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CREATIVITY: BEARING FRUIT ON THE IDEA FARM



BIG IDEA In A Few Words

People who do things that others say can't be done are iconoclasts. Five practices to stimulate iconoclastic thinking: 1) Release your inner maverick. You don't have to be disrespectful to be skeptical. 2) Become disciplined in cultivating creative space. You can't force a good idea. 3) Go after quality through quantity. Stimulate more ideas; eventually you will get better ideas. 4) Maintain a healthy emotional distance. Separate your ideas from your identity so you can adapt. 5) Turn up the heat in the refining process. The best ideas emerge as raw materials; enlist the help of others to refine them.

At the heart of creativity is seeing differently. People who do things that others say can't be done have the imagination and perception that enables them to see beyond the limiting factors and restraining forces holding everyone else back. In the words of Howard Armstrong, "It's the things people know, that ain't so."¹¹

You probably don't recognize the name Howard Armstrong, but you benefit from his iconoclastic thinking on a regular basis. He was responsible for the basic technologies that make radio and television possible. But perhaps his greatest achievement was the creation of FM radio. The only problem with his invention was in the 1920's everyone



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in radio believed that FM would be inferior in quality to AM. In fact a prominent mathematician from AT&T published a paper proving the inferiority of FM and it was accepted wholesale by virtually every radio engineer—except Howard Armstrong.

Over the span of eight years Armstrong singlehandedly battled to overcome the significant technical challenges associated with building an FM receiver. In 1934 he demonstrated the results to an RCA executive by transmitting between an antenna on the Empire State Building and a receiver on Long Island. With amazing clarity they could hear the sound of water being poured into a glass and the crumpling noise a paper makes when squeezed in one's hand. Music had concert hall clarity; the hiss of AM radio was replaced with high fidelity sound.

RCA was heavily invested in AM technology and quickly mobilized their best engineers to discredit the superiority of FM technology. They even forced the removal of the FM transmitter from the Empire State Building. RCA was among the last to benefit from Armstrong's breakthrough invention and serve as a powerful reminder of the dangers of investing so heavily in "what's now" that you can't see—or in this case hear—"what's next," even when it is presented to you.

The environment in which we as church and mission leaders find ourselves is in desperate need of paradigm busting ideas that will require a whole new level of creativity. Your church or mission needs people who can see differently—people who like Howard Armstrong believe—"It's the things people know, that ain't so."

I've never thought of myself as overly creative. I'm certainly not artistic, but I do recognize I have lots of ideas and I've been foolish enough to give some of them a try. Increasingly I'm asked to share a few thoughts about the creative process and because I believe it is so important for this moment in mission history I'm willing to get vulnerable and share a few thoughts with you. Even if you don't find anything I have to say helpful, I challenge you to give some careful thought to how to produce a bumper crop in your organizational idea farm.

Release Your Inner Maverick

Remember a key to creativity is seeing differently. That requires a maverick spirit that challenges the status quo. You don't have to be disrespectful to be skeptical. The fact something has worked well in the past has absolutely no bearing at all on the best course of action in the future. Cultivate a gracious skepticism that refuses to be intimidated by experts. Remember, everyone believed FM was inferior to AM and they had mathematical data from expert scientists in reputable companies to prove it. Everyone but Howard Armstrong.

Become Disciplined In Cultivating Creative Space

There is a reason why people get good ideas in the shower or while driving on autopilot or jogging on the treadmill. When you are engaged in an activity that does not require vigilant thought you free up your brain to think about other things. You need to discipline yourself to do this often because you can't force a good idea.

In a typical week I devote five to seven hours to thinking in my creative space. I can hear you asking out loud how anyone could ever find five to seven hours a week just to think. About four to five hours of my creative space think-time are between 5:30-6:30am during my morning workout. The rest of it comes in Atlanta traffic. One of the curses of living here in Atlanta is traffic. It's horrible and the first few months after we moved here I thought I was going to go crazy.

Eventually I decided I had to find a way to redeem all this drive time and I made a very simple decision. I don't listen to the radio or even play music in my car. I devote the majority of my drive time to creative thinking and the rest of it to listening to books using the text-to-speech feature on my Kindle. The only routine exception I make to this choice is making phone calls. I challenge you to audit your schedule and look for time where you are doing something routine that does not demand constant vigilant thought and experiment with multi-tasking and creative thinking.

Go After Quality Through Quantity

I understand that only thirty to forty out of every 100 of my ideas will be worth acting on. In baseball those are hall of fame numbers. I'm not stuck in a rut looking for the one or two killer ideas. I'm after volume and I'll sort it out as we go. To increase the volume you have to increase your exposure to new ideas, which is one of the most practical ways you can cultivate the ability to think and see differently.

You have to get beyond your routines and out of your normal patterns. For me that means reading magazines like *Fast Company* and *Wired*. I read books like *Predictably Irrational* and biographies on iconoclastic leaders like Einstein and Churchill. I am intentional about talking with forward thinking people. I listen to dozens of messages and podcasts. There is nothing really breakthrough here. You are probably thinking, "Steve, tell me something I don't know." When it comes to creative volume for most leaders the issue isn't learning a new trick but rather doing what you already know more often. Start with a plan to stimulate more ideas and eventually you will get better ideas. It's about volume.

Maintain A Healthy Emotional Distance

One of the biggest problems with ideas is we attach them to our identity almost as soon as they take shape in our minds and end up losing our objectivity. That's why we get defensive the first time someone asks us a question or offers a modification. I learned a long time ago the importance of separating my ideas from my identity, thus enabling others to refine or even dismiss my ideas without rejecting me. This attitude makes it much easier to share the credit with others later too!

Turn Up The Heat On The Refining Process

Even the best ideas tend to emerge as raw materials and need to be refined. If you have kept a reasonable measure of emotional distance you will not have trouble enlisting the help of others to sharpen your ideas. I had the joy of working with David Mays for almost five years before he graduated to glory. David had plenty of good ideas on his own but I came to understand he was just as valuable in the creative process when I gave him permission to tell me why my latest idea is not going to work. I often joked with

him saying, “I’m counting on you to save me from myself and if you can’t talk me out of this I’m going to do it.” David saved my bacon more than once by convincing me not to pursue something or offering modest but very helpful modifications. The more significant the idea the more intentional I am in enlisting others both individually and in focus groups as part of my refining process.

That is hardly an exhaustive list and I readily admit you may not even find it that creative. I hope I have at the very least highlighted how important it is for you to empower people in your sphere of influence to see differently. Be alert to the dangers of developing an RCA complex that has such deep emotional attachments and investments in current methods and strategies that you would squelch good ideas even when it is clear they leap frog the status quo.

So let’s come back to where we started with this simple question, how’s the crop looking in your idea farm and what are you doing to fertilize it?

NOTES

¹¹ Gregory Burns, *Iconoclast: A Neuroscientist Reveals How to Think Differently*, (Harvard Business Review Press, 2010) Kindle location 31-34

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