

Throw Away the Box: How to Spark Brilliance in Yourself and Innovation in Your Company

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Companies only have two competitive advantages: their people and innovation. And people are the ones who come up with innovative ways to do things. Without that push to evolve, a firm may cease to exist.

Companies such as Google, Apple, Zappos, and Cisco invest a lot of time and energy on two things: making sure that their people are engaged and excited about what they are doing and creating an atmosphere of innovation.

How do they do this? First, they pay attention to employees' needs and tell them how much they appreciate what they do. Managers walk around and get to know employees and their passions, likes, dislikes, and motivations.

Second, they create a climate where innovation is rewarded and there are no bad ideas. They don't negate new ideas. They embrace everything as a possibility and discuss the options. They are not afraid of failure. They foster an environment where people can come together formally and informally to share ideas and thoughts on how business is done and how to make it better. Employees are taught to silence their inner critic and managers are taught to say "yes" and "thank you" instead of "no, but" or "we tried that before and it didn't work." To be clear, "Yes, and ..." doesn't mean agreeing with everything. "Yes, and ..." creates a healthy dialogue and meaningful discussions.

For example, an engineering company tried to come up with ideas for creating more fun and engagement at work. In the



group exercise, everyone's ideas were responded to with "yes, but ..." to raise awareness about old, limiting habits. Then, the group switched the exercise to "yes, and..." responses. The positive suggestions built upon each other until the group came up with a way to foster innovation in the company by gathering for 20 minutes per day to "play." For those 20 minutes, employees could do anything they wanted to do as long as it wasn't their day-to-day job (e.g., they could tackle a bigger issue or work on a new way of doing something).

As construction folks, they were taught to find every way that something would not work, which effectively was shutting down their creativity and innovation. With the 20-minute play rule, they had the opportunity to come up with completely new ways of looking at things.

Framework for Innovation

What is the atmosphere at your company? Is it open to new ideas and innovation? Thinking differently is essential to surviving in this economy. Early designers of flying machines used movable wings because it emulated a bird in flight, but it wasn't until the paradigm was shifted with fixed wing aircraft that manned flight became possible. Artificial hearts emulate a real heart with chambers and a flow of blood that causes a heartbeat, but the latest innovation in that arena is an artificial heart with a simple pump that continuously flows the blood through the body. There is no heartbeat.

These paradigm shifts led to efficient and simple solutions, but it took someone to look at the way things were being done and say, "what if..."

Companies are starting to wake up to this fact about innovation. What if they started hiring MFAs (masters of fine arts) instead of MBAs? Would these creative people give companies the competitive edge they need?

What is your expertise? What are your employees' talents? How can you leverage that in a business setting to create new revenue streams? Don't think about how you've always done business. Think about what value you and your people bring and see if that is applicable in other areas. Get a group discussion going and brainstorm this concept. You never know where it will lead.

Some people resist embracing creativity and innovation because they think there are no rules, boundaries, or processes involved. But there are some great methodologies out there that serve as frameworks for innovation. One of them is from [Stanford's Institute of Design](#). This five-step process is amazing for design and problem-solving.

1. **Empathize:** Ask end users a lot of questions and find out the needs and criteria for the solution. Put yourself in their shoes. What is the perfect desired outcome?
2. **Clearly define the problem:** Einstein said if he had one hour to solve a problem, he would spend 55 minutes defining the problem. By clearly defining the problem, the solution becomes more apparent. NASA asked: "How do we get a pen to write in space?" They spent a lot of money coming up with a space pen that could write in zero gravity. The Russians defined the problem differently. They asked: "How

can we write in space?" The answer was simple: Use a pencil.

3. **Ideate:** Brainstorm and come up with as many solutions as possible.
4. **Prototype:** Actually build one of the solutions.
5. **Test:** Check to see if it works. If not, go back and create another prototype or go back even further to ideation.

A Note on Adaptability

Darwin's "survival of the fittest" quote is usually taken out of context. By "fittest," he didn't mean the strongest. He meant the one who could adapt. Those are the ones who survive.

The movie "Moneyball" is a great reminder of this concept. Billy Beane, the general manager of the Oakland Athletics, wanted to change the game of baseball by abandoning the traditional scouting process and using statistical analyses to find the "right" players who could attain the correct number of runs and wins to earn a playoff slot. It worked quite well. The Athletics won 20 games in a row, setting a new baseball record. Although the Athletics never won a championship, they consistently had good teams even though their budget was 40 percent smaller than some other big league teams' budgets. The ROI on this approach is undeniable.

15 Ways to Spark Corporate Creativity

So, how do we think differently about the construction business? Many of the following concepts are a bit outrageous. But many of them also are not new; they come from companies that do these things already. Perhaps there are ways to adapt these ideas to the construction industry and your business.

1. **Start each meeting with an innovation exercise.** There are thousands on the internet. Example: This is a pen. Hold up a pen and say, "this is a pen". The next person takes the pen and says, this isn't a pen, this is a _____ and makes something up. It can be anything. The next person takes the pen and says, this isn't a (the second person's idea), this is a _____. Keep it going for as long as you come up with interesting ideas. You can also make it practical. Ask about current company or project issues. This is a great way to brainstorm.

2. **Innovation roundtables.** Create diverse innovation roundtables that meet periodically. Use “Yes, and ...” and brainstorm. Ask the question: Why are we still doing this? How can we do it better? Is there a technological solution?
3. **Play at least 20 minutes per day.** For 20 minutes every day, make it a rule that everyone must play. Have games at the office and on the project. Let your brain take a break and just have fun. You will be amazed at what this creates.
4. **Create a physical environment for innovation.** Incorporate a lot of colors and textures things that excite your brain. Have common areas for collaboration and play areas to have fun.
5. **Reward Innovation and take more risks.** The risk-averse nature of the construction industry stifles creativity and innovation. Reward innovation, cultivate it, and revel in it. Don't condemn ideas that didn't work; just move on to the next one. Edison found 999 ways that a light bulb didn't work before he came up with one that did.
6. **Add quiet rooms.** Create a room to listen to music, have quiet time, or take a power nap. There have been dozens of studies showing spikes in productivity with this type of setup.
7. **Make every employee do anything other than work for one hour a day.** It can be anything from surfing the web to rollerblading. This gives them some downtime and clears their head for thinking in innovative ways. Employees will be more creative, less stressed, and more satisfied.
8. **Let employees bring pets or children to work.** This decreases stress and can increase employees' time at work.
9. **Create a results-oriented work environment.** Let employees set their own work hours and self-direct what they want to work on. Management can set work goals, but not tell employees how or when they need to be done. Depending on the position and the project, there are many days where employees could work from anywhere.
10. **Collaborate with each other (industry-wide, even competitors) on best practices for marketing, purchasing, procurement, and delivery.** Help each other and share the rewards. Come from a place of abundance where there is enough work for everyone.
11. **Give employees as much time off as possible during the workweek and for vacation without checking in.** This is vital

for your employees to recharge their health and well-being, as well as their longevity.

12. **Spread love inside and outside of the company.** Work doesn't always have to be serious.
13. **Re-brand the company and fill it with spirit.** Most contractors' and engineers' brand says trustworthy, reliable, stable, ethical, and probably a list of other very nice words. But these words are a bit stuffy. Look at most commercials on television for a variety of products and services. All of them are filled with positive emotions: Coke: Open Happiness. Love: It's what makes a Subaru a Subaru. Harley Davidson doesn't sell motorcycles—they sell freedom and independence. Construction has really missed the boat. The company that figures out how to brand itself with fun, love, humor, innovation, and creativity will rise above the competition.
14. **The High Five Gauntlet.** When someone has a great idea, set up a gauntlet in the office or on the project and have the person with the idea “run the gauntlet”. They will run between two rows of people giving high fives to both sides.
15. **Standing Ovation.** Whenever someone comes up with an idea or creative solution at any time (during a meeting, at lunch, etc) get in the habit of giving that person a standing ovation. Everyone can get in on this celebration and you can expand the reason for the ovation such as good news, a great win, a safety or other project milestone, a birthday, or an anniversary.

As a bonus idea, what if you came up with a completely new way of delivering construction services? What if you used a [GoFundMe](#) model as a way to finance a building? What if you built projects for free and received a percentage of the rents for the next 20 years and made 10 times what you would have made with the traditional model? What if you became more of a service contractor that took care of clients from cradle to grave? You could help with the initial design, financing, and building, as well as maintain the building throughout its life. That is a continuous revenue stream instead of a pay-for-services model. Companies like IBM, AT&T, and HP are adopting this model. They no longer sell products; they create a relationship for life.

Owners are starved for this type of approach to building. It may seem like it's all about low price, but there is a backlash

to the low bid mentality. The only ones making money are the lawyers. And according to Herb Kelleher, CEO of Southwest Airlines, “spirit” and intangibles are much harder for the competition to replicate.

These ideas may seem ridiculous. It may seem impossible to do any of these in the construction business, especially on projects. But the bottom line is that the companies that actually implement these kinds of radical changes and find new ways of working will dominate the industry. It may not be the ideas listed above; new strategies would have to be adapted and changed to fit company culture and industry standards. But the firms that continue to limp along with concepts that are hundreds or thousands of years old are doomed.

20 Ways to Enhance Your Personal Creativity

And what about you as an individual? How do you get your own creative juices flowing?

- 1. Become more of an observer.** Observe people, situations, and places. Become more aware. If you have low emotional self-awareness, it will improve with this focus. **Quick Exercise:** Without looking, describe your phone home page and any other pages. What are the colors, icons, arrangements, etc? How did you do? How many times a day do you look at your phone? But do you really observe and truly see?
- 2. Become more aware of your environment.** When you start to observe more, you will start to notice your surroundings in a different way. Try this exercise. Point at various things in the room and name them out loud. Example: chair, table, desk, computer, monitor, etc. Now point at various things in the room (they can be the same objects) and name the last thing that you pointed at. Example: point at chair, then point at table and say “chair”, point at desk and say “table”, point at computer and say “desk”, point at monitor and say “computer”. Now point at all of the things in the room (it can be the same objects) and name them ANYTHING you want to name them. Do this and then read the debrief.
Debrief: Did you have “rules” with your pointing and naming the objects ANYTHING? Most people say no. Did

you have the rule that you couldn’t name it what it really was? Did you have the rule that you name it a category like fruits or animals? Did you have the rule that you had to be clever and innovative when naming? Did you have the rule that you had to be really good at this? So maybe you did have some rules. The first point is that this exercise creates more awareness. Your brain knows what a chair is, so it doesn’t process that information. But when you point and name something else, your brain is forced to process that information. It creates a hyper awareness. You have awakened the brain from its sleep. Look around the room and see if there are things that you didn’t notice when we first started this exercise. The second point is that we all have these rules and limiting beliefs. Don’t automatically put things in categories or make rules. Be wide open to anything. If you want to do a final test, point and name things in the room and truly make it stream of consciousness. Truly name the items the first thing that pops into your head and be open and relaxed. It’s harder than it sounds.

- 3. Build in reflection time every day.** There are hundreds of stories about “eureka” moments in the shower or sitting under a tree. This allows your brain to process and make connections.
- 4. Get out of your routines.** Drive a different way to work, towel off from the shower differently, dress with a different order, use your opposite hand all day, or tie your shoes differently (don’t use your thumbs). Do anything to get your brain out of a subconscious fog.
- 5. Expand your knowledge.** Know a little bit about a lot of different things. Creativity comes out of the merging of different ideas. The more ideas floating around in your brain, the more possibility for connections and creative thought.
- 6. Play like a kid.** Play. Make mistakes. Be silly. Dance. Pretend. Make stuff up. Be with kids.
- 7. Disconnect from the world.** I encourage everyone to completely disconnect from the world: no television, no email, no phones, and no tablets. And something miraculous happens around the third day. Everyone starts freeing their brain and getting amazing insights and thoughts. Try it!
- 8. Get a little crazy.** Do something weird, yell at the top of your lungs or talk in a strange voice.

9. Do something outside your comfort zone. Join a dance class, acting class, or improv class. Learn something new like chess or rock climbing or computer code writing.

10. Know that everyone is creative. Creativity is like a muscle; it can be developed. When you look at the typical profile for most construction partners, they score high in reality testing (black and white thinkers) and problem solving and low in flexibility. This is not an ideal profile for creativity, but the good news is people can change.

11. Accept that more heads are better than one. Bounce ideas off others. Brainstorm in diverse groups without any censorship. Different perspectives can generate amazing creativity.

12. Start writing things down. Make lists. When you get an idea, capture it. Keep writing, even after you have exhausted all possibilities.

13. Reframe the problem. Create an unusual solution and then ask yourself, “Why is this a great solution?”

14. Use a ridiculous correlation. Randomly put your finger in a book, look for the nearest noun and ask yourself, “How is this problem like a [fill in the blank]?” Brainstorm in this manner will help give you some perspective on the problem.

15. Don't say “no” or “yes, but...” or “I tried that before and it didn't work.” Say “yes, and...” to build on the ideas generated.

16. Use Your Subconscious. Plant a problem in your brain before bed and see what your subconscious comes up with the next morning. Think of a problem you are struggling with, then take a walk in nature and DON'T think about the problem. When you return, see what your subconscious comes up with.

17. Know you are truly unique. Your brain is the only brain that thinks like you do. Celebrate that and promote that and know that you can break through anything. Lack of experience can be an asset. Sometimes a master can't see past how he's always done it.

18. Get physical. While you are thinking, do a physical activity such as walking, stomping, shaking, dancing, or running. It will help your brain work better.

19. Ask the right questions. Instead of asking “paper or plastic?” ask “how would you like to carry your groceries home?” A

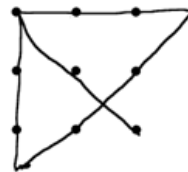
canvas bag might be the “right” answer. Try this exercise: Download the nine dots. Connect the nine dots by drawing only four straight lines. Now look at the solution.

20. Improvisation Drive. When driving, look for roads, bridges, overpasses, and highways named after people. Take that person's name and make up a story about them. You can do it collaboratively or alone.

A famous creativity experiment asks people to connect nine dots using four straight lines without lifting the pencil from the paper. Try it and see what you come up with. Don't look below for the answer!




Here is the “answer”. This is where the saying “thinking outside the box” comes from.



But what if you took a different approach to this problem? What if you asked, How many ways can you connect these nine dots with as few lines as possible? When you ask that question, you get all kinds of creative solutions, such as:

- » one big fat line;
- » one line that circles the earth three times and connects each row of dots;
- » one line, where the paper is folded and the dots are all stacked on top of each other; and
- » three lines, where the dots are fat and the lines form a “z.”

By asking a different question and expanding those limits, the number of ideas and potential solutions expand as well.

The next time you are faced with a dilemma, the next time you want to develop a strategic plan, the next time you are stuck, and the next time you want to try to do things differently, spark the genius in yourself and cultivate creativity in your company by creating an atmosphere of innovation. 



About the Author

Brent Darnell, the owner of [Brent Darnell International](#), has been teaching critical people skills and emotional intelligence to the AEC industry since 2000. Brent is a third generation construction professional. He graduated with a mechanical engineering degree from Georgia Tech and spent 18 years managing projects, such as the Brooke Army Medical Center and housing for athletes in the Olympic Village in Atlanta. In 2012 he was awarded Engineering News Record's top 25 newsmaker's award. His programs, books, and online courses, including [CMAA's Leadership Library](#), are helping to transform the industry.

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