



14 Ways to Get
Breakthrough
Ideas
Mitch Ditkoff

“Why is it I always get my best ideas while shaving?” Albert Einstein

There’s a lot of talk these days—especially in business circles—about the importance of innovation. All CEOs worth their low salt lunch want it. And they want it, of course, now. Innovation, they reason, is the competitive edge.

What sparks innovation? People. What sparks people? Inspired ideas that meet a need—whether expressed or unexpressed—ideas with enough mojo to rally sustained support.

Is there anything a person can do—beyond caffeine, corporate pep talks, or astrology readings—to quicken the appearance of breakthrough ideas? Yes, there is. And it begins with the awareness of where ideas come from in the first place.

There are two schools of thought on this subject. The first school ascribes the origin of ideas to inspired individuals who, through a series of purposeful mental processes, conjure up the new and the different—cerebral shamen, if you will. The second school of thought ascribes the appearance of ideas to a transcendent force, a.k.a. the “Collective Unconscious,” the “Platonic Realm,” the “Muse” or the “Mind of God.” According to this perspective,

ideas are not created, but already exist, becoming accessible only to those human beings who have sufficiently tuned themselves to receive them.

The first approach is considered Western, with a strong bias towards thinking and is best summarized by Rene Descartes’ “I think therefore I am” maxim. Most business people subscribe to this approach. The second approach is usually considered Eastern, with a strong bias towards feeling, and is best summarized by the opposite of the Cartesian view: “I am, therefore I think.” Most artists and “creative types” are associated with this approach, with its focus on intuitive knowing.

Both approaches are valid. Both are effective. Both are used at different times by all of us, depending on our mood, circumstances, and conditioning.

What does all of this have to do with you, oh aspiring innovator? Plenty, since you are most likely a hybrid of the above-mentioned schools of thought. That’s what this Manifesto is all about—a quick hitting tutorial of what you can do to conjure up brilliant ideas. The only tuition required is your attention and a willingness to try something new. }*

1. FOLLOW YOUR FASCINATION

If you find yourself fascinated by a new idea, chances are good that there's something meaningful about it for you to consider. Fascination, quite simply, is nature's way of getting our attention. Well beyond seduction or attraction, it's an indication that we are *being called*. Out of the thousands of ideas with the power to capture our imagination, the fascination felt for *one* of them is a clue that there's something worthy of our engagement.

Don't dismiss it as trivial. Give it room. Give it time to breathe. Honor it.

If you have any doubt, consider the origins of the word "fascination." It comes from the Latin "fascinus" meaning to be "enchanted or delighted." What enchants or delights us is sacred—or *could* be sacred—a clue that something significant is knocking on our door. Indeed, if we are willing to let fascination grow inside us—a kind of *immaculate conception* can occur—the illogical, miraculous becoming pregnant with possibility—the bodily expression of the phenomenon that you are here to birth something extraordinary.

The idea is simply the first "waaaaaaah" to get you to notice.

*What new idea is fascinating you? What new possibility has captured your attention?
In what ways can you honor this inspiration today?*

Fascination, quite simply, is nature's way
of getting our attention.

2. IMMERSE

Breakthrough ideas, like telemarketers or Jehovah's Witnesses, have a curious habit of showing up at odd times. And because they do, we're not always ready to *receive* them. To complicate matters, chances are good that when they *do* show up, we are multi-tracking our little tushies off—checking email, microwaving dinner, or looking for our Blackberry amidst the half-folded laundry. Not exactly the pre-conditions for breakthrough.

The alternative? *Immersion*: "the act of becoming completely involved or absorbed in something—engrossed, enthralled, or preoccupied."

If you want to radically increase your odds of originating breakthrough ideas, you will need to immerse. Don't be a chicken, be a hen! Baby chicks break through the shell separating them from flight not because their mothers are rushing off to meetings on parenting skills, but because their mothers are *immersed* in the act of hatching. Mommy is sitting in one place for a loooooooong time. And baby chick is also sitting (curled up) in one place for a loooooooong time.

At Google, employees are given 20% of their time to immerse in projects that have seemingly nothing to do with their so-called "day job." At 3M, it's 15%. W.L. Gore gives employees a half a day each week to immerse in projects that fascinate them.

Look at your calendar. Block out some time to focus on the development of your most inspired idea or venture. Unplug! Incubate! Hatch! Immerse!

3. TOLERATE AMBIGUITY

Breakthrough ideas are not always the result of a revolutionary Eureka! moment. On the contrary, they are often the result of an *evolutionary* series of approximations or failed experiments.

When Thomas Edison was asked how it felt to fail 800 times before coming up with tungsten as the filament for the light bulb, his answer was a revealing one. “Fail?” he said. “I didn’t fail once. I learned 800 times what didn’t work.”

Edison had the ability to tolerate ambiguity—to “not know.” Like most breakthrough thinkers, he had the ability to dwell in the “grey zone.” Confusion was not his enemy.

“Confusion,” explained Henry Miller, is simply “a word we have invented for an order that is not yet understood.”

If you are attempting to birth a breakthrough idea, get comfortable with discomfort. Give up your addiction to having all your ducks in a row—at least in the beginning of your discovery process. People may think you’re a “quack,” but so what? Your chances of birthing a breakthrough idea (and result) exponentially increase the more you are able to tolerate ambiguity.

What new idea of yours is bubbling on the brink of breakthrough? In what ways can you stay with it, even if something in you is impatient for a breakthrough?

4. MAKE NEW CONNECTIONS

True creativity rarely happens in a vacuum. On the contrary, it is the product of two or more variables connecting in a new way. It happens all of the time in nature. Water, for example, is really just the connection between hydrogen and oxygen. It happens in the human realm as well. Roller blading is nothing more than the connection between ice skating and roller skating. MTV? Nothing more than the connection between music and television. Drive in banking? Car + banking.

The originators of these breakthrough products didn't pull rabbits out of thin air. All they did was see a new, intriguing (and potentially commercial) connection between already existing elements.

Why don't more of us make these kinds of connections? Because we usually stay within the confines of what we already know. We live in a box of our own creation – whether that box be defined by our nationality, profession, concepts, cubicle, or astrological sign.

The more we are willing to get out of this box, the more likely it will be that powerful new connections will reveal themselves to us—uncommon linkages between this, that, and the other thing—kind of the way it was for Johannes Gutenberg when he noticed a previously undetected connection between the wine press and coin punch.

And so the printing press was born.

Make three parallel lists of ten words. The first list? Nouns. The second list? Verbs. The third list? Adjectives. Then look for intriguing new connections between them.

5. FANTASIZE

In 1989, Gary Kasparov, the Soviet Union Grand Chess Master, played a two game match against “Deep Blue,” the reigning supercomputer of the time. Kasparov won easily. When asked by the media what his competitive advantage was, he cited two things: *intuition* and *the ability to fantasize*. (And this from a master strategic thinker!)

Few of us are ever encouraged to fantasize—a behavior most commonly associated with children or perverts. And yet, *fantasizing* is exactly how many breakthrough ideas get their start—by some maverick, flake, or dreamer entertaining the seemingly impossible.

I find it curious that business leaders want their employees to come up with *fantastic* ideas or solutions, but they don’t want their employees to *fantasize*. And yet, the words “fantastic” and “fantasy” come from the same linguistic root, meaning to “use the imagination.”

Doh!

Think of a current challenge of yours. What would a fantasy solution to this challenge look like? What clues does this fantasy solution give you?

6. DEFINE THE RIGHT CHALLENGE

“It’s not that they can’t find the solution,” said G.K. Chesterton, the renowned American philosopher and writer, “they can’t find the problem!”

Translation?

Most people, in their rush to figure things out, rarely spend enough time *framing* their challenge in a meaningful way. If they owned a GPS, they’d fail to take the time to program in their destination because they were so much into the hustle of getting out of town.

Coming up with the right question is at least *half* of getting the right answer. If you want a breakthrough idea, begin by coming up with a breakthrough question—one that communicates the essence of what you’re trying to create.

State your most inspired challenge or opportunity as a question beginning with words “How can I?” Then write it five different ways. Which is the real question?

7. LISTEN TO YOUR SUBCONSCIOUS

If you study the lives of people who have had Eureka moments, you'll note that their breakthroughs almost always came *after* extensive periods of *intense, conscious effort*. They worked, they struggled, they noodled, they gave up, they recommitted—and *then* the breakthrough came. And often at unexpected moments.

They weren't buying lottery tickets at their local deli, hoping to win a breakthrough fortune, they were digging for treasure in their own back yard.

Rene Descartes got the idea for the Scientific Method in a dream. Richard Wagner got the idea for Das Rheingold while stepping onto a bus after long months of creative despair. Einstein used to conduct "thought experiments" (a fancy name for daydreaming) whenever he got stuck.

In other words, the conscious mind works overtime in an attempt to solve a problem or achieve a goal. Unable to come up with the breakthrough, the challenge gets turned over to the *subconscious* mind, which then proceeds to figure it out in its own, sweet time.

Of course, all of this assumes that we are *listening* to the promptings of our subconscious mind.

This week, keep a log of your most inspired ideas, intuitions, and dreams. At the end of the week, review your log. See what insights come to you.

8. TAKE A BREAK

If you want a breakthrough, you will need to take a break, True innovators rarely follow the straight and narrow path. Not only do they march to a different drummer, they're often not even on the same playing field as most people.

Take Seymour Cray, for example, the legendary designer of high-speed computers.

He used to divide his time between building the next generation super computer and digging an underground tunnel below his Chippewa Falls house. Cray's explanation of his tunnel digging behavior is consistent with the stories of many other creatives—inner-directed, boundary-pushing people who understand the need to go off-line whenever they get stuck.

Bottom line, whenever they find themselves struggling with a thorny problem, they *walk away* from it for a while. They know, from years of experience, that more (i.e. obsession, analysis, effort) is often less (i.e. ideas, solutions, results).

Explained Cray, "I work for three hours and then get stumped. So I quit and go to work in the tunnel. It takes me an hour or so to dig four inches and put in the boards. You see, I'm up in the Wisconsin woods, and there are elves in the woods. So when they see me leave, they come back into my office and solve all the problems I'm having. Then I go up (to my lab) and work some more."

Next time you find yourself stuck on a thorny problem or project, walk away from it for a while. Stay conscious of new solutions coming to you during this "down time."

9. NOTICE AND CHALLENGE EXISTING PATTERNS AND TRENDS

There are many people these days who make their living from the “pattern recognition” business: futurists, meteorologists, air traffic controllers, and stock brokers just to name a few. And while their success rates may not always be 100%, it is clear that whatever success they enjoy is intimately tied to their ability to notice patterns and then *interpret* those patterns correctly for the rest of us.

The same holds true for breakthrough thinkers.

The only difference? Breakthrough thinkers often hit the gravy train by *challenging* old patterns and then reconfiguring them in new ways.

“The act of creation,” said Picasso, “is first of all an act of destruction.”

“The genius,” said American painter Ben Shahn, “is merely the one able to detect the pattern amidst the confusion of details just a little sooner than the average man.”

What trends in the marketplace most intrigues you? In what ways might these trends shift in the coming years—and how might your most inspired idea be in sync with this imagined shift?

10. HANG OUT WITH DIVERSE GROUPS OF PEOPLE

Years ago, Sony used to insist that their engineers spend at least 25% of their work time out of the office and mixing it up with people outside the walls of their industry. Keepers of the innovation flame at Sony understood that diverse inputs were essential to the origination and development of breakthrough ideas.

Unfortunately, most of us tend to stay within the intellectual ghettos of the familiar. We hang out with the same people day and night—usually people who either agree with us, report to us or, through some indefinable act of karma, are joined to us at the hip.

If you want to increase your chances of getting a breakthrough idea, you will need to break the bonds of the familiar. Hang out with a different crowd. Go beyond the usual suspects. Seek the input of oddballs, mavericks, outcasts, or, at the very least, people outside of your field.

If you can let go of your need for comfort and agreement, you will likely find yourself catapulted into new ways of seeing, thinking, and acting – all precursors to breakthrough ideas.

Make a list of ten people (or groups of people) outside of your traditional “posse” who you can spend some time with this month. Who’s first? When?

11. BRAINSTORM

Breakthrough thinkers are often rugged individualists. They believe in their inalienable rights to “think for themselves.” They value their opinions, their perspectives, and their innate creativity. Their biggest fear is “group think.”

All well and good.

But there is an important distinction to be made between “group think” and the phenomenon of inspired individuals getting together to spark each other’s brilliance.

Indeed, most great breakthroughs are more about inspired collaborations than they are about lone wolf genius. Think Bill Gates and Paul Allen (Microsoft), Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak (Apple), Sergey Brin and Larry Page (Google), David Filo and Jerry Yang (Yahoo), Watson and Crick (DNA), Lennon and McCartney (the Beatles), Hewlett & Packard.

All you need to do is frame a meaningful question, invite the right people, and facilitate the process for helping your think tank riff creatively. If you are not the right person to facilitate, you probably know someone who is. Ask them.

What is the topic of your next group brainstorm? Who will you invite? Who will facilitate? When?

12. LOOK FOR HAPPY ACCIDENTS

Breakthrough ideas are often less about the purposeful act of inventing new things than it is the art of noticing new things that happen accidentally—those surprise moments when the answer is revealed for no particular reason.

The discovery of penicillin, for example, was the result of Alexander Fleming noting the formation of mold on the side of a Petri dish left unattended overnight. Vulcanized rubber was discovered in 1839 when Charles Goodyear accidentally dropped a lump of the polymer substance he was experimenting with onto his wife's cook stove.

Breakthroughs aren't always about inventions, but about the *intervention* required to notice something new, unexpected, and intriguing. For this to happen, you will need to let go of your expectations and assumptions and get curious.

Give up being an expert. Let go of the past. See with new eyes.

*What "failed experiment" or unexpected outcome might be interesting for you to reconsider?
Who else might you invite to participate in this effort?*

13. USE CREATIVE THINKING TECHNIQUES

I live in the Northeast. In the winter, it's common for old cars—especially on very cold mornings—not to start. When that happens, the best thing you can do is get a jump-start. All you need are jumper cables and another car that's got its motor running.

Creative thinking techniques are just like jumper cables. They spark ignition. They turn potential into kinetic energy. They get you going when you're stuck.

If you're looking for a breakthrough idea, perhaps all you need is a jump start.

That jump start could take many shapes. It could be a classic, creative thinking technique, of which there are many. It could be a “creative thinking coach” or a favorite book, or a quote. Ultimately, it doesn't matter what medium you choose, just as long as you choose something to get your motor running.

Here are a few links to get you started:

http://www.ideachampions.com/jump_start.shtml

http://www.ideachampions.com/idea_lottery.shtml

http://www.ideachampions.com/free_the_genie.shtml

14. SUSPEND LOGIC

Perhaps Einstein said it best when he declared “Not everything that can be counted counts; and not everything that counts can be counted.” He was referring, of course, to the part of the human being that knows intuitively, the part that is tuned in, connected, and innately creative.

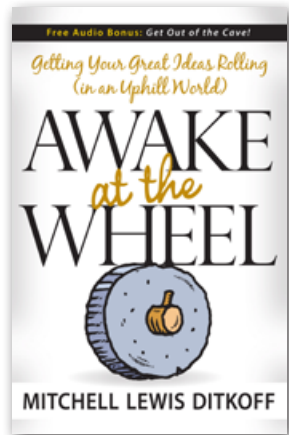
Kids live in this place. The rest of us just visit, preferring the left-brained world of rationality, logic, linearity, and analysis. On some primal level, we’re all from Missouri. We need proof. And while there is nothing inherently wrong with gathering data, the addiction to it subverts our ability to originate breakthrough ideas.

We know this. That’s why we go to the movies, the pub, watch TV, read novels, dial 900 numbers, and daydream. We seek an altered state—one that is free of the normal gravity of daily life. That’s why moviemakers ask us to suspend disbelief. That’s why brainstorm facilitators ask us to suspend judgment. That’s why women (innately intuitive as they are) ask the men in their lives to stop being so damn practical for a change and actually *feel* something.

It is in this state of suspension that our innate creativity is free to percolate to the surface—over, under and around all of the left brained guardians at the gate.

And so... if you want to really birth a breakthrough idea, you too will need to enter into this state—at least in the first phases of your new venture. Suspend judgment. Suspend evaluation. Suspend your addiction to the practical. What exists on the other side is fuel for the fire of your untapped creativity.

What can you do this week to suspend practicality, logic and rationality in service to birthing your big idea?



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