is your job over? Not at all. There are these things called "alleys." As the leader, **you now need to step back and watch the progress of the ball.** As long

as it's heading toward the pins, you really don't have to do much of anything. But if you see it veering off toward one alley or another, it's your job to **give it a little tap** this way, or a tiny nudge that way.

So here are the steps:

- Assemble a great, creative team (your bowling ball)
- Give them an exciting challenge (set up the pins)
- Send them on their way
- Stay out of their way, except...
- If you see them heading off course, give them a little push—guidance—in the right direction

Is this an over-simplification of the process?

Yep. But if you can keep the bowling alley metaphor in mind, you'll be a much better "leader" of creative talent.

## **What Creative Teams REALLY Need**

I've never run a pre-school daycare, but for fifteen years I was the boss of ten multi-E Emmy Award winning comedy writers, which amounts to pretty much the same thing. As the Executive Producer of *Almost Live!*, it was my job to keep a highly creative team motivated and productive. I learned a lot of things along

the way, but primarily I learned that **a creative team needs two seemingly incompatible things in order to thrive: direction and freedom**—with a little fire thrown in along the way. Let's take these one at a time. But first, a disclaimer:

*DISCLAIMER: ALL people are inherently creative. The only difference between "creative" and "non-creative" people is that "creative" people believe they are creative. When I talk about "creative" people and teams in this section, I'm referring to those who both believe they are creative and who are working toward a creative goal. Like, say, writing comedy for a sketch comedy TV show.*

**Direction:** Okay, I'm going to once again paint brain science (as well as creative people) with an absurdly broad brush here by reiterating that creative people tend to be great with their right brain (the creative side), and not so great with their left brain (the side that focuses on things like, oh, deadlines, or being at meetings on time). You, as a leader, have hopefully risen to your position partly because you've learned how to balance both sides of the brain (although you probably tend a little more to the left side).

What all of this means is that your creative team could be a little, shall we say, "scattered"? In a way,

they're a bit like a puppy, or a two-year old child. **They need to know the rules and the boundaries**—and that's where you come in. It's your job to make sure they're clear on the targets (i.e., the bowling pins), whatever they may be.

(By the way, if your team complains about having "rules" and "boundaries," please remind them that, at their creative peak, the Beatles were limited to 4-track recorders and 20-25 minutes per album side. And then remind them that, within these limitations, the Beatles created albums like *Rubber Soul*, *Revolver*, and *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. That should shut them up. My TV show *Almost Live!* was exactly 27 minutes and 55 seconds long, every week, for 15 years, and we had a very firm deadline: Saturday night, 11:30pm. So keep this in mind: **It's not the limitations, it's what you do within the limitations that counts.**)

**Freedom:** So here's the balancing act. Yes, you need to set and communicate clear targets, but **if you then try to tell your creative team how to achieve these targets, you'll lose them.** You'll lose them mentally (they'll lose interest and tune out), or you'll lose them physically (they'll go work for the competition), but you'll lose them. Creative people (just like puppies and two-year old children) need space to play, explore,

and discover. **They need the freedom to try things that don't work.** Have you ever seen a toddler playing with blocks? She can play for hours, trying to figure out how to arrange them so they don't fall down. But the minute a parent comes over and says, "Here, try it this way," the child loses interest. See, **while you as the leader may get your kicks out of reaching the destination, your creative team gets its kicks out of the journey**—especially if the journey contains some interesting detours. Which brings us to...

**The Fire:** Creative people thrive in a stimulating environment, and they die in a sterile one. So it's your job as the leader of a creative team to make sure the work environment has some fire to it. You want your creative team to be more motivated and productive? Paint your drab white walls blue. Subscribe to interesting magazines from a variety of fields and leave them lying around the office. Occasionally bring in a guest from a different department or industry. **Expose your team to new ideas and new influences.** You never know what's going to spark a brilliant idea in one of them.

**Bottom Line:** A creative team that comes up with brilliant ideas is one of the most valuable resources any organization can have. If you want to

give your creative team the best possible chance for success, give them clear ground rules and then let them run free.

With all of that in mind, let's start *your* journey. Let's get on to the **Innovation Blueprint!**





## Step 1: Ask the Question

The very first thing you need to do—and yes, I mean before you start generating *any* of your bright, shiny breakthrough ideas—is to come up with the *focus* for those ideas. In other words, you need to decide **what it is that you're generating ideas about.**

Are you trying to come up with the amazing new product that will propel your business into the stratosphere and make you rich by Thursday, or are you simply trying to brainstorm creative ways to make your meetings more productive?

The first thing you need to do then—whether you're working solo or with your team—is ask the question, *“What is it that I'm/we're trying to accomplish here?”*

In other words, “What's the goal?” Or, as I like to call it, “What's the **Innovation Intention?**”

This seems like a simple question, but there may be more to it than meets the eye.

### So There Was This Guy Named Einstein

Albert Einstein once said, “If I only had an hour to solve a problem, I'd spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and five minutes thinking about solutions.” And while I don't necessarily agree with Mr.

Einstein about the ratio, I think his quotation does highlight a common mistake that leaders and their teams make in the creative thinking process, and it's this:

**If you jump to solutions too quickly, you may find you're solving the wrong problem.**

Look, I get it. When a problem comes up, it might be a critical situation. Everything screams to a halt until the problem is solved, and that's not good for business.

So there's a sense of urgency: "We need to solve this problem now!"

Plus, solving a problem feels good, doesn't it? I'm guessing some smarty-pants brain scientist has done some research showing that when we solve a problem, our brain gives us a little shot of dopamine. But even in the absence of such research, you *know* that it feels good to be able to look at a problem that you've just solved and say, "That's done!"

So the temptation is strong to jump directly to the solution phase of the problem-solving process. Often when we do this, though, **what we end up solving is not the problem, but simply the immediate symptom of the problem.** We think we've put an end to it, but the root problem still exists, and will eventually

reappear as a new symptom. And so the cycle will repeat itself, leading to more interruptions, more work stoppages, and more frustration.

So what's the solution to this vicious cycle? (And yes, I get the irony of me jumping directly to the solution phase in a section pointing out the dangers of doing just that.) The solution is to take a tip from Albert Einstein. When a problem comes up, instead of rushing headfirst to the solution, **do a bit of regression analysis**. Ask yourself—or your team—“What caused this situation?” Then, once you've identified the cause, ask, “Okay, what caused *that* situation?” And then keep going, further and further back. In other words, **look for the question *behind* the question**.

“But Bill,” you ask quite reasonably, “how far back should I go? If we take this to its logical extreme, every problem will end up back at the Big Bang, and we'll have wasted a lot of time getting there.”

Fair point. I would encourage you not to take your regression all the way back to the Big Bang. So where do you stop?

Ideally, **you stop when you reach a systemic cause**. Yes, put a Band-Aid® on the symptom if necessary. You need to stop the bleeding. But then see if there is a deeper root cause in your systems and/

or policies. Perhaps the real reason for that customer complaint is that, at a system level, your company policies don't empower your front-line employees to make even limited customer service decisions. If that's the case, offering the customer a discount or a refund will take care of the immediate problem, but not the systemic problem behind the problem.

As a leader, it's your job to **dig a little deeper, search a little harder, and solve the *real* problem.**

Come to think of it, Einstein's ratio may have been right after all.

## **The Invention of Bill Nye the Science Guy**

You all know Bill Nye the Science Guy. If you're of a certain age, you grew up watching him on TV. If you're beyond a certain age, your kids grew up watching him on TV. But did you know that Bill Nye the Science Guy was invented out of desperation on January 10, 1987? And it all happened because **a low-paid comedy writer asked a different question.**

I was the Executive Producer of *Almost Live!*, and Bill Nye was one of my writers. In fact, he was my lowest paid writer. January 10, 1987 was a Saturday—show day for us—and our primary guest for that night's show had just called to cancel. There were probably

eight of us sitting around the conference table, trying desperately to come up with a substitute guest. We kept tossing out names and quickly rejecting them. "He's not in town." "She's in rehab." "I think he's dead."

But then, my lowest paid writer—Bill Nye—piped up and said, "I might be able to do something with liquid nitrogen."

**We thought he was crazy.** Here we were, trying to come up with a guest for the show, and he's babbling on about liquid nitrogen.

Fortunately, Bill was able to convince us, and on that night's show, Bill Nye (who really does have a science and engineering background) became Bill Nye the Science Guy.

**And it all happened because Bill Nye asked a different question.**

See, the rest of us were asking the question: *Who can we get to be a guest on the show?*

Bill Nye asked the question *behind* the question: *How can we fill the time?*

Can you see how asking a different question **completely redefined the situation?**

Quite often I see leaders and their teams struggling to solve a particular problem or overcome a particular challenge. And, almost invariably, they focus on **the**

**question closest to the front of the situation.** What do I mean by this? I mean they focus on the question that seems the most immediate, the closest to, the situation at hand. In our case, for example, the immediate situation was that we didn't have a guest for that night's show. And so the question closest to the front of that situation was *Who can we get as a guest?*

But Bill Nye realized that sometimes the correct question—**the one that will lead to the breakthrough idea**—is actually further back. He stepped back from the immediate situation to ask himself, "*What's the real problem here?*" And the real problem was not that we didn't have a guest; the *real* problem—the one further back—was that by not having a guest, we had about 12 minutes of empty show to fill.

If you and your team have a problem to solve, or are looking for a truly breakthrough idea, the answer might be simple—in fact, it might even be obvious—if you **re-frame the situation and ask a different question.**

## Why This Matters

The creative process can be a long one, depending on the scope of your task. So it would be a shame,

wouldn't it, to get to the end of that long journey only to find you've been on the wrong road the entire time.

It's kind of like programming an incorrect address into your GPS. Yes, the GPS will take you there—and that's when you discover that “there” isn't where you wanted to go.

The time you spend getting crystal clear on your goal—your **Innovation Intention**—is some of the most valuable time you can spend on the path to your breakthrough idea. That's because if you get Step 1 wrong, you'll be wasting your time—and that of your team—with Steps 2 through 5.

But when you *are* clear on your **Innovation Intention**, then it's time to move on to Step 2: Collect the Dots!





## Step 2: Collect the Dots

Once you've Asked the Question and are clear on your **Innovation Intention**, you need to start assembling the ingredients that will eventually form your breakthrough idea. I call these ingredients *dots*. To give yourself the best shot at a truly innovative idea, you need a large collection of dots—and you need variety in your collection.

### Why You Need Multi-Colored Dots

Are all of your dots the same color?

I talk about dots a lot. That's because dots are the key to innovation, creativity, and breakthrough thinking.

Most people get this wrong. They think that breakthrough ideas—the creative innovations that make the competition whimper like scared puppies—are the result of some divine lightning bolt that only strikes the gifted few. This is the common myth. But it's just that—a myth.

The truth is that **breakthrough ideas are virtually always the result of somebody—or a team of somebodies—connecting two or more dots that nobody has ever connected before.**

What are these dots? Pretty much anything: **people, experiences, concepts**. Let's say, for example, that you're Johannes Gutenberg in the year 1440 (give or take). You're familiar with a device called a wine processor used for squeezing grapes. That's one dot. You've also rubbed shoulders, figuratively speaking, with movable type, which was invented in South Korea (probably). That's another dot. **These two dots already existed in the universe**. But it took Gutenberg to look at them and say, "Hey, maybe I could combine these, invent the printing press, and change the world!" (Those may not have been his exact words.)

The point is, **the printing press did not spring to life out of nothing**. It was not the lightning bolt from above. **It was a guy connecting two dots that already existed, in a way that nobody else had ever done before**. And it's the same story (or a similar one) for virtually every great invention or breakthrough idea that went on to change the world.

But in order to *connect* those dots, Gutenberg had to first *collect* those dots.

In other words, **he had to have encountered them somewhere**. If he'd never come across a wine processor, that dot would not have been available to him.

Earlier I told you about Steve Jobs and Robert Palladino, the calligraphy-teaching Trappist monk. If Jobs had never sat in on Palladino's class, the calligraphy dot would not have been available to him. But because it was, he was able to make the connection between calligraphy and computers and create Apple.

So if you want to come up with breakthrough ideas in your world, you have to first become a *dot collector*. And the more dots you collect, the more connections you can make, which means the odds of one of those connections being your next million-dollar idea increase dramatically.

But—and stay with me on this dot metaphor—if all of your dots are the same color, all of your *ideas* (which, again, come from connecting dots) will be the same color. **If all of your dots are navy blue, all of your ideas will be navy blue.** Not exactly breakthrough, right? What this means is that **if you only read similar things, only interact with similar people, only listen to similar points of view, you're limiting your creativity.**

*If Steve Jobs had limited himself to only taking courses in computing, our world would be a different place.*

See, the way to really turbocharge your creative thinking is to collect dots that are **different colors,**

**different sizes, different shapes.** This means exposing yourself to all different kinds of people, experiences, and ideas. You may not agree with them all. Some may be outside of your comfort zone. But here's the thing:

*You never know which dot will lead to the breakthrough idea.*

And wouldn't it be a shame to miss out on inventing the printing press or the iPhone because the dot you needed was green, and you only collect blue dots?

## General Dots and Specific Dots

Let's talk for a bit about *general* and *specific* dots:

- **Specific dots** are those dots that are specifically related to your **Innovation Intention**; that is, your particular task at hand. I'll give you some ideas on where to find these dots shortly.
- **General dots** are the dots you collect simply by being alive on the planet. They're the dots you find in that random supermarket conversation, that magazine article about cheese that you once read, that hip-hop song that your teen made you listen to.

I urge you to make the acquisition of general dots a *lifelong habit*. Why? Two reasons:

- 1. You never know which random dot might be the one that unlocks the million-dollar breakthrough idea.**
- 2. It'll make you a more interesting person.**

It's true! If you have a wide array of knowledge on a wide array of topics, you'll be able to have a fascinating conversation with just about anyone (which is a great way to collect even more dots!). Also, the best way to collect diverse (multi-colored) dots is to be interested in diverse people, diverse experiences, diverse concepts. And when you are interested **in** other people, you become interesting **to** other people.

So how do you develop this lifelong habit? You become **intellectually curious**.

### **What Kills the Cat Strengthens the Leader**

If you have any cats in your life, you know that the adage "Curiosity kills the cat" is not just a saying; it's a fact. Cats have an insatiable curiosity that overrides their instinct for self-preservation. And it can get them into life-threatening danger, over and over again.

Fortunately, though, you are not a cat. You are a leader. And **leaders need a healthy amount of intellectual curiosity in order to be effective.**

To put it simply: **too much curiosity kills the cat; too little curiosity kills the leader.**

In his book *Non Obvious: How To Think Different, Curate Ideas & Predict The Future*, author Rohit Bhargava lists curiosity as one of the five essential habits of “trend curators.” (“Trend curator” is his term for a person who can predict the future by detecting trend patterns that others miss.) He defines curiosity as **“always asking why, investing in learning, and improving your knowledge by investigating and asking questions.”**

It seems self-apparent, doesn't it, that “asking why,” “investing in learning,” and “improving your knowledge” are pretty valuable traits for a leader to possess. And yet I'm amazed at how many so-called “leaders” remain willfully—almost proudly—incurious about the world.

Because I speak throughout the world on leadership and strategic creativity, I've had the chance to observe, work with, and learn from hundreds of **highly effective leaders**. And there's one thing I've noticed about every one of them, without exception: **they are all lifelong learners**. They all have a natural curiosity that makes them want to continually learn new things.

This makes good strategic sense, because you never know which “new thing” (read: dot) is going to be (or lead to) the “missing link” that provides you with the solution to a current challenge. **You never know which dot will lead to the breakthrough idea.** When you’re curious about the world, you end up with hundreds, thousands, of these dots—any one of which can give you that vital edge over the competition.

Where do you find these dots? Everywhere. Here’s a partial list:

- Books
- Magazines
- TED and TEDx Talks
- Podcasts
- Conversations (remember: everyone—with the possible exception of babies—knows something you don’t)

Now, here’s a word of warning: There’s a very good chance that much of what you learn **may not seem immediately useful.** That doesn’t matter. In fact, it’s kind of the point. Individual pieces of information become the most valuable when they combine with other individual pieces of information. Kind of like how a couple of hydrogen atoms and an oxygen atom,

on their own, aren't anything to get all worked up over. But put them together and, voila! Water!

So be curious about things! Ask questions! Learn, and then learn some more! Because curiosity won't kill you.

Unless you're a cat.

## Why You Need a Wacky Neighbor

There's a lot to be said for creative ideas that push the needle forward, even incrementally. But where do you go when you need a truly *breakthrough* idea? The kind of idea that will revolutionize your business—maybe even your entire industry—and cause your competition to wonder if they'd be better off just closing up shop? If that's the kind of breakthrough you're looking for—you need a **wacky neighbor**.

What do I mean by “wacky neighbor”? I mean **someone who sees the world differently than you do**. In fact, someone who sees the world differently than your entire team—maybe even your entire industry—does. For this reason, there's a good chance that your wacky neighbor may **come from a field completely different than yours**.

Earlier, I told you about Bill Nye the Science Guy. So you already know that, before he became the Sci-



ence Guy, he was just Bill Nye, writer and performer. Bill, however, came from a **different world** than the rest of us. We came from the world of TV, and comedy, and performing. Bill Nye came from the world of science and engineering. In fact, when *Almost Live!* was on hiatus during the summer, Bill would work as an engineer at Boeing (our little local airplane company) designing things that you and I aren't allowed to know about.

To put it another way, Bill Nye was the *different colored dot*.

Now here's the thing. Because Bill came from a different background, and therefore **saw the world differently** than the rest of us, he would routinely come up with ideas that **none of us would ever have thought of**. Many of those ideas were so far out there that they were completely unusable. But, every now and then, Bill Nye would come up with "the brilliant idea," the one that would have the rest of us (all Emmy winners) scratching our heads and thinking, "Now, how the hell did he come up with that?"

Wouldn't you like someone like that on your team?

A recent article in *Harvard Business Review* was titled *To Innovate Better, Find Divergent Thinkers*. Fine. They want to call them "divergent thinkers." Well,

they're *Harvard Business Review*, aren't they? I'm sticking with "wacky neighbors," because I think it's more memorable—it's "stickier"—and besides, it's more fun. But the bottom line, as encapsulated in their subheading, is the same:

*Often the best ideas come from "analogous fields."*

And this brings us into the world of *specific* dots.

## Specific Dots and Where to Find Them

While general dots are the ones that come to you from your own intellectual curiosity and life experience, specific dots are those you proactively seek out that are directly related to your **Innovation Intention**. Although when I say "directly related," keep in mind that even these specific dots should be ones that will spur creative thinking.

In other words, you want specific dots that can help you to see your situation differently. Here are two ways to find these dots.

## The Magic of the Pyramid

Let's go back to that *Harvard Business Review* article about divergent thinkers. Remember what they said:

*Often the best ideas come from "analogous fields."*

What this means is that the best ideas could come from someone who works not in your field, but in one that has *similarities* to your field.

To find these people—the ones from analogous fields who may still be able to shed some light on your situation—the article suggests using *pyramid searches*, with the word “pyramid” meaning, basically, a subject area. A pyramid search can be summarized in three steps:

- 1. Identify people who may have some knowledge of or interest in the topic in question.**
- 2. Ask them who might know even more than they do, or who else might know of others with greater knowledge.**
- 3. Contact those people and ask them to refer you to experts in analogous fields.**

The idea is that those at the “top of the pyramid” (those who are identified in Step 2) tend to know others with similar knowledge, even when that knowledge is in a different field.

By using this process, you’ll find yourself having conversations with **people you would have likely never encountered**—people who may have solved problems similar to yours, but in an entirely different field.

## Ask “Who else?”

This is a technique that is kind of like a simplified—or, if you prefer, more streamlined—version of a pyramid search. In it, you take a look at your situation and ask:

*“Who else has solved a situation like this?”*

And when I say “who else,” I mean “who outside of your industry, your field, your world.”

To do this, you need to identify the essence, the crux, of your situation. (Hopefully, you already did this in Step 1: Ask the Question.) If you’ve done a good job with this, you may have found that **the essence of your situation is not industry-specific.**

So, when faced with a challenge, ask yourself (and your team), “Who else has solved a challenge like this?” Examples include:

- An architect who solved the problem of cooling a structure—without using air conditioning—by studying how termites do the exact same thing in their mounds.
- A toothpaste maker who learned how to make teeth appear whiter by learning how laundry detergents do the same thing with sheets.

- An economic software developer who devised a multi-million-dollar algorithm after learning how Renaissance builders solved a problem similar to one he'd been fretting over for months.

So become a dot collector. Make it a lifelong habit. Collect general dots, and seek out specific dots. Look for dots that are different colors, different sizes, different shapes (again, keeping in mind that these dots are people, experiences, concepts).

Because you never know which dot will lead to the breakthrough idea.



### Step 3: Connect the Dots

Congratulations—now you're a dot collector (hopefully for life)! You're reading books and articles you wouldn't have read before, listening to programs and podcasts you wouldn't have listened to before, having conversations with people you wouldn't have spoken with before. **You're starting to live in the world of the breakthrough thinker.** Now what?

Now you need to start *connecting* those dots. Because while dot *collecting* is important, it's in the dot *connecting* where the magic happens! Why? Because *creativity is the spark that ignites when two or more different ideas collide.*

Let me say that again.

***Creativity is the spark that ignites when two or more different ideas collide.***

What does that look like?

I was recently speaking to a group of business leaders in Chicago, and they asked that same question. They wanted to know how they could generate creative ideas for their current business challenges—on demand. So I shared with them a trick I used to use when I was writing jokes for *Almost Live!*

Punch lines and creative ideas are both the products of unrelated things colliding (“You got chocolate on my peanut butter!” “You got peanut butter on my chocolate!” “Hey, look—we’ve invented the Reese’s Cup!”). So when I needed to come up with a quick joke for the show, I’d go to the morning newspaper. *[Note to younger readers: the “morning newspaper” used to be an actual thing. It was truly a marvelous invention. It appeared magically on your doorstep, required no scrolling, and never needed to be recharged.]*

I’d read an article from one section of the newspaper, and then read an article from a completely different section. Then I’d force myself to come up with a funny connection between the two articles.

Look, the result wasn’t always pure gold. But what I was doing was forcing my brain into that space that finds connections—and **that’s the space where creative ideas are born.**

## Ask Connecting Questions

Sometimes these connections pop up automatically. It’s that “Hey, you know what this reminds me of? That time in Italy...” moment that I spoke about in the Introduction. Something **triggers a connection** in your brain without any conscious effort on your part.



Other times, however, the connections need a little help—particularly if your brain hasn't yet acquired the connection habit (which, trust me, *will* happen if you keep at it). What do you do then?

You ask ***Connecting Questions***.

**Connecting Questions** are questions that are specifically designed to get your brain into connection mode.

See, here's the thing about your brain: **it will do its best to answer any question you put to it**. This, as it turns out, is a great **quality-control tool!** Want better answers? Put in better questions! I'll give you an example, using one of my suggested **Connecting Questions** (we'll get to more of these in a moment).

Let's say that, during your general dot collecting, you read an article in *Geology Today* [*NOTE: I have no idea if Geology Today is a real thing*] about how the Tetons were formed. Let's look at two questions you could ask yourself after reading this article:

**1. *Can I apply this to my current situation?***

If you ask yourself this question, all your brain has to do to answer it is to say, "No." There—question answered, move on!

The takeaway here is that, **if you want your brain to give you better answers, don't ask it yes or no questions.** So let's try another question:

**2. *HOW can I apply this to my current situation?***

Do you see the difference? Your brain can't give you a simple yes or no to this question. So what does it do? **It tries to come up with an answer.** It will now look for ways that the formation of the Tetons is like your current situation—and this is almost guaranteed to lead to **insights that you wouldn't have thought of before.** You've essentially *tricked* your brain into entering the creative zone!

## **Two Other Connecting Questions**

You now have one great connecting question that can lead to literally hundreds of breakthrough ideas:

***How can I apply this [particular dot] to my current situation?***

I'm going to give you two more to keep up your sleeve. Armed with these (see what I did there? Sleeve? Arm? Okay, so they're not all Emmy winners.), you will no doubt be able to come up with your own **Connecting Questions.** In the meantime, these are two questions I like to use that I think will help you and your team unlock your creative brilliance and apply it

directly to the challenge at hand. The two questions, in their short form, are:

1. ***What if...?***

2. ***How is...?***

Let's unpack each of these questions.

### **What if?**

This is the grownup version of “Let’s pretend.” And you should think of it the same way. Because, just as there are no limits to what can come after the words “Let’s pretend...,” there should be no limits to what can come after the words “What if...?”

- What if we had an unlimited budget for this challenge?
- What if we had *no* budget for this challenge?
- What if our solution had to incorporate the color purple?
- What if our grandparents were facing this challenge?

The magic isn’t necessarily in the answers to your “What if” questions. The magic is in **the conversation that emerges from the answers**. That’s because the answers—no matter how silly—will force you to look at the challenge from **a different point of view**. And this is where creative ideas are born.

Because remember: Steve Jobs once asked, “***What if*** we could make a computer that could do calligraphy?”

I wonder how that turned out?

## How is?

This is the ***big Connecting Dots*** question! The longer version is “**How is this like that?**” This is all about forcing your brain to find connections that may not be readily apparent (which is why people less brilliant than you haven’t spotted them yet). For example, how is wine like a book? (Aside from the fact that both are very nice in front of a fire, with a cat somewhere nearby.)

Well, let’s go back to 1440 and that Gutenberg fellow again. Gutenberg saw a machine that pressed the juice out of grapes to make wine (a machine that had been around since the 1st century AD) and thought, “Huh! That grape juice looks kind of like ink. So pressing the juice out of grapes is kind of like pressing ink onto...oh, I don’t know...movable type!” *[NOTE: Again, this may not have been Gutenberg’s actual internal monolog. But you get the point.]*

### ***How is this like that?***

I once facilitated a planning meeting for a group of association executives. The meeting was taking place in a casino/resort. For one activity, I divided the group into teams and had them walk around the casino asking themselves the question, “*How is running a casino like running an association?*” They came up with some very funny answers—but some very valuable ones as well. All by finding connections that others didn’t see—because others had never asked, “How is this like that?”

### Venn In Doubt

Okay, first of all, I apologize for that subheading. I couldn’t help myself. But I want to talk about Venn diagrams, because they are a great *visual* way to think about “How is this like that?”

You’ve probably seen Venn diagrams before—they’re the ones that show two or more circles intersecting.

So if you’re more of a visual thinker, it might be helpful to think of this **Connecting Question** like a Venn diagram. The first circle is Dot One (the “How is this...” part). The second circle is Dot Two (the “...like that” part, which in many cases can be translated into “...like my situation/challenge.”) Draw these intersect-

ing circles on a piece of paper (or, if you're working with your team, on a big board), and then come up with as many ideas as you can for things that could fit into the intersection.

## Sweet Home Chicago

Let's go back to my Chicago business leaders. Remember my newspaper trick for writing jokes? Here's what I suggested to my leaders in Chicago, and what I would suggest for you as well. Grab a newspaper. (I think this works a little better with an actual, physical, paper newspaper—simply because it's easier to mindlessly flip to a random section—but it will also work if your newspaper is on a screen.)

Got your newspaper? Okay, now flip to any section. (I'd love it if you'd avoid the business section, because we're looking for creative ideas here, and the business section mixed with a business challenge might be a little too close for breakthrough creativity. But I'll leave that to you.) Now, pick an article—any article. Read it. Now ask yourself this question:

***How is this article related my challenge (i.e., my Innovation Intention)?***

Yes, I know. Your immediate answer is likely to be, "It's not." But don't stop there. Don't be lazy. Force

your brain to come up with an answer—preferably more than one (more on this later).

## Make It a Habit

Get into the habit of using these, and other, **Connecting Questions** regularly. Now, I don't expect you to unleash a **Connecting Question** every time you encounter a new dot! Once you become an avid dot collector, you'll be encountering new dots continuously, so it's not reasonable that you ask a **Connecting Question** each and every time.

But get into the habit of playing with **Connecting Questions** at least two or three times a day. Why? Two reasons.

**First**, the more you do it, the more automatic it becomes. **Your brain will get the message that connections are important to you**, so making connections will be high up on its radar.

Because I lived for so long in the universe of comedy writers, I know that the brain of a comedy writer is *always* asking, "Is this funny? Is this funny? How can I make this funny?"

**It's the same thing with creative, breakthrough thinkers.** Their brains are always asking, "Is there a

connection here? Is there a connection here? How can I make a connection?"

**Second**, when you apply a **Connecting Question** to a new dot—you may actually come up with something brilliant! **You may actually come up with that next million-, billion-, or trillion-dollar idea!** Not a bad payoff for one little question, is it?

One last thing, though: When I say “idea,” I want you to think “ideas.” Because when it comes to ideas, “more” is better than “one.”

## **The Secret to Coming Up with a Great Idea**

Oh, to be the person who comes up with “the great idea”! Solar power! The artificial heart! Potato chips that stack in a can! Great ideas are everywhere, and yet they always seem to be the brainchild of somebody else. So how do you become one of those “somebodies”? How do you become the person who comes up with “the great idea”? Is there a secret to coming up with a great idea?

Yes, and here it is:

*Come up with a lot of ideas.*

**The secret to coming up with a great idea is to come up with a lot of ideas.**



When I was the Executive Producer of *Almost Live!*, we had a regular segment called **The Late Report**. This segment was basically our version of **Weekend Update** on *Saturday Night Live*. It was a series of jokes about the week's news. Each **Late Report** segment typically had eight jokes.

Depending on the staffing at the time, we might have anywhere from eight to ten writers on *Almost Live!*, each of whom submitted roughly twenty **Late Report** jokes each week. That means that on any given week, we had between 160 and 200 jokes to choose from.

And we chose eight.

Eight out of 200.

*That* means we only chose 4% of the jokes that were submitted, and I know this because I just checked the math on my iPhone calculator.

To put it another way, we rejected 96% of the jokes that were submitted. Cruel people might say that we had a 96% failure rate. And, technically, they'd be correct. 96% of the jokes that we wrote for **The Late Report** never made the cut.

But by having 200 jokes to choose from, it was a pretty sure bet that there'd be eight great ones in there.

(These were all Emmy Award winning comedy writers, after all.)

Now, imagine that on one particular week we had eight writers, and that each of them submitted only one joke. We'd have a total of eight jokes, which was the amount needed to fill a **Late Report**. But the odds that all eight would be great—despite the credentials of the writers—would be pretty slim.

When an Emmy Award winning comedy writer writes twenty jokes, however, the odds of one of them being great are pretty good.

**The secret to coming up with a great idea is to come up with a lot of ideas.**

At this stage, the goal is *quantity*, not *quality*. If you start judging too soon, you'll impede the flow. This is a bad idea for two reasons:

- 1. Once you impede the flow of ideas, it's really hard to get back *into* the flow.**
- 2. You never know which idea could be "*the idea that leads to the idea.*"**

See, at this point, even a bad idea has value. Because Jordan's bad idea could lead Skyler to say, "You know, what if we take what Jordan said, and we tweak it this way, and then we..." And all of a sudden, Skyler has laid out the million-dollar idea. But here's the

thing: **Skyler wouldn't have had that million-dollar idea if Jordan hadn't had the bad idea first.** And if you get into judging mode too early, you could be prematurely killing “the idea that leads to the idea.”

So if you're looking for that great idea in your business—or in your personal life—take a hint from me and the rest of the *Almost Live!* writers. Don't just come up with one idea and call it a day. Don't even come up with two, or three, or five.

Come up with twenty or more. Throw away the ones that don't make the cut (I'll help you with this in the next chapter).

And keep the great one.

## **A Few Real-World Connection Examples**

I've said it before and I'll say it again (now, for example): good ideas are everywhere. The problem is that most of us don't know how to look for them. We don't see them, because many times good ideas come disguised as something else. Sometimes we have to work a little to see the application to our own lives and businesses (this is where **Connecting Questions** come in). We have to teach our brains to recognize the good ideas that are around us all the time. Here's one way you can do that—and you can start today!

For one day (today, for example), I want you to **write down three things that happen during the day.** They could be any three things. Something that happened to you, something you experienced, something you read about in the news. Any three things. Just yesterday, for example, I:

- 1. went to a rock concert**
- 2. saw a guy walking a dog**
- 3. watched a UPS airplane land at the local airport**

Yes, yes, now you're all jealous because of the exciting life I lead. Get over it. My point is that I want you, for one day, to pick three things at random that are in some way a part of your world. And now I want you to ask yourself this question for each of your three events:

**What lesson can I take from this that will positively affect my business?**

(You can probably recognize this as a variation of the "*How can I apply this [particular dot] to my current situation?*" **Connecting Question.**)

And the remarkable thing is that if you really take the time to look for it, you'll find the lesson (in fact, you'll probably find several). Here are just a few ways the three things I noticed yesterday can positively affect my business, which is professional speaking:

- 1. Rock concert:** I noticed how the lead singer used the entire stage. He didn't just stand in one spot for every song. I can use this when I'm on stage speaking to an audience. I also noticed how the band was able to bring variety into their set (a few fast songs, then a slow one, then another fast one, etc.) without diminishing the energy. They played the slow songs with the same intensity as the fast songs. This is a great lesson for a professional speaker: you can vary the dynamics of your presentation without diminishing the energy.
- 2. Dog walker:** This guy (or somebody in his family) has to walk that dog every day, whether they want to or not. The dog isn't going to stop functioning just because somebody is too tired to walk it. So not walking the dog is not an option. This is a good lesson for me in my business: there are some things that I simply have to do every day, whether I want to or not. Some days I don't feel like writing. Yeah, well there are some days that guy probably doesn't feel like walking his dog. (Another lesson is that, in business, we all have to clean up somebody else's mess every now and then. Maybe not the

most pleasant lesson, but a lesson nonetheless. The point, though, is to force yourself to find lessons where they may not be apparent.)

- 3. UPS plane:** I'm a pilot myself, so I know that a successful landing is, to a large degree, a function of following well thought out checklists. Nothing is left to chance or memory. Seeing that plane landing gave me an idea for incorporating some checklists into my business. I already have a checklist for packing before a presentation, but I've now identified three other areas where using a checklist can save me time and aggravation.

There are certainly other lessons I could find in these events—and these were just three random things I happened to pick. I could have chosen from any of a hundred more (I told you, I lead an exciting life). And so can you.

So take some time today and write down three things. Then look for the lessons. I promise you, they'll be there.

When you and your team get into the dot collecting and dot connecting habit, you'll soon end up with more ideas than you can handle! And that's where Step 4 kicks in.

## Step 4: Make the Decision

The first three steps have been all about *generating* ideas. Step 4 is all about *eliminating* ideas.

If you've followed the **Innovation Blueprint**, you should now have more ideas than you could (or should) ever act on. This is a good thing because, let's face it, some of these ideas should probably never see the light of day (although they could well have been "the idea that led to the idea.")

So now it's time to separate the wheat from the chaff and winnow the mass of ideas down to the few (or the one) that you and your team will actually implement (which is Step 5).

"Wonderful," you say. "How do we do that?"

Great question—and I'm not going to leave you stranded! What I'm going to give you in this chapter is a step-by-step system for finding the gold. (Yes, that makes this a "step-by-step system" within a "step-by-step system." I like step-by-step systems!).

Here we go.

### One: Give Yourself a Deadline

You may have an actual deadline (and, if so, it's probably closer than you'd like). If not, I want you to

make one up. Put it on the calendar. Treat it as if it's real. Why?

Because **with no deadline, there's no sense of urgency**. And when there's no sense of urgency, it's *very* easy to put things off. It's very easy to fall into the "We've got plenty of fires to put out; this ain't one of 'em" trap.

So give yourself a deadline. And here's my suggestion on that:

*Give yourself (and your team) slightly less time than you think you'll need.*

Why?

Because having slightly less time than you need creates not just a sense of urgency; it creates a sense of *energy*. And when you're trying to come up with an implementable breakthrough idea with your team, which would you prefer:

1. Energy
  2. Lethargy
- Thought so!

## **Two: Be Willing to Let Go**

Think of this process like using a dating app. You're going to be swiping left on a lot of ideas. (For those of you who haven't used a dating app—or are unwilling



to *admit* you've used a dating app—swiping left means “You're a loser and I reject you!”)

So yes, you're going to be rejecting a lot of ideas.

### **You have to be okay with this.**

This will be easy for many—possibly even most—of the ideas that you've generated. But at a certain point, you're likely to feel like you're staring at the menu of a gourmet restaurant: “Everything looks so good, I just can't decide!”

But you have to. That's your job. And yes, choosing the *Poulet Cordon Bleu* means that you can't have the *Noisette des Tournelles*. That's what choosing means.

Here's the good news, though. Just because an arguably great idea doesn't make the cut *this time*, doesn't mean it can't be a good option at another time. So don't throw the rejects away (especially those that feel like a “flip of the coin” decision). They may simply be the right breakthrough idea at the wrong time.

### **Three: Waiter, These Ideas are Corked**

Ideas on a computer screen are great, but what's even better are ideas on a corkboard!

I know. It seems so analog, so 1990s, right? But after working with scores of teams, I've found that there's a real benefit to being able to **physically move**,

**group, and rearrange these ideas manually.** That way, the entire team can get involved and easily try out different combinations and rankings.

So here's what I suggest:

- Print each idea on its own 3x5 index card.
- Pin each card to a large corkboard. (Also, buy a large corkboard.)
- In all likelihood, some number of these ideas will be “easy outs,” particularly when you hold them up to your initial **Innovation Intention**. They may not be on task, they may not be on brand, or they may just be the crazy idea that led to the better idea. Unclutter the corkboard by removing these cards.
- Look for patterns among the cards that remain. Maybe ideas 4 and 7 are really similar. Great—group them together. Maybe three of your ideas have to do with marketing initiatives. There's another group. You may find that, rather than having to choose either idea 5 *or* idea 9, you can actually make idea 5 a *part* of idea 9.

By removing the “easy outs” and grouping the rest into patterns of similarity, you should start to get a sense of focus and clarity around the best options.

#### Four: Waiter, Reality Check Please

(Yes, I decided to stick with the waiter metaphor for this one.)

Now that you're starting to narrow down your options (partly by swiping left, aka removing the "easy outs," and partly by grouping), it's time to apply a reality test. **How feasible are the options that remain?**

Ask yourself questions like:

- Can we do this within our budget?
- Can we do this within our timeline?
- Do we have—or can we acquire—the necessary resources to implement this idea?

If any of your ideas don't pass the reality checks, take them off the board. NOTE: Don't throw them out! Remember, they could be valuable at a future time, or if your situation changes. But this just isn't their moment.

#### Five: Get Some Perspective

Okay, now we're really getting down to it. The ideas remaining on the board are all serious contenders. So how do you choose among them? These "tricks of the trade" (some of which come from Chip and Dan Heath's wonderful book, *Decisive: How to Make Better Choices in Life and Work*) will help you narrow it down:

- **Help a Friend:** One thing that can make decision-making difficult is if we're too close to the choices. All of these options are like your children, and now you have to choose from among them. When this happens, it helps to **psychologically remove yourself from the situation**. Okay, so how do you do that? One way is to imagine that your best friend has come to you with the exact same situation you're facing, and with the exact same options. Given that information, what would you tell *them* to do?
- **Apply the 10/10/10 Test:** For each of the ideas that have made the final cut, ask yourself, **"How will I feel about this decision 10 minutes, 10 months, and 10 years from now?"** This will help you to get a bit of context around your choices.

- **Ignore the Options:** At this point, you're probably comparing all of the options to each other. But remember that once you make your decision, **you'll be living with the option you chose.** So try imagining a future where your choice is the reality rather than focusing on the relative advantages of one option over the other. In other words, picture your world with **no other options but the one you chose.** How do you feel? The answer to that question could be quite telling!

## Six: Chill Out

By this time, if you haven't made a definitive choice, you're probably down to a very few options, any of which will likely be successful. After all, you've thoroughly vetted each idea—using the system and the tools in this chapter—and these are the options that have risen to the top. So relax! Chill out! At this point, **you're probably not going to go too far wrong** no matter which one you pick. Just pick one! If you're working with a team, you can simply take a vote. If you're flying solo, then flip a coin. Congratulations—you've made the decision! But there's one step left:

## Seven: Commit to the Bit

At *Almost Live!*, we had a rule: *Commit to the Bit*.

This meant that once the audience was seated and the red light went on, there was **no second-guessing**. By this point, the show was set, the script was locked and loaded, and the cameras were rolling. This was not the time to wonder if maybe we should have gone with that other joke, or if that sketch that we dropped from the rundown on Wednesday might have—maybe with a little more rewriting—been the better choice.

Nope. None of that now. It's showtime! And **when it's showtime, we give 100% to the show that we've written.**

It's the same with your decision. You've made it. Now it's showtime. Commit to your decision. Focus on it. Give it 100%. Don't revisit what might have been. Is your decision perfect? Probably not. In 15 years at *Almost Live!*, I can't remember going into a single show that I thought was perfect. But showtime is showtime—in my world, and in yours.

## Step Five: Do the Thing

Congratulations! You've come a long way! At this point, you've:

- **Asked the Question:** You've dug deep and come up with a worthy **Innovation Intention**.
- **Collected the Dots:** You've gathered concepts, experiences, and people—both general and specific.
- **Connected the Dots:** You've generated an abundance of ideas—some great, some terrible—by asking key questions and finding connections.
- **Made the Decision:** You've done the hard work of narrowing down your abundance to just a few—or just one—that you are ready to commit to.

That's a lot of work! So, before you actually roll up your sleeves and Do the Thing, I think you should pour a glass of your favorite celebratory beverage and bask—if only for a moment—in your accomplishment!

### Why Your Idea is Worthless

Okay, break time is over. You've made your decision, you have your breakthrough idea. But here's the bad news:

*Ideas—even breakthrough ideas—in and of themselves are essentially worthless.*

“Well then why did I just spend all that time and effort coming up with and refining my breakthrough idea, if it’s essentially worthless!?” you ask angrily.

Good question—and I’ve got a good answer:

Because while breakthrough ideas in and of themselves are essentially worthless, *they are **potentially** priceless.*

So what determines the difference between worthless and priceless? One word:

*Implementation.*

Way back in chapter one, I talked about *turning creativity into money*, and the difference between creativity and innovation. In a nutshell, *creativity* is the process of coming up with ideas. That’s what steps 1 through 4 were about. *Innovation* is about turning those ideas into action. That’s where you are now. To put it more simply:

*Innovation is applied creativity.*

Once you **take your breakthrough idea and combine it with action**—well, that’s when worthless turns into priceless.



## How to Finish a Movie

Depending on the scope of your breakthrough idea, full implementation might take anywhere from a few seconds to a few years. If it's only going to take a few seconds...well...then, you don't really need this chapter. Just do it. Do the Thing.

But if your idea is more complex, and requires substantial time and effort to implement, I suggest that you **think of it like a movie script**.

See, when they shoot a movie, they don't just wake up on Wednesday morning and say, "Okay, let's shoot the movie today!"

That's because movies are big and complicated. You can't shoot a movie in a day. That's why movie scripts are **broken down into acts, and the acts are broken down into scenes**. Because you *can* shoot a scene in a day.

So how do they shoot a movie? **Scene by scene**.

It's like the old joke: How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time. [*LEGAL DISCLAIMER: You should not eat elephants.*]

So how will you implement your big, complex breakthrough idea? Scene by scene. One bite at a time.

This means that, like a movie script, you'll have to break this project down into scenes: **bite-sized steps**

**that you can accomplish, day by day, until you've completed the project.**

### **The Magic Sentence for Getting Stuff Done**

This is going to shock you, but it turns out that willpower alone is not the most effective strategy for getting stuff done!

Research shows that **we're far more likely to get something done when we make a specific plan for it.** The odds increase even more when that plan includes times and locations. So here's the magic sentence for getting stuff done:

***I will [BEHAVIOR] at [TIME] in [LOCATION].***

For example:

- I will meditate for 10 minutes at 6:30am in my bedroom.
- I will study accounting for one hour at 3pm at the library.
- I will practice my speech for 30 minutes at 5pm in the living room.

You get the idea. And the same thing applies to the “scenes” of your breakthrough idea. **Assign a date, time, and location to them**, and you'll be much more likely to accomplish them.

## Where to Live

Some people insist on living out of their email inboxes. You may know the “system.” You wake up, have a delicious breakfast, take a hot shower, and then—you check your inbox.

And there goes your day.

Because all of a sudden, it’s lunch time, and all you’ve done is respond to, deal with, and act on whatever happened to be in the inbox that morning. Here’s something I want you to commit to memory:

***Your inbox is just a convenient storage place for other people’s agenda!***

Let me say that again.

***Your inbox is just a convenient storage place for other people’s agenda!***

When you live out of your inbox, your agenda is not your own. Your *day* is not your own.

When you live out of your inbox, you’ll be busy all day, and you’ll accomplish nothing. You’ll leave the office feeling exhausted, but realizing that you haven’t really moved the needle at all.

So where *should* you live, if not in your inbox?

**Your calendar.**

Live in your calendar, not your inbox. When you write an “*I will [BEHAVIOR] at [TIME] in [LOCATION]*” sentence, ***put it in your calendar!***

Then, instead of checking your inbox after your delicious breakfast and hot shower, you check your calendar. Because your calendar is *your* agenda! (And I would strongly suggest that you check *tomorrow's* calendar before you leave the office *today*, so you can get a mental jump start on what's coming up.)

Look, I'm not saying you should ignore your inbox. But here's a trick: **schedule inbox time in your calendar**. Give yourself, say, 15-20 minutes at 10am to check your inbox to see if there are any fires that need to be put out, or any opportunities that need to be jumped on.

When you **break the task down into scenes, make specific plans for acting on those scenes, and put those plans in your calendar**, you've created a **framework for implementing** your breakthrough idea. Which puts you squarely ahead of the pack!

## Conclusion

So there you have it—a **complete blueprint for generating, evaluating, and implementing breakthrough ideas**. Let's do a quick recap of the five steps:

### Step 1: Ask the Question

Make sure you're spending your brain power on the right outcome by defining your **Innovation Intention**.

### Step 2: Collect the Dots

Fill your radar with dots—people, experiences, concepts—that you can combine in new ways to spark your breakthrough idea.

### Step 3: Connect the Dots

Ask **Connecting Questions** like:

*“How is this like that?”*

*“How can I apply this to my situation?”*

*“What if...?”*

Make it your mission to come up with as many connections as possible. Remember: at this stage, it's more about *quantity* than quality.

## Step 4: Make the Decision

Evaluate the ideas to gradually narrow your options to just a few, or even one, that you will then commit to, 100%.

## Step 5: Do the Thing

Think of your breakthrough idea as a project, and break that project down into “scenes”: small, easy-to-accomplish tasks that you can *put in your calendar* and complete, step-by-step, until your idea is fully implemented.

## A Few Final Thoughts

*The Innovation Blueprint* is available to you and your team anytime you want it. You now have a framework for coming up with breakthrough ideas—on demand! And here’s the really cool thing about the **Blueprint**:

*The more you use it, the easier it gets.*

The reason for this is twofold:

- When you start to make dot *collecting* a habit, you will by definition acquire a larger and larger collection of dots. And the larger your dot collection, the more readily you'll start to see patterns. You'll have more and more of those "This is like that" moments.
- The more you look for *connections* between dots, the more it will become a habit. Your brain will get the message that it's now in the dot connecting business. This is the universe of comedy writers, inventors, and other innovative thinkers. Like a shark looking for prey, their brains are constantly looking for connections, to the point where it becomes automatic.

So welcome to the world of innovation, the world of creativity, and the world of breakthrough thinking! Whether you choose to live here, or just visit every now and then, this is a world that is available to you any time you need that next million- (or billion-) dollar idea.

I hope you make breakthrough thinking a lifelong habit, and that you enjoy your journey of innovation!





## About Bill

When **29-time Emmy Award winner** and **Hall of Fame keynote speaker** Bill Stainton speaks on the topics of **Innovation, Creativity, and Breakthrough Thinking**, he's speaking from experience. As the Executive Producer of Seattle's legendary comedy TV show *Almost Live!*, he and his team had to be creative—on demand—every week for 15 years. During that time, Bill led his team to over 100 Emmy Awards of their own, and **ten straight years of #1 ratings**. Along the way, he worked with people like **Jerry Seinfeld, Ellen DeGeneres, and Bill Nye the Science Guy**. He's been quoted in *Forbes* and *The Wall Street Journal* and has been a regular columnist for *Seattle Business* magazine.

Bill's **customized, engaging, and interactive keynotes** help leaders and their teams **stay ahead of the competition** by using proven breakthrough thinking techniques.

Bill is also a pilot and a musician, although rarely at the same time. For more, please visit **Bill-Stainton.com**.

