



Innovation You

Creating Growth | Jeff DeGraff

“Man is a piece of the universe made alive.”
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

The Enlivened Self. My first memory as child involves wrestling with a rebellious orange life-vest that smelled like an unfortunate combination of grass clippings and Lucky Strikes. In my Grandpa’s trusty old wooden row boat, my older brother John got the enviable lookout point while I was relegated to the lowly rear bench. Armed with only a cane pole, I fished for all variety of leviathans in what I remember as a perpetual torrential downpour. Through the rain, I transfixed my attentions on the bright yellow tip of the bobber for when it moved it was a call to action in the anticipation of an acquisition—frisky bluegills and the occasional foul tempered bass.

My Grandpa preferred to pursue his quarry by more sophisticated means. He had a bottomless tackle box of bedazzling lures in colors even Kodak had never imagined. They spun or floated or rattled like my Aunt Betty’s jewelry, and to my amazement the most monstrous of walleye and pike pursued them with the zeal of a famished boy maneuvering for the last donut.

An unwilling conscript in the Great Angling Crusade, I learned early that our world is as alive as we are, animated by the dynamic signs of energy at work. All life continues from life and gives chase to that which is most active. Nature pursues what moves and derives from it power, progeny or pleasure. This is the essence of fishing...and meaningful creative endeavors. My Grandpa taught me that a successful outing starts with wishful thinking but is contingent upon our ability to anticipate, attract and act on that which is already animated. To believe otherwise is to be victim of coincidence or perpetrator of outrageous fortune.

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Sometimes the fish just aren't biting and wishing it to be so doesn't change it. It only changes our experience of the situation and how we make sense of it. Growth comes from developing a deeper understanding of the interplay of the forces and how to manage the tensions of conflict and cooperation. That's why there is no magic lure or secret checklist for landing the big ones. Our opportunities to become better and new—to become whole—to succeed, are discovered in the places where the world around us is growing and calls us to do the same.

We are part of nature which compels us to go with it and grow with it.

“Catch a wave and you’re sitting on top of the world.” — The Beach Boys

Ride What Moves. Near Santa Cruz, on beautiful Monterey Bay, there is a marvelous place called Steamers Lane where the accomplished and novice surfers test their skills of balance and timing against the temperamental Pacific Ocean. The rookies jump on their boards too early and the skulking waves pass under foot before cresting behind them and gently rolling them along as if in a wading pool. Other unlucky amateurs rise up too late when the towering wave is in full decent and plunges them with indifference to the craggy rocks below. However, the master surfer dude, by some combination of skill and intuition, recognizes the potency of a wave in the distance and times its ascent perfectly to propel them effortlessly to the shore. “Ride what moves... and move your feet” is rightfully the surfer dudes mantra for becoming part of a greater generative force. Action is the interplay of these forces, the ocean and the surfer, and on occasion unwelcome intruders like tiger sharks, operating in an ancient dance where all participants are beings within a common ecosystem looking to prosper in an environment that decidedly moves towards a greater form of balance.

We cannot control the ocean, those ubiquitous and unseen forces that are more compelling and powerful than ourselves: Science and technology, politics, conflicts, economics, social mores, and such. If there is storm on the water, or the market, your puny little surf board will be thrashed about until you make landfall intact or not. The ludicrous believe that they will outwit the totality of nature by some special providence, while the naysayers are certain that all maneuvering is futile for in the end we inevitably succumb. Though we see these perspectives as oppositional, they are delusional in the same way. We can engage our ingenuity to make our situation a positive one, but we have a limited ability to change the circumstances. Yes, we must acknowledge the power and presence of the ocean, ride what moves, but we have our agency, our ability to navigate, to move our feet.

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If we are to ride the choice waves that propel us to our aspirations our thoughts must flow with the twisting torrents that surround us but are so often missed or even worse dismissed. We must take a higher point of view while never forgetting our precarious and temporal presence in this marvelous and dangerous world.

We all have the capacity to become the surfer dude or dudette with a unique ability to recognize the force and trajectory of our circumstances and employ them for our betterment. We harness these powers by shifting our beliefs, developing new skills, making better plans and choices, and ultimately, taking more effective action. We are the cleverest of adaptors, albeit mostly avowed pedestrians, we walk on water. Still, we have little ability to change others. They too are aquatic dancers looking for their own choice waves.

In order to advance ourselves we must first recognize that which is progressing around us and harness, to the best of our opportunities and abilities, its vitality—to surf where the big waves are rolling in...or will be soon.

We progress when we are in sync with the generative forces all around us.

“If you don’t know where you are going, any road will take you there.” — Lewis Carroll

How We Create Is What We Create. A trip through the MET or the Hermitage or the Louver reveals the history of western civilization in the color and form of paint and plaster. Renaissance artists like Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael used scientific instruments and employed the laws of perspective passed down from classical antiquity to create realistic representations of significant religious and secular subjects. Conversely, impressionist painters like Monet, Renoir, and Pissarro emphasized the experience and changing effects of light and color on the subjective perception of nature and ordinary life. Abstract expressionists like Picasso, Kandinsky and Pollock moved away from representation all together in favor of the spontaneous moment of creation, the surface qualities of the paint and the destruction of convention. While these art works hang in the same halls under the general subject heading of painting or sculpture, the methods used to create them and the ends to which they were created couldn’t be more different. Imagine the Mona Lisa painted with the wild palette knife and exaggerated

strokes of Vincent Van Gogh. The same holds true in our own lives where we perceive our reality, interpret our circumstances and craft our art via a wide array of experiences and techniques. Through our unique mix of imagination, brush strokes, color and line, how we create is what we create.

From ancient astrology to modern management theory, we recognize the mitigating affect of types. Our style and propensities attract us to particular patterns of behavior. We explain our preferences, actions and foibles by connecting them to a particular variety or situation—Sagittarius, ENTP or second oldest child. Theories of type often point to the origin or device that produces our categorical differences. These range from our personal experiences to our biological disposition. Assigning an origin to our personality type speaks as much to our world view, how we believe the cosmos operates in our life, as it does to our perception of the type itself. Was it our hard work and diligence that created this attribute or our innate talents or the hand of God guiding us along... or all the above?

So, while we are unsure as to what really produces the mosaic of the Self, we can observe how recognizable types influence how we are going to take action. Typologies don't reveal much about our competency or range, but rather if we are more prone to use our right or left hand under duress. For example, while most effective leaders utilize a portfolio of management

techniques, some focus on vision or values; yet others processes or goals. These preferences reflect deeper views on alignment and balance and influence everything from who gets hired to what methods are employed to get the job done.

By placing the individual at the center of a passive universe, we regrettably animate the debilitating effects of the designation of type without due consideration of the active role that the situation plays. This produces stereotypes, typologies driven by our prejudices which mistakenly connect cultural differences to attitude, aptitude and disposition.

Our preferences and capabilities determine our outcomes.

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“Four seasons fill the measure of the year;
There are four seasons in the mind of man.”
—John Keats

Practice Prismatic Thinking. The magic of the prism is that it appears to create color from ubiquitous streams of white light that imperceptibly dance about us at all times. Like a cheap Carney trick, all one needs is a little glass with a few oblique angles and voila— instant rainbow. Of course, the real curiosity is that ordinary light contains all imaginable variations of hue and shade, and some still unimagined given that we can't see the entire light spectrum, but we just don't see them interacting.

Colors are as much defined by their opposites as they are their composition: Green vs. Red and Blue vs. Yellow. All New Age nomenclature aside, they vibrate at different frequencies but can be combined in all manner and shape to recreate our view of the universe.

There are four competing forces that drive growth at all three levels. The interaction of these forces can be witnessed in the development of children, the strategic maneuvers of corporations and the trajectory of spiritual movements. This is because these forces are not psychologically derived; they are not determined by how one feels or thinks. Instead, they are defined by what outcomes they pursue or avoid. For example, imagine a stock broker on Wall Street who has been aggressively investing in high growth, high risk stocks. One day, the stock market changes directions and these stocks quickly lose their value while low risk stocks become more attractive. If that broker continues with his strategy of buying high risk stocks in the dynamics of the new market he will quickly undo all of his gains and then some. The market, an articulation of communal level forces, has little regard for his type, and the broker must respond to it or avoid it. What constitutes a high growth strategy will largely be determined by our situation and our response to it. Our situation is neither personal nor transpersonal for the dynamic forces that comprise it are universal in nature.

There are four fundamental forces that pursue competing values and pull us and all the constituents in our situations in different directions: Collaborate, Create, Compete and Control. These forces drive or thwart growth in dyadic oppositions: Collaborate vs. Compete and Create vs. Control. The paradox of growth is that it is born from the tension and constructive conflict of these opposing forces and their agents.

The Collaborate force moves towards connection, harmony and togetherness. This force represents human relationships, the identification with family and clan, and the greater good of Man. The Collaborate force may be interpreted as spiritual because when it is made manifest at the Communal Level it appears as identification and commitment to a particular set of mores and beliefs. Communication and cooperation are the essential enablers of this force. Communities are united by their values. At the Individual Level we see this force at work in the life of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Roman Catholic nun, founder of the Missionaries of Charity and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. She was compelled to create something larger than an organization, nationality or religion. Mother Teresa created a movement built on values, compassion, and service to bring dignity and mercy to the sick and poor of all faiths. The Collaborate force is typically associated the slowest forms of growth because it focuses on building the underlying organizational culture and competencies required to sustain it.

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The Compete force, the opposite of Collaborate, represents a Darwinist approach that focuses on competition where the strong prevail at the expense of the weak. This force represents the drive toward goals and the end game of power, money, fame and other tangible forms of success. Contained within is a rational view of the world as divided between winners and losers. While this approach may at first appear to be hard hearted, history tells a different story where the Han Dynasty, the Romans and British Empire not only flourished but also brought prosperity to conquered lands. This view embraces meritocracy where the best and the brightest are encouraged to distinguish themselves and are compensated disproportionately from the ordinary. Laissez-faire capitalism and free market competition are hallmarks of this view and often summed up in locker room aphorisms like “Winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing.” This form of growth is the fastest of all four, but is not typically sustainable because its “sweat shop” approach gives little concern to the development of others.

The Create force pursues radical growth through wild experimentation and extreme dislocation of conventions. Often this form of growth is event-driven by an unconventional breakthrough, such as a miracle drug, or a cataclysmic event, such as an act of terrorism or a natural catastrophe. The incident is so extreme that a traditional response would be untenable. Evolutionary biology refers to this total displacement of convention as “punctuated equilibrium” meaning the revolutionary moment when the trajectory of growth is irrevocably altered. This Create force

burns bridges behind it. This force is often generative and is experienced as creating as in the case of the Eco-Movement or the artistic endeavors of Pablo Picasso who came to represent cubism among other adventurous departures from realistic painting. Because of its fluid, idea-generating nature, the Create force drives unique products and services, which in turn can cause seismic shifts in the marketplace that create new categories and segments. A compelling vision of splendid possibility is usually part of this view. While this approach provides the greatest magnitude of growth, it also brings the greatest risk.

While Create represents the radical force for growth, Control brings up the rear focusing on continuity and the elimination of errors and outliers. The Control force represents incremental growth — taking something that exists and modifying it to make it better. In this view there is a right and wrong way governed by the irrefutable laws of science and civility. A meter always contains one hundred centimeters and highborn ladies never wear white after Labor Day. Interpretations are of little significance in the face of rules and standards. Data wins the day. This approach is closely associated with technology, systems and engineering employed to streamline complexity and increase efficiency and quality. From Henry Ford to Ray Kroc the industrial age is defined by this “push a button and watch it go” approach. Perfect every time. The Control force, more than any of the other three, is focused not only on growth but on the mitigation of failure. Weather manufacturing an aircraft or conducting an intricate surgery,

there is a step-by-step approach for improving the process. This methodical march of progress often brings with it unwanted bureaucracy.

These four forces, the 4Cs, pull us in divergent directions not simply because we have different personality types, but rather because we seek different destinations. Like looking through a prism, different angles unveil new colors and what was hidden is revealed. On the other side of this complexity, the competing array of colors and forces, there is the simplicity of white light—the integration of all. We cannot create our own white light, our wholeness, without first seeing and understanding the composition and integration of its parts—how it grows.

Constructive conflict from the four forces produces new forms of growth.

“Children grow in phases as do markets as do we. This is the seven ages of man, the circle game and all that jazz. While we cannot master time, we can surely be its attentive servant.”

“To be interested in the changing seasons is a happier state of mind than to be hopelessly in love with spring.” —George Santayana

Think In Terms Of Cycles; Not Lines. Most of our Western concepts of time are linear. Chronos, named for the ancient Greek version of Father Time, is sequential and man-made as indicated by the technical name for a watch—chronometer. Conversely, Kairos, meaning the right moment or supreme opportunity, is the period in which something special happens, like falling in love. While the first can be measured and the later only anticipated, both are successive in nature. Ironically, it is not time but the productive use of it that confounds us. There is no viable theory for timing in economics or sociology or military science. Currencies go up and down as a matter of course but only those who know exactly when profit from their fluctuation. Social movements begin and end in their own time as do conflicts of all variety and degree. All we can really time is the development cycle of an entity or event. Children grow in phases as do markets as do we. This is the seven ages of man, the circle game and all that jazz. While we cannot master time, we can surely be its attentive servant.

The ancient monastic sages characterized the totality of our existence, including the reoccurring assortment of loonies we attract to the carny we call our life, as the turning of a great wheel. Our karma and dharma were all part the cosmic cause and effect with no plea bargaining for a reduced sentence. Famously brilliant and bizarre philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche also eschewed the idea of progress, usually considered the destination for our growth, in favor of the eternal return—meaning that the rise of culture and the creation of civilization endlessly repeats itself like a late night infomercial or a smarmy politician.

This life cycle can be seen in the rotation of history. The end of an era is typically marked by increased control, large scale, the centralization of power, and conflict. It is through the act of consolidation and productivity that an age reaches its maturity, and like human beings, begins its gradual descent into decay. This is also true of all time bound life, both communal and individual. How long can a centralized organization exist? The Soviet Union lasted less than a century. Conversely, the beginning of a new era is usually indicated by radical creativity, wild variation, the distribution of energy, and conflict. Conflict is the fundamental trait both beginning and end share. Since an emerging epoch must contend for scarce resources it does not yet possess, it must displace the status quo through some compelling form of deviation.

The more a prevailing power works to maintain its dominant position, the harder the nascent one pushes until someone gives way. Incumbents use their power to keep the rules in place that protect their rent while upstarts and interlopers engage in seditious maneuvers that give them their only pathway to privilege. To complicate matters, there are usually several forces engaged in this most universal tug of war. Of course these basic ideas about the cyclical dynamics of power and growth can be found in Darwin and Marx and their luminous predecessors. The key to avoiding complete displacement and revolution is to incorporate this inevitable dynamic into a productive plan for succession where the younger can be assimilated and accommodated by the older. Consider China, which has existed as a nation state and culture for over three thousand years, and how they have cycled through dynasties and revolutions with a remarkable ability to put itself right side up in every century.

But why do some new organizations get momentum and take hold while others don't? At the beginning of the Nineteenth Century there were scores of Utopian spiritual communities staked in the United States. By the start of the next Century most of these faded into vague historical landmarks while the few that remained to transcend their geographies and went on to become widely accepted religions.

The late Harvard economist Joseph Schumpeter saw these cycles as more than an enlighten spiritual view when he observed “...out of destruction a new spirit of creativity arises.” He called this cyclical dynamic creative destruction meaning innovation produces new types of growth that destroys the status quo and requires all companies to respond with better and new products, services and solutions. These radical new innovations create such a distinct and profitable advantage over the traditional fare that they are called in the vernacular category killers. Like the S shaped sigmoid curve in mathematics, the descent of one line precipitates the start of the next. Schumpeter characterized growth as ballistic, revolutionary instead of evolutionary, and warned us all that in our success we sow the seeds of our undoing. It is through our complacency, orthodoxy and desire for serenity that we are dispossessed of our power and treasure.

Gauge the time and timing it takes to develop a person, practice or project.

“The world is its own magic.”

—Shunryu Suzuki

Ever Onward. We give counsel to kings, boom to the voice of the wizard and call the blue hot fire of the universe to dance. We are the golden child that has come into our inheritance in every age by seeing anew and delving deep and finessing the fantastic. It is in entrusting the world to see with us that we come to find our new places; the things that were there all along but overlooked or unrecognized for want of a frame. When years cloud our eyes it gives us a better line of sight and with any luck the high angle of the sun brings us wisdom and comfortable shoes. But faith without sister reason is lost and leads us too into delusion where the projected phantasms of hope and despair haunt our dreams. Synthesizing sight and muse reveals the real magic where we find inspiration and science and the sacred entwined.

Age over age we build our beliefs like new cities on top of the old ones and we cover our gods until we cannot see them imprisoned in our own mythologies. Poor Odin and Minerva who answered many a prayer in combat and labor and blessed the names of the first born and kept the hearth warm are now broadcast in syndication as cartoon characters—outrageous, trivial

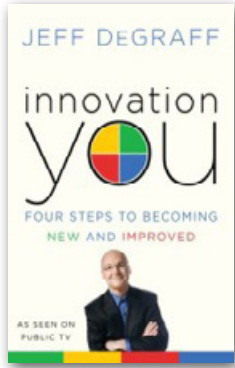
and amusing. We now stand on Olympus and lord over them with the same indifference and impunity they once enjoyed. Nothing substantial has changed, only our affect of looking up or down.

So what will be said about our most hallowed beliefs? It is a sad irony that we see the divine face styled in brush and bronze but cannot see it in the mise-en-scène of our own kind. We must begin again and rejoin those very things we have torn asunder starting with the miasma in the morning mirror. We are neither cause nor effect, subject nor object, but apportion of both. We are Self aware; not Self created.

The seasons between lunacy and illumination, error and enlightenment are short. It is in improving our imperfections that barber becomes doctor, alchemist becomes chemist and bicyclist becomes aviator. Our explanations of creativity at work advance as superstitions to be replaced by science only to be overtaken in turn as ignorance. Though we may now find the botany flawed the blossom is not. While we may contemplate those heavenly places beyond time and space to gaze upon Dante's pure white rose, we must plant our bulbs in the fall and tend to them in spring and make do with the beauty and symmetry that brings our amazement. Nothing is ever perfect or complete; only constantly becoming. All grows with us to conjoin possibility with reality. Perhaps the most essential part of the garden is the loving hand of the gardener who sees himself as both benefactor and beneficiary. Growth is all we are and all we can give to others for it is through the generative act that we keep on after all else falls away.

Innovation requires deviation. ☒

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Jeff DeGraff is Clinical Professor of Management and Organizations at the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan where he teaches popular MBA courses on leading creativity and innovation. Dr. DeGraff runs an acclaimed innovation institute, [Innovatrium](#), with labs in Ann Arbor and Atlanta. He is a frequent contributor to popular magazines and has written several books including *Innovation You: 4 Steps to Becoming New and Improved*. His PBS program by the same name has introduced these ideas to viewers across America. You can find more at [jeffdegraff.com](#) and [innovationyou.com](#).

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