

CREATIVITY

# How to Be Creative on Demand

by [Joseph Grenny](#)

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Creativity is *learnable* providence. It feels like an inexplicable miracle when it arrives, and we may never be able to isolate all the variables that generate it. But, in my experience, we *can* reliably create the conditions to invite it.

Twenty years ago, I was involved in a terrifyingly inspiring project, working with some of Kenya's poorest citizens in one of Nairobi's most blighted areas. Our goal was to generate self-help strategies that would enable this group to climb a few rungs up the economic ladder. The audacity of this effort hit me in the middle of a flight from Brussels to Nairobi. I had fallen asleep briefly just long enough to become immersed in a nightmare. I dreamed I had somehow become the president of Kenya, and this filled

me with overwhelming despair. When an announcement about approaching turbulence jarred me into consciousness I've never been happier. But the dream had hammered home the weight of the task I was heading toward. I was to lead a two-day meeting with hundreds of people for whom the stakes could not be higher. We had a clear goal but no concrete plan. I knew the work was worth pursuing, but I had never done what we were trying to do and felt inadequate to the task. I hoped and prayed that worthwhile ideas would come. And they did. The trip was successful in ways that exceeded my competence. This was a welcome surprise, but one I had done my best to make happen.

Here are some of the ways I've learned to be more predictably creative.

**Frame the problem, then step back.** Like a grain of sand in an oyster, cognitive irritation stimulates creativity. When you give yourself a compelling, complex, unsolved problem — and make sure to clearly, concisely, and vividly articulate it — your brain becomes irritated. For months before my trip to Nairobi, I carried around a pad of paper on which I had handwritten the following statement: “How, with no outside resources, will we create 300 middle class jobs for the people in our group?” The problem turned in my mind. One way to further amp up the cognitive irritation, is by slogging through a first, unsatisfying round of generating solutions. This effort is more about priming the pump than solving the problem. Then, walk away for a bit, and allow the unconscious work — that which draws from a fuller complement of mental resources, experiences, and creative connections — to begin.

**Obey your curiosity.** Steve Jobs claimed that “creativity is just connecting things.” I agree. If you want to be more creative, you need to have more things to connect. The best way to build a rich mental database that will help you solve problems later is to honor passing curiosities. If something tickles your brain, spend a moment with it. Follow paths that have no obvious purpose other than to satisfy a whim. It could be an article or a conference session that intrigues you; a book that you inexplicably notice; a person to whom you are introduced. It's tempting to let these opportunities pass, but you do so at your creative peril. They become the Lego bricks, tinker toys, and pipe

cleaners from which your creative masterpieces emerge. My Kenyan experience was the product of scores of conversations, books, lunches, and papers that seemed to have little immediate value. But I invested in them anyway — and it paid off.

**Keep a shoebox.** Next, find a way to collect and organize your experiences. For example, when I read, I fanatically highlight. I then go back and re-read the highlighted passages. And then I cut and paste the best of them into a document so I can easily find them later. This three-step process (highlight, review, organize) increases the likelihood that I retain the information and, eventually, am able to conjure fertile connections between all the tidbits. During that same transcontinental flight, I think somewhere over Egypt, a memory of a book on large group decision-making that I had read five years earlier tickled its way to my consciousness. I had not thought of the book since, but I had highlighted, re-read, and tagged it at the time, so I opened my laptop and reviewed key ideas that would inform the agenda our group used to leap forward in coming days.

**Do things that don't interest you.** Early in my career, Will Marre, the founding president of Stephen Covey's training company, admonished me to subscribe to a handful of business journals he listed, then added, "And every time you read one, be sure to read at least one article that holds no interest for you." I've been rewarded time and again for doing so. Many things that end of up in my shoebox have come from conference workshops, articles, or online videos that began as a chore and ended with an insight. My work in Kenya, for example, was heavily influenced by a *Christian Science Monitor* article I had forced myself to read 10 years earlier. Sometimes, we call things "boring" simply because they lie outside the box we are currently in.

**Invite uncomfortable conversations.** Another great creative stimulus is to regularly engage in conversations with people from whom you might normally recoil. Three of the more unexpectedly fruitful conversations of my life were with a racist cabby in London, a drug dealer seatmate on a plane, and an extremist political advocate in Puerto Rico. While I didn't change teams as a result of these conversations, I gained valuable perspectives from lives I will never live. This discipline helped me find the psychological flexibility I needed in Kenya. At times, a member of our group engaged in

the graft so common to their experience. I needed to find a balance between empathy and accountability. Long practice in grappling with others' realities helped me approach the situation with determination rather than disgust.

**Stop and work when it hits.** I can tell when something is coalescing inside of me. At an unexpected time, I will feel a rush of clarity. The final discipline of inviting creativity is to honor these moments by *writing*. If I interrupt whatever is happening at the time to transcribe and organize my thought flow, I accelerate the development of ideas. If I ignore those moments — or try to kick them down the road — I find them impossible to re-conjure. I lose the emerging clarity and slow the process. A couple of hours from Nairobi, I felt a rush of ideas. I was exhausted and drowsy, but I recognized the first symptom of inspiration for what it was. Before the plane landed, I had a powerful opening speech written as though it had been dictated. I simultaneously envisioned the two-day group process that helped the group coalesce around a detailed and hopeful strategy.

Over the next two years, I helped my 300 co-conspirators form a worker-owned cooperative. From their meager but collective efforts, they assembled enough capital to begin an enterprise that employed many of them. These experiences contributed to the founding of a non-profit that has, to date, helped tens of millions around the world to improve their economic circumstances.

Creativity may always be part mystery. But we can all practice disciplines that invite its beneficent arrival.



Joseph Grenny is a four-time *New York Times* bestselling author, keynote speaker, and leading social scientist for business performance. His work has been translated into 28 languages, is available in 36 countries, and has generated results for 300 of the Fortune 500. He is the cofounder of VitalSmarts, an innovator in corporate training and leadership development.

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Wendy Glavin 3 months ago

Great read and I completely agree! Creativity, like anything, takes practice. It's being aware of everything around us including, reading, attending events, being open to new experiences and different viewpoints. Like Dr. Carol Dweck says, it's about our mindset. If we choose to embrace a growth mindset we'll continue to learn and are more likely to be successful.

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