

The Improv Mindset

CHANGE YOUR BRAIN.
CHANGE YOUR BUSINESS.

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and
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EXCERPT

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Section 1

Your Brain

"Rabbit's clever," said Pooh thoughtfully.

"Yes," said Piglet, "Rabbit's clever."

"And he has Brain."

"Yes," said Piglet, "Rabbit has Brain."

There was a long silence.

"I suppose," said Pooh, "that that's why he never understands anything."

– A.A. Milne, Winnie-the-Pooh

Before you read any further, do the following exercise. Pull out your cellphone timer or look at the clock and give yourself two minutes. Two minutes exactly. Ready? Now, flip to the next page (Figure 1) and over the next two minutes think of as many different ways that you can use a paperclip as possible. Go.

<i>Different Ways to use a Paperclip</i>	
1)	11)
2)	12)
3)	13)
4)	14)
5)	15)
6)	16)
7)	17)
8)	18)
9)	19)
10)	20)

Figure 1: Paperclip Test

Divergent Thinking

Ever take a test like this before? It's called an alternate uses test (AUT), and it's a common tool for measuring your ability for divergent thinking.

What is *divergent thinking* you ask? How is it different from creativity?

We like Sir Ken Robinson's definition.

“Creativity is the process of having original ideas that have value. Divergent thinking isn’t a synonym. It’s an essential capacity for creativity. It’s the ability to see lots of possible answers to a question. Lots of possibilities to interpreting a question.”¹

With that in mind, how many ideas did you come up with? 5? 10? 30? Most people come up with around 10-15.

What if we told you that there was a study of a group of 1,600 people, and that 98% of that group scored at the genius level? What group of people do you think that would be?

The answer: ***Kindergartners***

Why would Kindergartners be SO MUCH better at this test than you? The answer is quite simple: *they don’t have the same boundaries that most of us do.*

Look at your list. Did you put down something like “to clip paper together?” Almost every one of our clients gives this answer. But why can’t the paperclip be the staff used in The Raiders of the Lost Ark? Or a baseball bat that can knock the earth off its axis? Or a fighting stick for the world’s smallest ninja?

If you change the size and material of the paperclip, and give your brain permission to let go of past restrictions you’ve placed on the object, there’s a good chance that you could come up with many more ideas than just 10 or 15.

We don’t do that, do we? We are limited by our experience. We know the paperclip to be a paperclip, and our knowledge of the object itself drastically limits our thinking. Kindergartners’ brains, on the other hand, are WIDE open and can see no limitations.

¹ (Robinson, 2010)

The adult brain is exceptional at categorization. Life could be challenging if we didn't categorize objects and instead, had to relearn what an object did each time we saw it. And once categorized, it's as if our brain says, "A paperclip holds paper together, and it will do so until the end of time."

Clearly there is efficiency to this type of approach. The National Institutes of Health recently mapped the entire brain using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). They discovered that the brain is actually organized like a grid – a vast superhighway of millions of interconnected neurons containing seemingly endless bits of data. The brain's connections cross at right angles, like the weave in fabric.²

We assert that this categorization likely allows us to travel down that superhighway of right angles to access data more quickly. It's like a major city – You want to find meaning of the word "paperclip?" Your brain "pulls out the map," looks for "Objects," turns left at "Office Supplies," then takes a right at "Paper Holders," and finally reaches paperclips! Voila! The location for the definition of "paperclip!"

What happens when we need the paperclip to be something else? What happens when we want to re-categorize, or reimagine, that small piece of metal that holds paper together?

Let's talk about the Kindergartner study again. The researchers performed the study with the same group of 1,600 kids at different times in their development, starting in Kindergarten and following them to adulthood. As the Kindergartners progressed, the data presented some interesting results (Figure 2).

² (National Institute of Health, 2012)

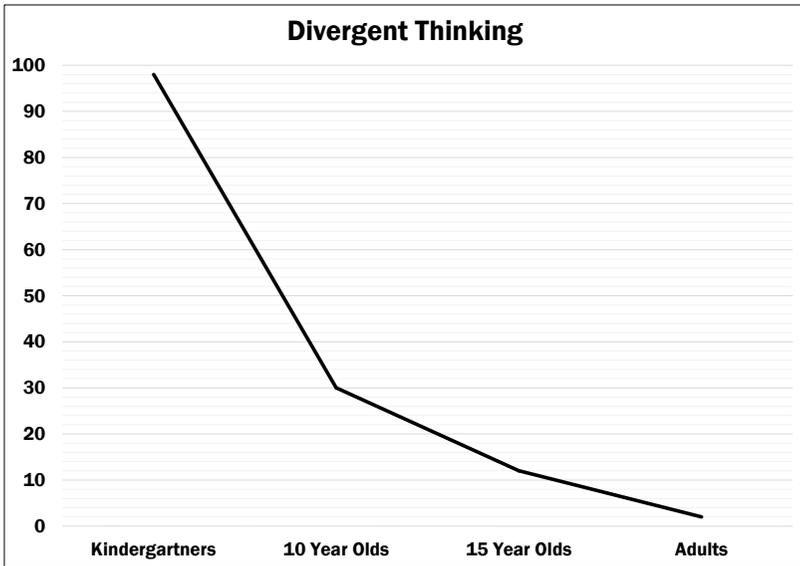


Figure 2: Divergent Thinking³

You'll notice that divergent thinking has a very strong trend downward. Think about it – 98% of people tested could come up with genius-level numbers of ideas for a paperclip when they were in Kindergarten. At age 20, only 2% were geniuses. Two percent.

If, at a very basic level, innovation = new ideas, then this drastic drop in idea generation is deeply problematic. So, the question becomes: ***What can we do to disrupt the rigid and natural order of our thinking so that we can come up with radical new ideas?***

³ (Land & Jarman, 1992)

More Ideas = More Creativity

As we defined earlier, ***creativity is the process of having original ideas that have value.*** Those ideas could be brand new to the world, or tweaks to things that already exist. The important thing is that we need to have a lot of them. The volume of ideas (your ability to keep coming up with ways to use a paperclip, for example) matter. Why?

In a study at MIT, the number of ideas generated was directly correlated with creativity. In the first part of the study, 84 participants (students, professionals, and improvisational comedians) were asked to identify innovative product ideas for a common item, such as a toaster. The participants had only 12 minutes to come up with as many ideas as they could. Ideas included things like optically recognizing burned toast, and a cardboard box solar-powered toaster. The researchers then enlisted a separate group of people to rate the product ideas on five metrics: Creative, Novel, Useful, Product Worthy, and Clear.

In the second part of the study, the same participants were asked to create as many punchlines as they could over 5 minutes to a caption-less New Yorker cartoon (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Sample New Yorker Cartoon

Responses included:

- The company is underwater...and we called you.
- We're expecting the stock market to go to the toilet and may need you for assistance.
- Who you calling beekeeper?

A similar group was asked to rate the legitimacy and humor of the responses.

Researchers then analyzed the results of both tests. What they found was fascinating – the respondents who had **more ideas also had more creative ideas**. The researchers concluded that the ability to generate ideas quickly (the more ideas

you had within the given time period) was strongly correlated to the creativity of those ideas ($r^2 = .82$).⁴

Or, put in another way, ***the people who had more ideas, had more ideas of value.***

Problems are solved by coming up with ideas. Sometimes a solution is simple and elegant, other times it is overwhelmingly complicated, but it does the same thing: it solves a problem. So, it stands to reason that if we have a method for coming up with lots of ideas, then we are more likely to have an idea that will be good and useful – an idea that will actually “stick.” Linus Pauling, the multiple Nobel prize-winning chemist, famously said, “The way to have a good idea is to have a lot of ideas.”

Sounds simple, doesn't it? The challenge is that we get in the way of those ideas as we go from being Kindergartners to adults. We are so good at seeing things the way they ARE that we can't see them any other way. It's partly our makeup (how our brains are put together) and partly the way we learn. So, the goal needs to be finding a way to shift the path of our brain's connections so we can increase our flow of creativity.

We can look at this as a process (Figure 4). If you practice improving your divergent thinking skills, we've found that you can increase your number of ideas. Increasing the number of ideas can then increase your chances of finding something of value.

⁴ (Kudrowitz, 2010)



Figure 4: Divergent Thinking Process

Where does The Improv Mindset sit in all of this?

To us, The Improv Mindset is *practical creativity*. It's the process of finding those ideas that have value, and then ***applying them to your business***. We will return to innovation later in this book. For now, let's focus on creativity.

Why Does Creativity Matter?

Now, you might at this point find yourself saying, “Great, I need to be more creative. But I can promise you there is nothing creative about what I do at work.”

We hear this from our clients quite a bit. Along with, “Shouldn't we just be making money and letting the Marketing team be creative?”

Forrester Consulting, a research-based consulting company, performed a quantitative study exploring how creativity influences business performance. We have always had a suspicion that creative companies outperform their peers (look at Disney, Apple, IDEO), but no real data to back it up. Now we do. The study, entitled *The Creative Dividend*, surveyed senior management from numerous companies that crossed both industries and geographies. The results of the study were astonishing:

- Companies that foster creativity achieve exceptional growth over their peers

- Creative companies enjoy greater market share and competitive leadership (by a factor of 3 to 1!)
- Creative companies win more “great places to work” awards (leading to higher retention rates and employee satisfaction)

The “creative dividend” is real. There are massive dollars at stake here when we’re talking about a market share of 3 to 1, and yet 61% of companies do not see themselves as creative.⁵ This leaves a HUGE gap (or opportunity) for a company to begin building a framework that is focused both on creativity and innovation, which in turn has the potential to drastically change its position in the marketplace.

And it’s not just business where creativity matters. Let’s look at professional sports. Researchers in Sweden performed a two-year study on some of their highest-level (national team) soccer players to determine whether there were any factors that could predict the success of the player (as measured by number of goals and assists).

And guess what?

The soccer players who were more creative were more successful in scoring goals and assists.⁶

When you are more creative, your output is better – on the soccer pitch or in the boardroom.

⁵ (Forrester Research, 2014)

⁶ (Vestberg, Gustason, & Petrovic, 2012)