

7. To innovate, train yourself to think: 'That's awesome! Now imagine if ...'

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Keen to innovate in your business? Here's a simple approach, based on how quickly human knowledge is advancing.

Being interested in new ideas, in everything around you, allows you to see the 'adjacent possible,' new ideas that can now be implemented as a result of the ideas that came before them.

As a result of new developments in all manner of areas, new things become possible every day. There are new adjacent possibles opening up all the time. Knowledge now doubles approximately every 12 months and that presents a lot of opportunity for seeing new connections.

Based on this dynamic, it turns out that people living in densely populated cities are, on average, around three times more innovative and creative than people living in rural areas. This is not to say that the sheer number of people living in urban areas results in more innovative ideas. It means that the individuals themselves are up to three times more innovative per person. This is because they live in the interconnected world of ideas, competing forces and new adjacent possibles. Ideas thrive in rich ecosystems. Urban dwellers, surrounded by new things and new ideas, have a much greater opportunity to say, 'That's awesome. Now imagine if...'



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And this is learnable behaviour. It's simply about learning how to acquire a sense of awe for what has just been done, and then applying a slight leap of the imagination that asks, 'What could come next as a result?' Or, 'How could I use that idea?' Applying a new idea in a different scenario is a form of innovation. The application alone becomes the next new idea and contributes to the pyramid.

In terms of the way in which ideas grow and develop, this simple formula - 'That's awesome! Now imagine if...' - is the heart and soul of innovation.

Here's an example of how it works in a highly technical field: Audi have just released a new innovation for their upcoming A8 limousine. They have developed cars that can now park themselves while you go to your meeting.

This innovation is the simple result of thinking, 'That's awesome! Now imagine if...' It's also a quintessential example of how one idea springs into being because of the idea directly before it, which opened up the adjacent possible.

This is how it unfolded: decades ago, car manufacturers introduced cruise control, which meant that for the first time, a car could continue to operate on its own without human input. This was the first step in the cascade of ideas leading up to self-parking cars.

A car in the state of cruise control was unintelligent: it didn't know where it was and could happily drive itself into a bridge or off of a cliff in this form of blind autopilot.

Then cars were given parking aids, in the form of radars that detect their proximity to obstacles. Put those technologies together and suddenly you introduce the adjacent possibility of adaptive cruise control. The car can operate automatically, but now it can also detect obstacles in front of it and slow down if necessary.

Car makers then introduced GPS in their vehicles. As a result, it became possible for a car to 'know' where it was in relation to the surrounding environment and determine which routes to follow to get to a destination. And then came lane-detection technology, which allowed cars to 'see' where the white lines are on a road, to prevent drifting across lanes.

Lane-detection technology opened up another adjacent possible. If a car could run by itself, detect obstacles in its way, read the lane markings on roads and know which roads to take to get to a destination, then the next possibility became a car that could go off on its own, look for a parking spot and park itself.

That's how ideas evolve. That's how innovation occurs.

I invite you to take this idea and ask the next logical 'what if?' For instance, now that cars can park themselves, why can't they go back home after dropping you off and be at your spouse's disposal for the day? Or earn you some passive income by becoming a rental car while you're at work? Or make deliveries? These things, and many more, are now part of the next adjacent possible.

Computer-animation film giant Pixar Animation Studios attributes its success - in fact, the very invention of the field that the company pioneered - computer animation - to this dynamic. In his book, *Creativity, Inc*, Ed Catmull, president of Pixar and Disney Animation, says that the culture that went into Pixar was a conscious choice that was deliberately developed in very specific ways over the decades.

Catmull attended the University of Utah in his early 20s. As well as being interested in computers, he was amazed by the culture promoted by his professors there. They made no prescriptions as to what their students should explore. Instead, they exerted a light touch and let them pursue their own interests. As a result, Catmull was exposed to a rich culture of invention and innovation. "When one of my colleagues at the University of Utah invented something," he writes, "the rest of us would piggyback on it, pushing that new idea forward." They were constantly saying, "That's awesome! Now imagine if..."

Catmull loved the university environment so much that he sought to replicate it at Pixar. As a result, Pixar has a very flat hierarchy, is very big on interdepartmental mingling, and encourages extracurricular pursuits like in-house rock bands and sports teams.

This management style makes me immediately think of some financial-services director, whose response is likely to be, "That's fine for them, but we're a bank. Our world doesn't work that way. We don't need people who say, 'That's awesome! Now imagine if...'"

In response, I ask: "Are you sure?" Because Pixar is not a collection of cartooning hippies who sit around smoking hookahs and doodling all day. Their scientific breakthroughs would make the average tech company's offerings look like horse-and-cart stuff by comparison. Pixar's technical, mechanical, procedural and logistical problems go significantly beyond, "Dude, does this shade of purple make my character look fat?" They are a technology- and complexity-driven organisation on a scale that most managers could barely fathom.

Don't presume that the culture that makes Pixar so strong could not make your accounting firm one of a kind. Don't rob yourself of the opportunity to innovate within, for example, a bank. The formula "That's awesome! Now imagine if..." is every bit as important for the big corporate.

At the same time, however, you don't have to be Audi or Pixar, with their massive resources, to use this technique. The same principle of thinking applies right down to small things - like making your workspace a bit better, improving your website, putting together a stronger presentation, or upgrading your simple, completely analogue product.

You need only look at new ideas around you and say, "That's awesome!" Then apply the principle to your own scenario and add, 'Now imagine if...'

Want to own your industry? Then be the innovation leader by looking at the latest thing. Take a moment to admire and respect it, and then add one more step to it. Read about or go out and discover the very latest trend or development in your world. Then add the additional leap, "Now imagine if..."

The wrong way to think about it: I must be a genius in an attic having an inspiration-gasm!

The right way to think about it: The world is freakin' fascinating! And you know what would be even more awesome...?

ABOUT DOUGLAS KRUGER

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