
Crush the “I’m Not Creative” Barrier

By Hal Gregersen

Did you know that if you think you are creative, you’re more likely to actually be creative? This surprising fact pops up again and again in our research. In our database of over 6,000 professionals who have taken the Innovator’s DNA self & 360 assessments, people (entrepreneurs and managers alike) who “agree” with the survey statement “I am creative” consistently deliver disruptive solutions — by creating new businesses, products, services, and processes that no one has done before. They see themselves as creative and act that way.

But what if you don’t see yourself as creative? Are you actually less creative?

This is an important question to ask because many — probably half — of you don’t think that you’re creative. Around the world we regularly ask groups of 100 to 1,000 managers and executives, “Are you creative?” With clockwork consistency, *at best* half the hands in an audience slowly rise. This is not exactly a scientific sample and methodology, but it’s direct enough data to see that most managers *don’t* define themselves as creative (and for what it’s worth, asking the more socially acceptable “Are you innovative?” question delivers an equally anemic response).

The bad news is that if you don’t think you’re creative, our survey data say that you probably are not. But there is good news: You can actually become more creative by changing your mind-set. Anyone can innovate, *if* they choose to. Disruptive innovators do it by choice, not chance. Their everyday actions swap out an “I’m not creative” mind-set for an “I am creative” one. And then magical (not mystical) things unfold.

The magic materializes as people engage unique innovation skills (what we call their **innovator’s DNA**) on an everyday basis. For example, by asking provocative questions, observing like anthropologists, networking with

people who see the world in 180-degree opposites, and experimenting with intensity, innovators obliterate the “I’m not creative” brain barrier and, more often than not, break out from the pack.

Stepan Pachikov, founder of Evernote (personal software that retrieves any kind of information whenever you need it), leveraged his innovator’s DNA to put together a product with one of the most loyal followings around. From start to finish, Pachikov was obsessed with a single question: “What kind of database will help me remember things?” He took this simple question and did something with it, not only for himself but for millions of others. He observed first-hand how people actually try to remember things. He talked to a host of folks taking different angles on the problem of memory (finding what you want when you want it). He rapidly **prototyped** the software to make it work.

The result? A product that changes lives by enabling forgetful people to remember things they never could before. Yes, it does change lives. Whenever we mention Evernote to audiences, at least 20% of the Evernote users in the group affirm with real emotion that it really has changed their lives. By leveraging his personal portfolio of innovation skills, Pachikov collaborated with colleagues at Evernote, including CEO Phil Liblin, to build a hit product that makes a powerful, positive impact.

If you think your innovation efforts might be blocked by an “I’m not creative” brain barrier, take this fast, five-question diagnostic test (pulled from our 60-item assessment, which captures the innovator’s DNA skills in far more depth), or pass it along to someone who seems stuck in a creative rut. Do you agree with the following statements? A simple yes or no works fine for each one.

Associational thinking: I creatively solve challenging problems by drawing on diverse ideas or knowledge.

Questioning: I often ask questions that challenge others’ fundamental assumptions.

Observing: I get innovative ideas by directly observing how people interact with products and services.

Idea Networking: I regularly talk with a diverse set of people (e.g., from different functions, industries, geographies) to find and refine new business

ideas.

Experimenting: I frequently experiment to create new ways of doing things.

If you answered no to three or more questions, then you're probably bumping into the "I'm not creative" barrier.

Becoming more creative requires acting more creative — on a daily basis — to conquer the most vexing problems you face, personally or professionally. It sounds deceptively simple, but acting and thinking differently actually makes us different. You must hunt for things to change. You must spend time at it — a lot more time. The problem is if you don't *think* you can, you won't. Remember that old saying: "Whether you think you can or think you can't, either way you're probably right." As we come to define ourselves as creative, we change our behaviors and we can actually become more creative. Doing this is key to keeping a creative edge, or for getting it back.

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