

6. Your brain needs sticky notes

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Innovation, and the art of capturing ideas on the fly.



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Creative people in all spheres of life use this simple approach. Whether it is rapper Eminem scribbling lyrics on his palm or Charles Darwin, who chronicled his observations in great detail in journals aboard seafaring ships, ideas-driven people are known for capturing their ideas then and there.

Have you ever had the experience of a brilliant idea intruding upon your shower time? Or nearly smacking you clean off your feet as you run on the treadmill at the gym? Perhaps in the bathtub, as per Archimedes' 'Eureka!' moment? These are among the most common places for people to have brilliant ideas. (I'll leave out the loo, but let you assume that it qualifies, too.)

Next question: have you ever tried to remember your brilliant idea even half an hour later, and not been able to? Or gone to bed with something superb swimming around your mental soup, convinced that you would remember it in the morning, only to awaken frustrated because you knew there was something there, but for the life of you, you couldn't remember what it was?

These experiences are not unique to you. They happen to everyone. They are as common as they are easy to solve: write

your ideas down immediately. Richard Branson also encourages people to record ideas on the fly, a habit he developed early in life. In *The Virgin Way: Everything I know About Leadership*, Branson writes that in the 40-odd years he's been in business, the hundreds of notebooks he's filled have served him well.

I know from my own experience that I can write an idea down while I'm walking through a mall, and then, when I get home 15 minutes later and read the note, it's as though I'm having the thought for the first time. Sometimes I'll even look at it and think, 'Damn, that's clever!', as though it were a brand-new concept sent to me by an independent entity.

I use my smartphone to keep a running list. From time to time, I email the list to my computer and I'm often amused to find that it runs into tens of pages. I would simply never have remembered all the pages of little insights and arbitrary ideas. I don't remember some 15 minutes later, but because I make it a habit to record them, they're all there to be used or abandoned, as I see fit later.

My own list is a mishmash of random thoughts and ideas for career advancement. I've jotted them down as they came to me and I might only do half of them, but I can guarantee that if I hadn't written them down, I would have forgotten all of them.

I spent two months recording ideas for my book on innovation on my phone as they popped into my mind or as I noticed interesting and useful things during the course of the day. When it came to writing the book, I already had so much content that it felt like cheating.

Innovation is characteristically messy. You don't sit down in a boardroom, press the 'on' switch, record three neat ideas, then click 'off' and go about your normal day. If we accept that innovation is messy and happens at random moments, we can accommodate it by capturing it on the fly.

As you read innovation literature, strange and interesting new ideas will occur to you. Write them down. Scribble them over the pages of the book - the author won't be offended. Then, as your subconscious mind puzzles them out later in the day, or at night as your spouse is trying to get some sleep, they will emerge again in fresh and interesting forms. Write them down, then and there. Don't assume they'll last; my experience is that they rarely do.

And how about this one: have you ever had an unformed notion that you've hung onto for years - something you've just kept on simmer at the back of your mind? The history of inventions is replete with such stories - people who had an odd notion at some point and then just let it bubble through their minds for years, sometimes even decades, before finding a useful application for it.

If you have a pet-project idea swimming around in the murky depths of your subconscious, let it swim. Keep feeding it from time to time. Make notes and record your thoughts. Some day, it may enter the realms of the adjacent possible. Some day, it just may be an idea whose time has come.

Start a public hunch-board

In *Where Good Ideas Come From*, Steven Johnson proposes the notion of what he calls a public 'hunch-board'. The idea behind this is not just to collect fully formed ideas. Also encourage your team to start collecting and sharing the beginning of somethings - a hunch that perhaps, one day, will lead somewhere, possibly ...

Sharing these hunches openly helps to connect them. One person may have the first half of a thought, but not really know what to do with it. Another says, 'Hey, we could use that for ...' and, suddenly, the hunch is completed and becomes an innovation.

Sharing unformed thinking can be much more powerful than disseminating fully formed idea commands. An idea command issued by management rarely encourages thoughtful interaction. Half-formed hunches, on the other hand, invite speculation, which can lead to entirely new ways forward.

The wrong way to think about it: I'll remember this idea later.

The right way to think about it: I'll relentlessly record all speculative thinking. Then I'll connect the dots later.

ABOUT DOUGLAS KRUGER

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