Reclaim Your Creative Confidence

How to get over the fears that block your best ideas by Tom Kelley and David Kelley
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 frompredictable sources; contradictory 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 Stanford business school professor Jim Patell. They eventually realized that they couldn’t complete their group project—to research 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 to six hours without an external power 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.”

**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.

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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 kindergartner 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 through our adult lives, often constraining our judgment, but it stays with us through our adult lives, often constraining our dreams 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. 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 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
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