

“Making Ideas Happen”
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Far from being some stroke of creative genius, this capacity to make ideas happen can be developed by anyone. You just need to modify your organizational habits, engage a broader community, and develop your leadership capability. ...success is dependent on developing and executing new ideas. In the modern world of information overload and constant connectivity, you must manage your energy wisely. The Action Method helps those of us with creative tendencies live and work with a bias toward action. With an understanding of this methodology, we will delve deeply into prioritization, managing your energy and attention, and fully executing your ideas. During my years in Pine Street, I realized that the creative world desperately needed cutting-edge information on productivity and leadership development.

We never ask typical questions such as “What inspires you?” or “Where do your ideas come from?” On the contrary, we focus less on the creativity and more on how these people stay productive and consistently execute their ideas. While many of us spend too much energy searching for the next great idea, my research shows that we would be better served by developing the capacity to make ideas happen—a capacity that endures over time. The ideas that move industries forward are not the result of tremendous creative insight but rather of masterful stewardship. Yes, there is a method to the madness of turning an idea into a reality—it’s just not as romantic as you thought. It is a tragic truth that most new ideas, despite their quality and importance, will never see the light of day. Chad checked his e-mail “every week or so.”

Production executives and Chad’s close friends said the same thing: Chad is tough to get in touch with and is extremely disorganized. He is unable to stay on top of his ideas, some of which have the potential to fit into various projects. Chad created a paper-based system that displayed the Action Steps for his most important projects in plain sight. He stopped living his life at the mercy of Post-it notes and trying to keep up with e-mail. Instead, he adopted a set of principles and even a few rituals that made him focus on the actionable aspects of his most important projects without abandoning his creative process.

Making Ideas Happen = (The Idea + Organization and Execution + Forces of Community + Leadership Capability

Organization and execution. The way you organize projects, prioritize, and manage your energy is arguably more important than the quality of the ideas you wish to pursue. ...your productivity is really about how well you are able to make an impact in what matters most to you. ...it is at the intersection of creative energy and organizational prowess where great ideas become actions and ultimately revolutionary achievements. My freedom will be so much the greater and more meaningful the more narrowly I limit my field of action... Organization is the guiding force of productivity: if you want to make an idea happen, you need to have the process for doing so.

The most important, and most often neglected, organizational element is structure. We tend to shun structure as a way of protecting the free-flowing nature of ideas. But without structure, our ideas fail to build upon one another. Structure helps us achieve a tangible outcome from our ideas. Organization is just as important as ideas when it comes to making an impact. Someone with average creativity but stellar organizational skills will make a greater impact than the disorganized creative geniuses among us.

A surplus of ideas is as dangerous as a drought. Brainstorming should start with a question and the goal of capturing something specific... ...ideas are made to happen only as the result of a well-managed work flow. For each idea, you must capture and highlight your “Action Steps.” Action Steps, References, and Backburner Items. Action Steps are the specific, concrete tasks that inch you forward; References are any project-related handouts, sketches, notes, meeting minutes, manuals, Finally, there are Backburner Items—things that are not actionable now but may be someday. These Action Steps are always in plain view. They catch your eye every time you glance at the project folder.

And, as you review all of your project folders every day, what you’re really doing is just glancing over all of the pending Action Steps. We call it the “Action Method” because it helps us live and work with a bias toward action. The Action Method starts by considering everything around you with a project lens and then breaking it down. Action Steps are the building blocks of accomplishment. ...the key realization should be that everything in life is a project, and every project must be broken down into Action Steps, References, and Backburner Items. It’s that simple. Greenberg reserves time every day to process the day’s Action Steps and schedule. ...a methodology is only effective when it is practiced consistently. Whatever medium you choose to use for capturing Action Steps, it should always be readily available. Every Action Step must be owned by a single person. However, even when the onus to complete an Action Step has been delegated to someone else, the Action Step must still be owned—and tracked—by the person ultimately responsible. “Ensure Action Steps.” “Ensure that Dave updated the article with the new title.” “Awaiting,” “Awaiting confirmation from Joe at Apple re: consultation,

“Some of the most productive teams I have observed are comfortable making sure that others are capturing Action Steps. ...some teams take a few minutes at the end of every meeting to go around the table and allow each person to recite the Action Steps that he or she captured. ...the design of your productivity tools will affect how eager you are to use them. ...most often, great ideas that are not yet actionable are quickly forgotten. The more energy you spend on scribbling down notes, the more liable you are to miss the opportunity to capture valuable Action Steps. Try to see each project as a collection of the three elements: Action Steps, Backburner Items, and References. Have you ever found yourself rereading e-mails repeatedly, trying to distill the action steps.

Your Action Steps become hidden within the e-mails and then gradually buried by other e-mails. For this reason, Action Steps should have a space (or system) of their own. But observing the most productive people reveals that Action Steps are Action Steps, regardless of their context. Priorities may change, but managing everything actionable in one system is your best bet.

Regardless of your method for managing Action Steps, it is vital that you (and your project partners) never accept an Action Step unless it is clear and able to be executed. Reactionary work flow prevents you from being more proactive with your energy. Time spent processing is arguably the most valuable and productive time of your day.

Given the unyielding flow of communications, you will want to capture and manage your Action Steps separately. Whatever method you choose, it is critical that your Action Steps stand out and can be managed separately from all of the other stuff. ...all teams should discuss and debate how their energy is allocated. Energy is a finite resource that is seldom managed well. "Our value for clarity overcomes the risk and fear of speaking up when something doesn't make sense." Some people narrow their list of important items to just five specific things. To achieve long-term goals in the age of always-on technology and free-flowing communication, create windows of time dedicated to uninterrupted project focus. ...the level of interruption increases in direct proportion to one's level of availability. Although it is part of the creative's essence to constantly generate new ideas, our addition to new ideas is also what often cuts our journeys short. Constant motion is the key to execution. You need to say "no" more than you say "yes," and you need to build a team and culture that helps kill ideas when necessary. ...some of the greatest ideas and solutions come up in meetings, we often fail to connect these ideas to a tangible set of next steps.

The most productive teams plan meetings sparingly. ...leaving a meeting without anything actionable signifies that the meeting was just an information exchange and should have taken place over e-mail. ...meetings that lack both an objective *and* an actionable outcome should never happen. Godin believes that the source of obstacles to shipping is the "lizard brain." "All chickens and lizards have is a lizard brain," "It is hungry, it is scared, it is selfish, and it is horny. That's its job, and that's all it does. It turns out that we have one too." But the primal tendencies of the lizard brain to keep us safe by avoiding danger and risk are still potent. "...every single time we get close to shipping, every single time the manuscript is ready to send to the publisher, the lizard brain speaks up. The lizard brain says, 'They're gonna laugh at me,' 'I'm gonna get in trouble...'"

And so, what happens is we don't do it. We sabotage it. We hold back. We have another meeting." The lizard brain interferes with execution by amplifying our fears and conjuring up excuses to play it safe. Suddenly the responsibilities of our full-time jobs or our personal lives will support our lizard brain's call for retreat. What creative people need, Godin believes, "is a quieter lizard brain." A big part of execution is persistence. ...to keep moving our ideas forward, we need to relentlessly follow up with others. Jesse Rothstein, an energetic and charismatic sales representative at Procter & Gamble... What Rothstein has is perseverance and a simple conviction that he adheres to with an almost religious fervor: he follows up like crazy. "I'm starting to believe that life is just about following up,"

Rothstein's brilliance lies with the fact that he always identifies the necessary actions for each project and then takes them (and enforces them) relentlessly. He always follows up until every action is done. While each person's system is personalized, the mechanics of how productively creative people work are fairly consistent. Brilliant creative minds become more focused and actionable when the realm of possibilities is defined and, to some extent, restricted. Despite your natural tendency to thrive on untethered creativity, you must recognize and harness constraints.

While we must remain open to change, we must also ensure that changes are introduced at the right time and for the right reasons. Change can get us offtrack very easily. Feeling progress is an important part of execution. When you make incremental progress, celebrate it and feature it. Surround yourself with it.

On a frigid day in February 2009, I visited John Maeda, the newly minted president of the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), to find out how the leader of one of America's premier design schools organized his efforts. Sworn in just months before in September 2008, Maeda was already making waves in the academic world, both for his nontraditional background and his bold management strategies. While most visitors to the IDEO campus are struck by the creative nature of the space, I was intrigued by the physical dominance of actionable items and sketches on the walls in each project room.

One team member, Jocelyn Wyatt, noticed my intrigue and explained, "We thrive off of being surrounded by what needs to get done." You live in a world of choices. At any moment in time, you must decide what to focus on and how to use your time. ...organizing life into a series of projects, managing those projects with a bias toward action, and always moving the ball forward are critical for execution. Structuring time spent executing ideas is a best practice of admired creative leaders across industries. As you glimpse these well-known writers' routines, you get a sense of the important role structure plays in creative pursuits.

When we are conducting research or trying to focus on our Action Steps, we should sequester ourselves to smaller, more confined environments. But, when brainstorming or beginning a creative project, we should try to work in a more open space. Develop an awareness of your tendencies in varying conditions, and use this knowledge to better manage your energy as you make progress on projects. Insecurity Work is a trap that plagues many creative leaders. Your constant need for assurance becomes a shackle on your productivity. Frank is a Dreamer—a member of one of the three broad categories of creatives we've consistently found in our research: the Dreamers, the Doers, and the polymaths who we call the Incrementalists. Some of the most successful Dreamers we have met attribute their success to a partnership with a Doer.

An idea can only become a reality once it is broken down into organized, actionable elements. The Incrementalists—those with the ability to play the role of both Dreamer and Doer. Understanding the tendencies of Doers, Dreamers, and Incrementalists is the first step to establishing lasting partnerships and collaborations. Doers and Dreamers fit well together. They are seldom threatened by each other because of their very different strengths.

Roger Bennett. Bennett has founded a variety of culturally potent works with the sole purpose of strengthening a sense of Jewish identity in young people. For every project, Bennett finds himself a partner. Partnerships are so important to him that he doesn't pursue an idea until he identifies the right partner. Bennett knows his weaknesses and strengths and is always on the lookout for others with similar interests but different skill sets. Over the years, I have observed perpetual Dreamers who only "made it" once they hired a real Doer... *Wired* magazine's editor in chief, Christ Anderson,... "I don't believe you can do anything by yourself," Anderson explains.

"Any project that's run by a single person is basically destined to fail. If one of my projects can't attract a team, I pretty much figure that there's something wrong with it."

The ideas of requesting a few feedback points for each participant under the headings START, STOP, and CONTINUE. Regardless of where you are in your career—and what stage your ideas are in—you should not only accept feedback, you should seek it out. Managers, coworkers, and clients have a responsibility to share feedback, and you should encourage them to do so. “Diversity of opinions and circumstances increases the likelihood of ‘happy accidents.’...” Diversity of expertise sparks new ways of looking at old problems.

Brier wholeheartedly believes that people can visit you—and come to respect you—only if you put yourself out there in an authentic way. People choose to follow you and your work because they respect you or something you have done. There is no question that the creative mind has narcissistic tendencies. While helpful in developing ideas that challenge the status quo, these tendencies also limit our ability to connect with others. Leaders of any creative endeavor should focus first on the things that *only they* can do—things that simply couldn’t be delegated to others. As the founder or originator of a creative pursuit, you may find yourself acting and thinking as the sole owner despite the presence of your team. But if you fail to share ownership, you’ll also fail to get those around you to care. You need to engage your team as owners by sharing credit, sharing responsibility, and sharing financial rewards. There is a great void of leadership in the creative world. Creative projects run amok and teams break down all the time as a result of misaligned incentives, poor team chemistry, and inconsistent management. As we seek to effectively lead others, we must become more effective leaders of ourselves.

How we spend our energy is greatly influenced by the short-term reward systems that permeate our lives. To push our ideas to fruition—time and time again—we must find ways to overpower our basic tendencies and nearsighted motivations. You can become aware of what really motivates you and then tweak your incentives to sustain your long-term pursuits. As you push ideas forward, you should make use of alternative rewards that keep you—and your team—engaged with your long-term pursuits. As you cultivate a productive work environment, you must strike a balance between flexibility and expectations, idea generation and execution, and help disagreements and consensus. As you build a high-performing creative team, you will want to look beyond technical skills and develop a chemistry that will transform ideas into remarkable accomplishments. Rather than focusing exclusively on an individual’s experience, truly effective managers instead measure a prospective employee’s ability to take initiative.

As we now know, simply being interested in new ideas is not sufficient. Those who consistently take initiative possess tenacity and a healthy degree of impatience with idleness. ...Jon Ellenthal, the president of Walker Digital, the unique R&D intellectual property firm behind such innovations as Priceline.com and a number of other successful patented inventions. Ellenthal and his team pride themselves on hiring Initiators rather than superstars. “I always try to hire people with a high level of intrinsic motivation,” Ellenthal explains. “I don’t want to spend my time trying to get people to do something. Ideas never get made unless everyone makes it their business to do so.”

I would trade experience for initiative and the raw desire to do stuff in a heartbeat.” When you stumble across an Initiator—someone who has passion, generates ideas, and tends to take action—recognize your good fortune. Nothing will assist your ideas more than a team of people who possess real initiative. Just as you should build a team of Initiators, you should also foster a chemistry of complementary expertise. As leaders, we must create rules and norms for the sake of efficiency rather than as a result of mistrust.

We should measure tangible outputs like actions taken and quality of outcomes. Best Buy, IBM, Sun Microsystems, and other major firms have implemented programs like ROWE (Results Only Work Environment), which measures performance based on output rather than *sit-put*. This means that bosses stop watching employee calendars and paying attention to when people arrive and leave the office. ...people thrive when their judgment and autonomy are respected. ROWE and other attempts at hands-off management fail miserably when objectives and goals are not mutually agreed upon and tightly managed.

When leaders lack confidence in their team's preparedness and commitment, they compensate through increased control. Admired leaders of creative projects are able to provide flexibility for their teams by keeping a close eye on the team's chemistry and ensuring that the priorities are clear to everyone.

While our natural tendency may be to not hire, engage with, or empower those with an inclination to poke holes in our ideas, these people are in fact essential to a productive creative environment. The great challenge is to balance idea generation and relentless focus. Finding the right balance requires allocating time for open idea exchange along with a healthy level of intolerance of idea generation during execution. Despite the frustration that friction causes, it will serve you in the long run if you are able to manage it. If good chemistry has been cultivated, teams can use disagreement to foster valuable insights that would otherwise be inaccessible. A leader's role is to keep people engaged in the debate and ruthlessly attack apathy. Your team is more likely to conceive breakthroughs if its chemistry is strong enough to capitalize on conflict. ...consensus-driven teams run the risk of settling on what offends no one and satisfies no one. In many creative teams, especially in the creative agency world, I observed an "input by many, decisions by few" strategy.

Anderson gauges the worth of an idea on whether or not anyone else is enthusiastic about owning it. Getting people excited about your idea, however, is just the first phase of sharing ownership. The second and much more challenging part is empowering team members to push the idea forward rather than micromanaging them every step of the way. The best creative leaders are able to recognize that the cost of variation from their original vision is often outweighed by the benefits of shared ownership and the scalability that it provides. You want your collaborators to stay up at night thinking about how to execute the ideas at hand—in their own way. ...Peter Rojas. Originally the editorial director of the technology blog Gizmodo, Rojas went on to cofound the hugely popular tech/gadget site Engadget and become the chief strategy officer for Weblogs, Inc. In 2007, Rojas cofounded RCRD LBL, a forward-thinking online record label and blog, which became profitable after just fourteen months. Engadget would have never functioned properly if I was that hands-on...My approach is to hire people that I trust and let them do their thing.

And if I don't trust them, I'll get someone else." As long as the desired outcome is achieved, controlling how it is achieved shouldn't be that important to you. Instead of overshadowing their ideas with your own brilliant insights, silence yourself and welcome fresh, though sometimes naïve, insights. Challenge yourself to ask questions before making statements. "Leadership," Steffen would often say, "is most effective through the art of storytelling." Some of the greatest barriers we face along the path to pushing our ideas to fruition lie within us. As you lead others in creative pursuits, you are your greatest liability. Self-leadership is about awareness, tolerance, and not letting your own natural tendencies limit your potential.

Self-awareness is a critical skill in leadership, but it is deeply personal. It is not about our actions but about the emotions that trigger our actions. “Society teaches us to suppress emotions,” Lee explains. “But, to effectively lead, you must understand and hone them.” We must use time to our advantage and temper our tendency to act too quickly. The best leaders have a high tolerance for ambiguity. They don’t go nuts over the unknown, and they don’t lose patience when dealing with disappointments. As British author A. A. Milne once said, “Good judgment comes from experience, and experience—well, that comes from poor judgment.”

I have come to call this propensity “visionary’s narcissism”—it is a leader’s default thinking that he or she is the exception to the rule. Not only can we get carried away with the uniqueness of a particular problem or opportunity, we crave firsts and love to do things differently. Don’t get so caught up in the novelty of what you are doing that you lose touch with what’s been done before.

All conventional wisdom and “best practices” should be taken with a grain of salt and built upon as we aspire to “better practices.” What matters most is your ability to keep moving and pushing your ideas forward, yard by yard. Deviants are maverick-like, willing to be unpopular, misunderstood, and even shunned during creative pursuits. The vision of extraordinary achievements is, by definition, a few steps beyond consensus and conventional logic. Society celebrates the outcome of what society shuns. Creative achievement is simply the logical outcome of doing something different and seeing it through to completion. Nothing extraordinary is ever achieved through ordinary means. You must stay focused on the intrinsic rewards of your work and stay motivated by the means rather than the ends. Regardless of industry, every creator who has successfully made an idea happen has fought and survived a very long war.