The Best-Kept Secret to Cultivating Creativity and Innovation



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Curiosity is a muscle — and that muscle needs to be exercised if you want to be more innovative or deliver on creative work. But as with anything that must be developed or worked on, most of us look for shortcuts. From workouts to productivity tools to grocery shopping … we're all attracted to time-saving hacks that offer fast results and immediate solutions.

This can happen in creative work when we look for shortcuts or try fast-tracking the process by pulling inspiration from design galleries or others' websites. To be clear, there's nothing wrong with your team members trying to optimize their time by turning elsewhere for inspiration. Your team *should* be

doing that. Often.

But if that's *all* they're doing — if they're relying solely on inspiration from others' work — then they're stunting their curiosity's growth. Without a well-developed sense of curiosity, they'll fail to grow into the brilliant creatives they're meant to be.

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Explore outside your industry

By building your curiosity muscle, you'll be able to not only ask deeper, more meaningful questions but also ideate ideas more rapidly. How do you develop that muscle? By learning new things. Proactively. You can develop that muscle even more successfully by learning things you're not familiar with and even exploring ideas you may be uncomfortable with.

Don't limit your learning and exploration to ideas directly connected to your job. Go outside of your industry to learn new things.

A designer might cultivate their curiosity by learning how to bake and studying the reason why yeast causes bread to rise, why a second rise yields a better loaf and how yeast, baking soda and baking powder are all leavening agents but require very different conditions to cause baked goods to rise.

If you're a nonprofit exec, you could explore why the tools, techniques and strategies of Six Sigma matter in manufacturing. You could study processes like Toyota's production system or the five whys technique. Or you could explore how things relate in different ecosystems. The point is to broaden your curiosity across a variety of disciplines.

The best-kept secret to creativity

So, why does this matter to your creative muscle? Why bother investing so much time and effort into learning ideas so far removed from your creative endeavors? It's all about getting your reps in.

We live in a world that offers endless opportunities to ponder, discover and investigate ideas. And every time you embrace one of those opportunities, you develop your curiosity. And perhaps more importantly, you create a deeper well of experience to draw on. By soaking in all that new information, you have a broader set of ideas to apply to your current challenges and iterate on. That's the best-kept secret to cultivating creativity and innovation.

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3 questions for cultivating your curiosity

So, how can you and your team develop that curiosity muscle to grow in creativity and innovation? Use these three questions to lead you forward as you grow your curiosity:

1. **"Am I learning something new?"** It's a fairly common question, right? Most people will ask themselves this question a couple of times a year when they're feeling reflective and introspective. But that's not enough. The most successful creatives ask themselves this question every day. Whether they're trying to learn something big over the course of time or simply exposing themselves to new ideas, they are exercising their sense of curiosity about the world every day. Right now, go into your calendar and block off 15 minutes every day to focus on learning something new.

2. **“Am I discovering something new about a topic I already know?”** Stay in your career long enough, and you’ll get to a point where you feel like you know a lot. It’s a great feeling, isn’t it? But don’t get comfortable there. Develop the mindset that no matter how much of a subject matter expert you may be, there is always more to learn. Keep an ongoing, ever-growing list of ideas and topics within your industry that you want to grow in. If this is a struggle for you, ask your peers about their career paths and the knowledge gaps they had to overcome.

3. **“What if…?” and “Why not…?”** To really level up your creativity muscle, you need to use prompts such as: “What if…?,” “Why not…?,” “I wonder…,” and “What’s stopping us from…?” Be the person who’s always questioning ideas and strategies. The point isn’t to be contrarian, but to cultivate the curiosity your team needs to drive innovation.

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If you’ve ever felt limited in your creativity, then asking yourself the questions above will help you do something about it. And if you’ve thought you’re just not creative, well, stop. Because you *can* make yourself more creative. Cultivate your curiosity, and you’ll start producing more creative, innovative ideas.

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