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How to get over the fears that block your best
ideas *by Tom Kelley and David Kelley*

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ILLUSTRATION: ANDRÉ DA LOBA

Most people are born creative. As children, we revel in imaginary play, ask outlandish questions, draw blobs and call them dinosaurs. But over time, because of socialization and formal education, a lot of us start to stifle those impulses. We learn to be warier of judgment, more cautious, more analytical. The world seems to divide into “creatives” and “noncreatives,” and too many people consciously or unconsciously resign themselves to the latter category.

And yet we know that creativity is essential to success in any discipline or industry. According to a recent IBM survey of chief executives around the world, it's the most sought-after trait in leaders today. No one can deny that creative thinking has enabled the rise and continued success of countless companies, from start-ups like Facebook and Google to stalwarts like Procter & Gamble and General Electric.

Students often come to Stanford University's “d.school” (which was founded by one of us—David Kelley—and is formally known as the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design) to develop their creativity. Clients work with IDEO, our design and innovation consultancy, for the same reason. But along the way, we've learned that our job isn't to *teach* them creativity. It's to help them *rediscover* their creative confidence—the natural ability to come up with new ideas and the courage to try them out. We do this by giving them strategies to get past four fears that hold most of us back: fear of the messy unknown, fear of being judged, fear of the first step, and fear of losing control.

Easier said than done, you might argue. But we know it's possible for people to overcome even their most deep-seated fears. Consider the work of Albert Bandura, a world-renowned psychologist and Stanford professor. In one series of early experiments, he helped people conquer lifelong snake phobias by guiding them through a series of increasingly demanding interactions. They would start by watching a snake through a two-way mirror. Once comfortable with that, they'd progress to observing it through an open door, then to watching someone else touch the snake, then to touching it themselves through a heavy leather glove, and, finally, in a few hours, to touching it with their own bare hands. Bandura calls this process of experiencing one small success after another "guided mastery." The people who went through it weren't just cured of a crippling fear they had assumed was untreatable. They also had less anxiety and more success in other parts of their lives, taking up new and potentially frightening activities like horseback riding and public speaking. They tried harder, persevered longer, and had more resilience in the face of failure. They had gained a new confidence in their ability to attain what they set out to do.

We've used much the same approach over the past 30 years to help people transcend the fears that block their creativity. You break challenges down into small steps and then build confidence by succeeding on one after another. Creativity is something you practice, not just a talent you're born with. The process may feel a little uncomfortable at first, but—as the snake phobics learned—the discomfort quickly fades away and is replaced with new confidence and capabilities.

Fear of the Messy Unknown

Creative thinking in business begins with having empathy for your customers (whether they're internal or external), and you can't get that sitting behind a desk. Yes, we know it's cozy in your office. Everything is reassuringly familiar; information comes from predictable sources; contradic-

tory data are weeded out and ignored. Out in the world, it's more chaotic. You have to deal with unexpected findings, with uncertainty, and with irrational people who say things you don't want to hear. But that is where you find insights—and creative breakthroughs. Venturing forth in pursuit of learning, even without a hypothesis, can open you up to new information and help you discover nonobvious needs. Otherwise, you risk simply reconfirming ideas you've already had or waiting for others—your customers, your boss, or even your competitors—to tell you what to do.

At the d.school, we routinely assign students to do this sort of anthropological fieldwork—to get out of their comfort zones and into the world—until, suddenly, they start doing it on their own. Consider a computer scientist, two engineers, and an MBA student, all of whom took the Extreme Affordability class taught by Stanford business school professor Jim Patell. They eventually realized that they couldn't complete their group project—to research

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and design a low-cost incubator for newborn babies in the developing world—while living in safe, suburban California. So they gathered their courage and visited rural Nepal. Talking with families and doctors firsthand, they learned that the babies in gravest danger were those born prematurely in areas far from hospitals. Nepalese villagers didn't need a cheaper incubator at the hospital—they needed a fail-safe way to keep babies warm when they were away from doctors who could do so effectively. Those insights led the team to design a miniature "sleeping bag" with a pouch containing a special heat-storing wax. The Embrace Infant Warmer costs 99% less than a traditional incubator and can maintain the right temperature for up to six hours without an external power

Tackling the Mess, One Step at a Time

You can work up the confidence to tackle the big fears that hold most of us back by starting small. Here are a few ways to get comfortable with venturing into the messy unknown. The list gets increasingly challenging, but you can follow the first two suggestions without even leaving your desk.



Caroline O'Connor is a lecturer at the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design. **Sarah Stein Greenberg** is its managing director.

source. The innovation has the potential to save millions of low-birth-weight and premature babies every year, and it came about only because the team members were willing to throw themselves into unfamiliar territory.

Another example comes from two students, Akshay Kothari and Ankit Gupta, who took the d.school's Launchpad course. The class required them to start a company from scratch by the end of the 10-week academic quarter. Both were self-described "geeks"—technically brilliant, deeply analytical, and definitely shy. But they opted to work on their project—an elegant news reader for the then-newly released iPad—off-campus in a Palo Alto café where they'd be surrounded by potential users. Getting over the awkwardness of approaching strangers, Akshay gathered feedback by asking café patrons to experiment with his prototypes. Ankit coded hundreds of small variations to be tested each day—changing everything from interaction patterns to the size of a button. In a matter of weeks they rapidly iterated their way to a successful product. "We went from people saying, 'This is crap,'" says Akshay, "to 'Is this app preloaded on every iPad?'" The result—Pulse News—received public praise from Steve Jobs at a worldwide developer's conference only a few months later, has been downloaded by 15 million people, and is one of the original 50 apps in Apple's App Store Hall of Fame.

It's not just entrepreneurs and product developers who should get into "the mess."

by Caroline O'Connor and Sarah Stein Greenberg

Lurk in online forums. Listen in as potential customers share information, air grievances, and ask questions—it's the virtual equivalent of hanging around a popular café. You're not looking for evaluations of features or cost; you're searching for clues about their concerns and desires.

Pick up the phone and call your own company's customer service line. Walk through the experience as if you were a customer, noting how your problem is handled and how you're feeling along the way.

Seek out an unexpected expert. What does the receptionist in your building know about your firm's customer experience? If you use a car service for work travel, what insights do the drivers have about your firm? If you're in health care, talk to a medical assistant, not a doctor. If you make a physical product, ask a repair person to tell you about common failure areas.

Act like a spy. Take a magazine and a pair of headphones to a store or an industry conference (or, if your customers are internal, a break room or lunch area). Pretend to read while you observe. Watch as if you were a kid, trying to understand what is going on. How are people interacting with your offering? What can you glean from their body language?

Casually interview a customer or potential customer. After you've gotten more comfortable venturing out, try this: Write down a few open-ended questions about your product or service. Go to a place where your customers tend to gather, find someone you'd be comfortable approaching, and say you'd like to ask a few questions. If the person refuses? No problem, just try someone else. Eventually you'll find someone who's dying to talk to you. Press for more detail with every question. Even if you think you understand, ask "Why is that?" or "Can you tell me more about that?" Get people to dig into their own underlying assumptions.

Senior managers also must hear directly from anyone affected by their decisions. For instance, midway through a management off-site IDEO held for ConAgra Foods, the executives broke away from their upscale conference rooms to explore gritty Detroit neighborhoods, where you can go miles without seeing a grocery store. They personally observed how inner-city residents reacted to food products and spoke with an urban farmer who hopes to turn abandoned lots into community gardens. Now, according to Al Bolles, ConAgra's executive vice president of research, quality, and innovation, such behavior is common at the company. "A few years ago, it was hard to pry my executive team away from the office," he says, "but now we venture out and get onto our customers' home turf to get insights about what they really need."

Fear of Being Judged

If the scribbling, singing, dancing kindergarten symbolizes unfettered creative expression, the awkward teenager represents the opposite: someone who cares—*deeply*—about what other people think. It takes only a few years to develop that fear of judgment, but it stays with us throughout our adult lives, often constraining our careers. Most of us accept that when we are learning, say, to ski, others will see us fall down until practice pays off. But we can't risk our business-world ego in the same way. As a result, we self-edit, killing potentially creative ideas because we're afraid our bosses or peers will see us fail.

We stick to "safe" solutions or suggestions. We hang back, allowing others to take risks. But you can't be creative if you are constantly censoring yourself.

Half the battle is to resist judging *yourself*. If you can listen to your own intuition and embrace more of your ideas (good and bad), you're already partway to overcoming this fear. So take baby steps, as Bandura's clients did. Instead of letting thoughts run through your head and down the drain, capture them systematically in some form of idea notebook. Keep a whiteboard and marker in the shower. Schedule daily "white space" in your calendar, where your only task is to think or take a walk and daydream. When you try to generate ideas, shoot for 100 instead of 10. Defer your own judgment and you'll be surprised at how many ideas you have—and like—by the end of the week.

Also, try using new language when you give feedback, and encourage your collaborators to do the same. At the d.school, our feedback typically starts with "I like..." and moves on to "I wish..." instead of just passing judgment with put-downs like "That will never work." Opening with the positives and then using the first person for suggestions signals that "This is just my opinion and I want to help," which makes listeners more receptive to your ideas.

We recently worked with Air New Zealand to reinvent the customer experience for its long-distance flights. As a highly regulated industry, airlines tend toward conservatism. To overcome the cultural

norm of skepticism and caution, we started with a workshop aimed at generating crazy ideas. Executives brainstormed and prototyped a dozen unconventional (and some seemingly impractical) concepts, including harnesses that hold people standing up, groups of seats facing one another around a table, and even hammocks and bunk beds. Everyone was doing it, so no one was scared he or she would be judged. This willingness to consider wild notions and defer judgment eventually led the Air New Zealand team to a creative breakthrough: the Skycouch, a lie-flat seat for economy class. At first, it seemed impossible that such a seat could be made without enlarging its footprint (seats in business and first-class cabins take up much more space), but the new design does just that: A heavily padded section swings up like a footrest to transform an airline row into a futonlike platform that a couple can lie down on together. The Skycouch is now featured on a number of Air New Zealand's international flights, and the company has won several industry awards as a result.

Fear of the First Step

Even when we want to embrace our creative ideas, acting on them presents its own challenges. Creative efforts are hardest at the beginning. The writer faces the blank page; the teacher, the start of school; businesspeople, the first day of a new project. In a broader sense, we're also talking about fear of charting a new path or

breaking out of your predictable workflow. To overcome this inertia, good ideas are not enough. You need to stop planning and just get started—and the best way to do that is to stop focusing on the huge overall task and find a small piece you can tackle right away.

Best-selling writer Anne Lamott expertly captures this idea in a story from her childhood. Her brother had been assigned a school report about birds, but he waited to start on it until the night before it was due. He was near tears, overwhelmed by the task ahead, until his father gave him some wise advice: “Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird.” In a business context, you can push yourself to take the first step by asking: What is the low-cost experiment? What’s the quickest, cheapest way to make progress toward the larger goal?

Or give yourself a crazy deadline, as John Keefe, a d.school alum and a senior editor at radio station WNYC, did after a colleague complained that her mom had to wait at city bus stops never knowing when the next bus would come. If you worked for New York City Transit and your boss asked you to solve that problem, how soon would you promise to get a system up and running? Six weeks? Ten? John, who *doesn’t* work for the transit authority, said, “Give me till the end of the day.” He bought an 800 number, figured out how to access real-time bus data, and linked it to text-to-speech technology. Within 24 hours, he had set up a service that allowed bus riders to call in, input their bus stop number, and hear the location of the approaching bus. John applies the same fearless attitude to his work at WNYC. “The most effective way I’ve found to practice design thinking is by showing, not telling,” he explains.

Another example of the “start simple” strategy comes from an IDEO project to develop a new dashboard feature for a European luxury car. To test their ideas, designers videotaped an existing car and then used digital effects to layer on proposed features. The rapid prototyping process took less than a week. When the team showed the video to our client, he

laughed. “Last time we did something like this,” he said, “we built a prototype car, which took almost a year and cost over a million dollars. Then we took a video of it. You skipped the car and went straight to the video.”

Our mantra is “Don’t get ready, get started!” The first step will seem much less daunting if you make it a tiny one and you force yourself to do it *right now*. Rather than stalling and allowing your anxiety to build, just start inching toward the snake.

Fear of Losing Control

Confidence doesn’t simply mean believing your ideas are good. It means having the humility to let go of ideas that aren’t working and to accept good ideas from other people. When you abandon the status quo and work collaboratively, you sacrifice control over your product, your team, and your business. But the creative gains can more than compensate. Again, you can start small. If you’re facing a tough challenge, try calling a meeting with people fresh to the topic. Or break the routine of a weekly meeting by letting the most junior person in the room set the agenda and lead it. Look for opportunities to cede control and leverage different perspectives.

That’s exactly what Bonny Simi, director of airport planning at JetBlue Airways, did after an ice storm closed JFK International Airport for a six-hour stretch in 2007—and disrupted the airline’s flight service for the next six days. Everyone knew there were operational problems to be fixed, but no one knew exactly what to do. Fresh from a d.school course, Bonny suggested that JetBlue brainstorm solutions from the bottom up rather than the top down. First, she gathered a team of 120 frontline employees together for just one day—pilots, flight attendants, dispatchers, ramp workers, crew schedulers, and other staff members. Then she mapped out their disruption recovery actions (using yellow Post-it notes) and the challenges they faced (using pink ones). By the end of the day, Bonny’s grassroots task force had reached new insights—and resolve.

The distributed team then spent the next few months working through more than a thousand pink Post-its to creatively solve each problem. By admitting that the answers lay in the collective, Bonny did more than she could ever have done alone. And JetBlue now recovers from major disruptions significantly faster than it did before.

Our own experience with the open innovation platform OpenIDEO is another case in point. Its launch was scary in two ways: First, we were starting a public conversation that could quickly get out of hand; second, we were admitting that we don’t have all the answers. But we were ready, like Bandura’s phobics, to take a bigger leap—to touch the snake. And we soon discovered the benefits. Today, the OpenIDEO community includes about 30,000 people from 170 countries. They may never meet in person, but together they’ve already made a difference on dozens of initiatives—from helping revitalize cities in economic decline to prototyping ultrasound services for expectant mothers in Colombia. We’ve learned that no matter what group you’re in or where you work, there are always more ideas outside than inside.

FOR PEOPLE with backgrounds as diverse as those of Akshay, Ankit, John, and Bonny, fear—of the messy unknown, of judgment, of taking the first step, or of letting go—could have blocked the path to innovation. But instead, they worked to overcome their fears, rediscovered their creative confidence, and made a difference. As Hungarian essayist György Konrád once said, “Courage is only the accumulation of small steps.” So don’t wait at the starting line. Let go of your fears and begin practicing creative confidence today. ♥

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 **Tom Kelley** is the general manager of IDEO and the author of *The Ten Faces of Innovation* (Currency/Doubleday, 2005). He is an executive fellow at UC Berkeley’s Haas School of Business and at the University of Tokyo. **David Kelley** is the founder and chairman of IDEO and the founder of the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford, where he is the Donald W. Whittier Professor in Mechanical Engineering.