



# Borrowing *Brilliance*

And Other Oxymorons



David Kord Murray

*“The secret to creativity  
is knowing how  
to hide your sources.”*

*Albert Einstein*



## Corporate Creativity: An Oxymoron?

George Carlin’s obituary in *Time* magazine expressed his fascination with fuzzy language and fuzzy thinking and how he marveled at oxymorons like “jumbo shrimp” and “military intelligence.” An oxymoron, you’ll recall, is a figure of speech that combines two contradictory terms. As you can tell from the title of my new book—*Borrowing Brilliance*—like Carlin, I’m fascinated with them, too. Borrowing and brilliance aren’t usually associated and at first blush appear to contradict each other, after all, you say: brilliance can’t be borrowed—it’s inherent, not something you can take from someone else. But, appearances can be misleading. In the book, I explain that there’s a fine line between plagiarism and creativity—that creative thought begins with copying, that you build new ideas out of existing ideas, and that originality is a perception and not a reality. For me, this was a liberating insight that changed my relationship with creative thought. It prompted a renewed search for existing ideas and the illuminated the process of re-combining and re-structuring them to come up with a new one.

And so, as I go out into the world and teach people about creative thought, I’m often asked by managers “how to” apply this in an organization. They want me to talk about “corporate creativity” and “innovation management” and at first blush, to me, “corporate creativity” seems like a Carlin-esque oxymoron. It seems like two words that contradict each other, like “jumbo shrimp,” “military intelligence” and “borrowing brilliance.” Corporations are typically highly structured and highly political, and typically NOT very creative. But they don’t have to be this way. In fact, once you understand the basic mechanics of creative thinking, the basic block and tackling skills of the thinker, you can turn your organization into a creative factory that churns out innovative concepts through intelligent collaboration and the development of a corporate culture that fosters “corporate creativity.”

*Let me explain.*

*“In order to see farther,  
I have stood on the  
shoulders of giants.”*

*Isaac Newton*

## The Six Steps to Business Innovation

In my book, I describe the basic mechanics of creative thinking using a six-step process. I think of the first three steps in terms of a construction metaphor. An idea is like a house or a building. Your business problem is the foundation of that house. In other words, you build your idea on a foundation of well-defined problems. Once defined, you borrow ideas from places with a comparable problem. You start close to home by borrowing from your competitors, then venture farther by borrowing from other industries and, finally, you travel outside of business and look for ideas with that problem in the scientific, entertainment, artistic or natural worlds. Then, you take these borrowed ideas and start combining them to form the overall structure of your house—the structure of your new solution. You can use metaphors and analogies to create this structure and, so too, to create the overall *form* of your new idea. I refer to the first three steps as **The Origin of a Creative Idea:**

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*Step 1:* DEFINING → Define the problem you’re trying to solve.

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*Step 2:* BORROWING → Borrow ideas from places with a similar problem.

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*Step 3:* COMBINING → Connect and combine these borrowed ideas.

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However, the construction metaphor only extends so far. Creating a new idea requires a process of trial and error, something an engineer or architect would never suggest doing in the construction of a house. So, I think of the next three steps using an evolutionary metaphor.

An idea forms over time the way an organic species forms. An idea is a living thing, a descendent of the thing (or idea) it derived from, the way the gramophone evolved into the phonograph, the phonograph into the tape recorder, the tape recorder into the Walkman, and the Walkman into the iPod. Ideas give birth to one another. Using this metaphor, your subconscious mind becomes the womb in which new ideas are created. You give birth to them by teaching your subconscious to define, borrow, and combine—feeding it with problems, borrowed ideas, and metaphorical combinations. Then you incubate your idea and let your subconscious form a more coherent solution.

Next, you use your judgment of this new solution as the mechanism by which to drive the evolution of the idea, in the same way that the fight for survival drives the evolution of organic species. You separate your judgment into positive and negative, thus revealing the strengths and weaknesses of your new solution. You use judgment to improve the idea by eliminating its weaknesses and enhancing its strengths. In other words, you create through the incremental improvement of existing ideas. Over time, though, your new idea will grow and evolve and, when you eventually present it to the world, it will appear to be completely new and original and the incremental steps will merely be fossils in the process. I call these steps **The Evolution of a Creative Idea:**

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*Step 4:* INCUBATING → Allow the combinations to incubate into a solution.

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*Step 5:* JUDGING → Identify the strength and weakness of the solution.

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*Step 6:* ENHANCING → Eliminate the weak points while enhancing the strong ones.

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The sixth step isn't really a step at all, it's a return to the previous five steps: defining; borrowing; combining; incubating; and judging—all in an attempt to advance your idea through elimination and enhancement. While the first five steps are linear and build off each other, the sixth step is more of a haphazard one. It's more organic, a self-organizing process, one in which the process creates itself and is unique to each project. After passing judgment, you return to the problem, reconsider it, perhaps redefine it or decide to solve a completely different one. Your positive/negative judgments will develop your creative intuition and give you greater insight into what to borrow and where.

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You replace ill-fitting components with new ones that work better. This will help you to restructure your idea and make new combinations that work better to solve your problem. You simulate the mind of a genius by using left-brained thinking to take your idea apart, reconfigure it, and then use right-brained thinking to put it back together. In between these steps, you'll reincubate, returning to the well of subconscious thought as the process evolves. The order in which you do these things will depend upon your unique situation.

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Once you understand this process, you can then build an innovation program within your corporation to foster this type of thinking. In fact, you can use this process, through collective collaboration, and involve your entire organization in the creative process. The brilliance of the organization can become greater than the sum brilliance of the people in that organization. In other words, you can use your teams to gather the materials to construct truly revolutionary ideas for your company.

*Let me explain.*

## Corporate Creativity

Now, more than ever, creativity and innovation are the lifeblood of any organization. Product life-cycles have grown shorter and shorter. New ideas are being introduced into the marketplace at a feverish pace, unseating old ideas and leaving a path of corporate destruction in their wake. Innovation and creativity now drive the market, replacing scarcity and price as the primary keys to success. It's a wave that's just beginning to crest, and you'll need to ride that wave or else drown in the turbulence of its wake.

While creative thought, ultimately, takes place in the shadows of the mind, this doesn't mean you can't incorporate it into the processes of an organization. My time spent as an innovation leader at Intuit and other Fortune 500 companies has taught me that you can incorporate creative thinking into the DNA of any organization by using the **Six Steps to Business Innovation**, described above, to alter the brainstorming process.

Most companies have either a formal or an informal brainstorming process, often mediated by an outside source. However, the great misconceptions that result from brainstorming are more detrimental to the creative process than anything positive that results from the process itself. The constraints of brainstorming leave out many important aspects of the creative thinking process. In particular, most brainstorming moderators tell you to suspend judgment, and most of us erroneously take this to mean that criticism and judgment are detrimental to the creative process. They are not; they are *instrumental* to the process. Without them your ideas are trivial and frivolous.

So here's how to incorporate the creative thinking process into the daily practices of your organization. Separate the concept development process into four different meetings, each with a different goal and different set of rules. These are: 1) a problem-definition meeting; 2) a borrowing-ideas meeting; 3) a new-idea meeting; and 4) the judgment of these ideas at a separate time.

*"Why join the Navy  
if you can be a pirate."*

*Steve Jobs*



The first meeting is for defining problems—It's a data dump. First, you work to identify new problems, then you work to understand them by finding the root cause and, finally, you define them and the problems that surround them (problems never exist in isolation). Looking up and down, you and your team will create the hierarchy of problems that your business works within. For example, you can define a high level problem as the response rate to your direct mail program, while you would define the color of the envelope as a low level problem. This helps you to determine the scope of the problems you want to solve. Mistakes in creative thinking, after all, are often the result of working on the wrong problem. Sometimes it means your problem is too broad, other times too narrow. You won't know until you define the complete hierarchy.

## Now, more than ever, creativity and innovation are the lifeblood of any organization.

Once the first meeting is over, organize your problems by sorting and grouping them. This will help determine if you're missing any problems and it will also provide you with the structure for the next meeting. Once you've got your problem groups, assign different members of your team to different problem groups. Then ask these teams to find other places that have similar problems. These are first competitors, then other industries and, finally, places outside the domain of business—from science or entertainment and beyond. Instruct the teams to look for places with a comparable problem, wherever they may be.

The second meeting is the borrowing meeting. The teams will get back together and present their research to each another. They'll describe the problem they were assigned and then show how competitors solved it, how other companies solved it, and then how other domains solved it. In essence, you're gathering the materials for the next meeting.

*“Intuition will tell  
the creative thinker  
where to look next.”*

*Jonas Salk*

The third meeting is the idea-generating meeting. It’s when you begin constructing your solution. Using the material from the last meeting, look for an overarching metaphor for your solution. This metaphor will provide you with a high-level structure for your idea. Try a bunch of different things. Remember, the creative process is a matter of trial and error. This meeting is very similar to the current concept of brainstorming. You may or may not want to suspend the judgment of the ideas, depending on how you think the members of the teams will respond and cultural aspects of your organization (are the egos fragile or not?).

The fourth and subsequent meetings are the evolutionary meetings. These meetings take the most promising ideas and use the alternating viewpoint of positive and negative judgment to analyze them. This involves debate and the clear delineation of strengths (positives) and weaknesses (negative). After this meeting, you should have developed one or two promising ideas that need to be assigned to smaller teams for further development. Remember, these things take time; it’s a process of trial and error and new problems will arrive that require new solutions and so lead to the evolution of your ideas.

At the end of the day, innovation is personal. It happens in the shadows of the mind. These meetings are meant as input devices, using members of your organization to help you gather materials, share them, make promising connections, and help to see the positive and negative aspects of possible solutions. However, the inception of an idea will always happen in a deeper and darker place. Even so, “corporate creativity” can work if, and only if, you understand the nature of creative thought and the process of innovation. Your teams are most effective when you use them to gather materials (borrow ideas from faraway places) the way that a search and rescue team can be more effective with more people participating in the search. Even so, a large group needs to be coordinated, they need to know where to look for this material, and so they need to understand the problems they are trying to solve. This process needs a leader, someone to coordinate these efforts.



## A True Oxymoron

A true oxymoron, according to the late political commentator William F. Buckley, is one that contradicts but is also “surprisingly true, a paradox.” Perhaps, if we better understand the basics of creative thinking, the origins of creative thought, that brilliance is borrowed, and incorporate these understandings into our organizations, then we can turn “corporate creativity” into a true oxymoron ... something surprisingly true and paradoxical ... just like creative thinking itself. 🧠



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David Kord Murrays  
[\*Borrowing Brilliance\*](#).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Today, Dave is the author of *Borrowing Brilliance*. In the past, however, he's been an entrepreneur, a scientist, a salesman (selling nuclear weapons), a marketing executive, an innovation leader (for a Fortune 500 software company), a web designer, a CEO, an inventor (he's got a few patents to his name), a rock climber, skier, a mountaineer (he's summited Mt. McKinley), and now a writer. At one point in his career, he made millions of dollars from a single, simple idea; at another point he filed for personal bankruptcy protection (unfortunately, in that order). But failure is temporary, he says, just like success. They're both part of the creative process, both just different stops on the same journey. And besides, you learn from your mistakes, which means Dave's learned a lot.

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