

If you aren't willing to ask ***what if...***
Then you will always be left with ***what is.***

Preface

Let us begin...

“If there are no new ideas, there is no innovation. And if there is no creativity, there are no new ideas.” -Max McKeown *‘The Innovation Book’*

I would like you to stop just for a minute, slow down your thoughts and clear a bit of space in your mind. Gently allow the pace of your life to slow down and feel your mind begin to clear and open. This is a chance to reflect, a moment in time, to look back and take stock of your journey and your ability to create ideas. And how those ideas have influenced your journey and taken you to this point in time.

Big ideas. Little ideas. Wild ideas. Crazy ideas. Outlandish ideas. Imaginative Ideas. Good ideas. Bad ideas.

As you reflect back, try and estimate how many ideas you think you’ve had over the span of time that encompasses your life. Hundreds? Thousands? Millions? More? Now try to scale it down just a bit and try to determine how many you think you have an hour? A day? A year? Hundreds? Thousands? Millions? More? Let’s take this even just a bit further. How many of those ideas did you actually act upon? How many were forgotten almost as quickly as they appeared? A lot? A few? None?

It's difficult to fathom...the amount of ideas that skitter across our mind on any given day, let alone a month, a year, or even a lifetime. In the hustle and bustle of our everyday life we have a tendency to lose sight of just how important these ideas actually are. We take them for granted. We just assume that we will have more. We assume that we will have a never-ending supply of them.

Maybe, just maybe we don't give them the time and consideration they deserve. Sometimes we do our ideas a disservice when we don't value their potential and worth. Especially, when history has taught us is that just one of those ideas can change your life exponentially. Just one idea can change how our organizations work and operate. Just one idea can change the lives of millions of people. Just one idea can change the world.

But yet, we still have a tendency to take them for granted, to fail to see their full value.

You may be asking yourself, why is there such importance and focus placed on our ideas? Like you said, we all have them. The answer is: Because our world has changed and is changing, at far faster rates than ever before. Because we are facing issues and problems we have never faced before. Because we are now beginning to see new and shifting requirements and expectations for those entering the workforce. Because we are expecting our students to leave our schools college and career ready, as our higher education institutions and career opportunities are in flux from the current pace and turbulence of change in society. Because if we don't have ideas to help us to solve the current and coming problems we are facing and will continue to face, our future will be bleak at best.

Because ideas are the fuel and lifeblood of the creativity and innovation needed to carry us forward...

We have a world that is crying out for more creative and innovative thinking to deal with the problems we are facing. A world that is clamoring for more creative and innovative

problem-solvers to wrestle with the issues that are streaming at us in wave after wave. Clamoring for those individuals and teams that can put on a new lens and approach these problems and issues from a variety of perspectives and angles. A world that is looking for more creative and innovative thinkers, and doers.

Which is where my *why* began.

A why that began with questions. Questions we all have to ask ourselves. Especially if we are going to begin to ready ourselves for this chaotic, turbulent and uncertain future we face. We have to ask ourselves, if new and novel ideas are needed and creative and innovative problem-solvers are necessary...

Why then, have we seen a steady decline in creativity, from the classroom to the boardroom, since 1990?

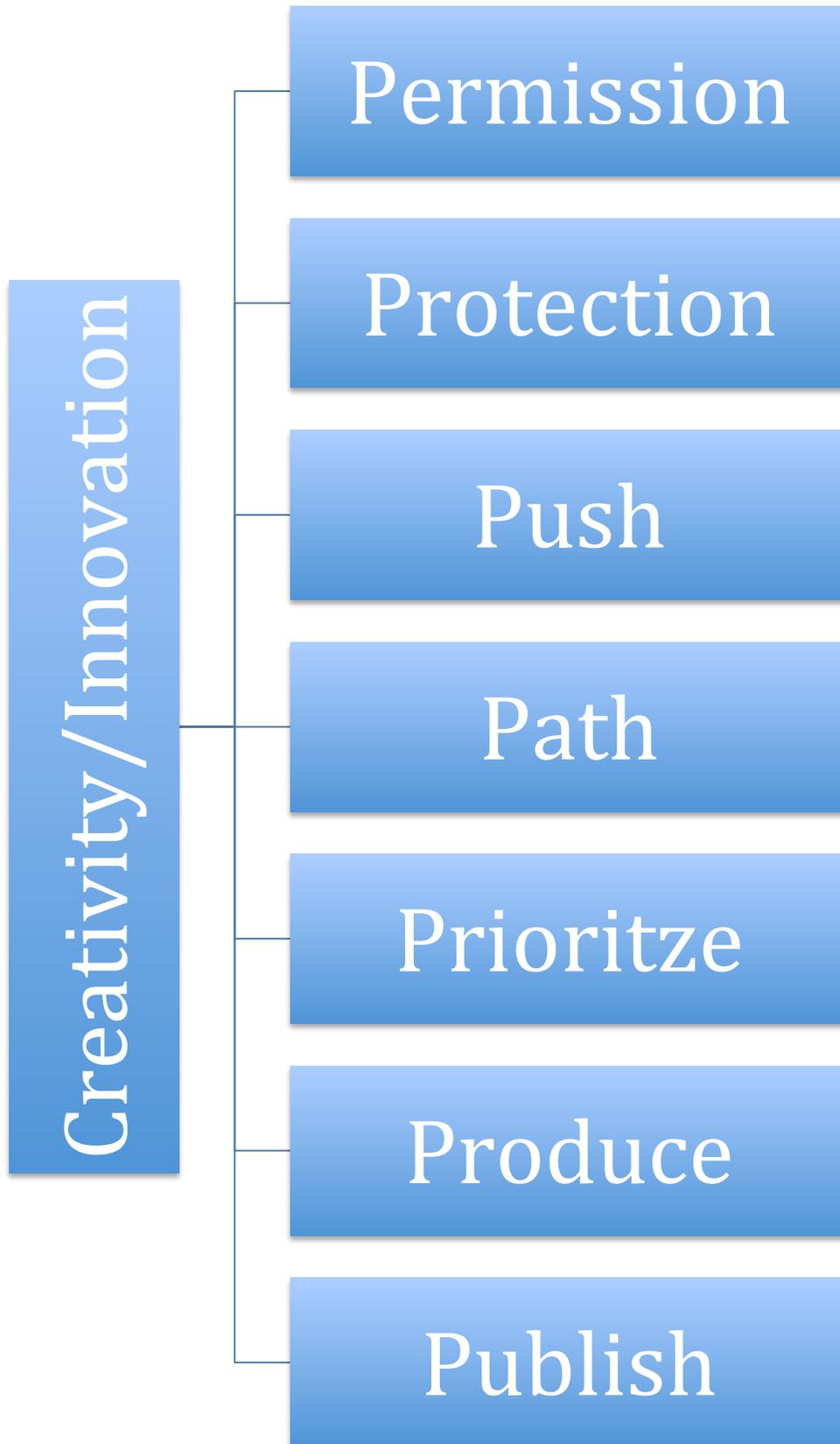
Why do our educational institutions struggle to engage, let alone keep up with the pace of innovation in society?

Why do we struggle to create communities of learners and learning where diverse perspectives and ideas can be considered and shared?

If creativity and innovation are the rally cry of higher education and the CEO's of the business world, then we have to determine what creativity and innovation is? We have to determine what it looks like? What it sounds like? And how we are going to begin to engage it in our schools. Especially if we are truly going to send out students ready to function proficiently and positively in this new change world.

There are no easy answers to these questions. There are no silver-bullets or one-size fits all formulas that you can implement that will ensure creativity and innovation will flourish in your classroom, your school or district. However, there are processes that you can incorporate that will exponentially improve your ability to scale creativity and

innovation. Processes that build up and upon each other, to improve the odds of engaging and scaling creativity and innovation at all levels. Which are covered in each chapter, as shown in the illustration below.



For me, this has been much more about a journey, than a destination. And while these (six + one) processes are not a formula, they do provide direction to guide us on the journey. Never forget, as we move through these processes, it will be our questions, our conversations, our willingness to experiment, to engage in discovery, trial and error learning, and to face set backs and failures while remaining persistent and resilient that will help push our efforts to a tipping point...to begin to bring creativity and innovation to scale.

As we go through these chapters, you will find that I often use creativity and innovation in unison. And while there is a significant difference between the two, they have a tendency to work in tandem. You can even think of it in trifecta terms, creativity leads to the ideas that take us to the innovation.

Creativity is considering or conceiving of a change, it is the ideation process. Innovation is introducing and accepting the change. It is turning that ideation process into action, and eventually adoption.

May the ideas presented within, provoke new and novel ideas that allow you to determine your own individual, team, school and district path to greater levels of creativity and innovation...and not because it is needed, but because it is necessary.

Permission

Just start...

“Innovation is scary. After all, no one knows what the outcome will be. How do you persuade people to take the leap and trust that this is the way to go? -David Kelley ‘TED’

Permission is an interesting word. We often see it as a submissive term. We think back to our childhood and when, at home and school, permission was such a vital part of our vocabulary and life. Permission was needed to go to a friend’s house, to go out and play, to sharpen your pencil, and even to go to the bathroom. As children, we always talked about how great it would be when we were all grown-up so that we would no longer need permission to do things and go places. We would be free. And yet...

What we find is that permission really truly never goes away or escapes us. Permission continues to pervade our personal and professional lives as we grow up. We look for permission from our leaders and bosses. We look for permission from our spouse, family and friends. The full independence and freedom from permission is never what we thought it would be. What we thought would go away, never seems to entirely disappear.

So, the question is why would permission be important for scaling creativity and innovation in education?

Accountability and standardization have all but obliterated and wiped *permission* off of the educational landscape and map. Scripted curriculums, rigid pacing guides, high-stakes tests, and value-added evaluation systems have done little to embolden teachers or administrators to engage more creativity and innovation across our campuses. In fact, it has been quite the opposite.

If we are going to heighten the creative and innovative thinking in our classrooms, schools and districts, we are going to have to grant permission:

- **Permission to experiment and engage trial and error discovery learning.**
- **Permission to take chances, at the risk of failure, to further student and adult learning in our classrooms, schools and districts.**
- **Permission to look at learning and school in new, novel and exciting ways that extend learning across the entire community.**
- **Permission to engage ideas and thinking that open up possibilities, rather than present obstacles.**

Permission opens the door to possibilities.

Which is why it will be vital in any effort to heighten the level of creativity and innovation. Especially, when we change our perspective on the word itself. The interesting thing is when you look up the definition of permission, it is not really a submissive term at all. That is just the lens we have placed upon it from our years and experiences. Take a look. See how a Google search defines permission...

per-mis-sion: consent; authorization

synonyms: authority, authorization, sanction, license, assent, approval, endorsement

What we've traditionally considered to be submissive in nature, is really quite powerful in presentation. Permission provides consent, authority, even endorsement. Not submissive words in the least.

Permission provides the consent and authority to engage the ideas and creative and innovative thinking that has often lain dormant and unexplored for far too long.

Understand, most of us have been brought up to work in institutions, organizations and systems that have long been entrenched with command and control leaders and deep-rooted top-down hierarchies. Cultures and environments that will struggle to adapt and change quickly. Which will require today's creative catalysts and innovative leaders to look for win-win, rather than win-lose situations.

Awhile back, many of us were called into a meeting to discuss the implementation of a new initiative and how we should go about getting the ball rolling as quickly and efficiently as possible. It was obvious the leader had an idea of how he wanted to march forward, but it was apparent he needed input from the team if this was going to be implemented effectively. Since we were sitting as a group, he asked that each of us in turn share out how they thought we could achieve the goals of the initiative. He said he needed the best thinking of the whole group. And while the group was quite large, we were stopped before even two members were able to share their thinking. The leader told us he had "*heard enough*" and "*knew where this was going.*" That was a pivotal moment and a lesson that we should heed as we try to bring more creativity and innovation into our work. People want to be heard. People want to share their ideas and thinking. And when we create environments where people's ideas and thinking are not valued, they will no longer see the value in sharing their thinking and ideas. Permission is about value...and valuing what and how each individual brings, adds and supports the learning community.

It will require bridging the gap between 'old' world and 'new' world ways of thinking.

For this to happen, we have to find a way to move our people, institutions and systems from dated command and control, top-down hierarchies towards more autonomous,

creative and innovative environments and cultures. And the first step in building this bridge can begin with *permission*.

Permission essentially serves as a freedom ‘*to try*’ card. Permission has the capacity to wipe away the fear of failure and judgment, as well as the insecurity that accompanies the uncertainty of the unknown, which will often plague our willingness to engage any type of risk.

The significant and noteworthy concept to consider is that *permission* pushes us forward on that first step towards scaling more creative and innovative people, classrooms, schools and districts.

Unfortunately, very seldom, if at all, do we find leaders who provide the permission or space to take risk, experiment, or engage in any type of discovery, trial-and-error learning. All of which is not just needed, but necessary if we are to scale up our organizations to be more creative and innovative. Too often, our current accountability systems have made our educational institutions risk-averse. We have to create the space and environment for people to feel safe (which is very different from comfortable), to take chances and know that punishment, condemnation and judgment are not waiting for them on the other side.

Permission provides the authority and license to try, to engage the new.

If we are ever going to get to more creative and innovative classrooms, schools and districts...permission will be needed and necessary tool for moving forward. We have to infuse our people and our cultures with the license to be more curious, more inquisitive, and even more imaginative. We have to create opportunities for divergent discussions and thinking to occur, shielded from the critical voices that can and will diminish and decimate those processes in the future.

In a society that has seen a diminishing downslide of creative and innovative thinking and abilities over the last twenty years, permission gives people the ‘license’ and ‘authority’ to revive, what for many, has laid dormant since their early years in elementary school. That creative and innovative force that resides in each one of us.

However, before we move forward, let’s understand that the goal is not to make permission an ongoing part of the creative and innovative process. Rather, the goal of permission is to start us on the path, to instill a sense of ‘authority’ and ‘license’ to try, to engage a bit of autonomy into the equation. Permission is, in effect, a call to action.

The overarching goal is that this initial invitation of permission serves to empower those in the organization to be more creative, more innovative, and commit towards a willingness to engage in more experimental, trial and error, discovery learning. Permission to build the capacity and momentum to pull ourselves and our educational organizations out of the ruts of comfort that have entrenched us in implementation for far too long.

Permission is not just about people, it is about creating an environment, a culture, that influence our habits, our thinking, and our ways of doing. It is about creating capacity. Permission not only provides the ‘authority’ and ‘license’ to try, it invokes feelings of trust and a sense of confidence.

Permission provides the foundation for the path. Built on bricks of trust. Cemented together by our commitments and shared goals.

Our vision, our mission, our commitments and our shared goals provide the parameters and constraints that allow our creative and innovative thinking to best serve our work, our people, and our schools and districts. For in the end, creativity and innovation are all about value, creating and adding value to the life and work of our people. Which can be lost in translation, if we don’t have clarity in our communication towards permission. Otherwise, permission can become a wild frenzy to try anything and everything that fits

your fancy. Which will ultimately have a negative impact on our students, teachers, classrooms, schools and districts.

Creativity and innovation must remain focused on value. And while creativity and innovation are neither predictable nor linear, it should still be anchored in the goals and commitments of the organization. Otherwise, value is often missed and we find ourselves trying to be more creative and innovative for the sake of just being creative and innovative. And value is lost, often in chaos and confusion.

When you have an organization that has deep understanding of their goals and commitments, when permission is provided, when autonomy is granted, you will have set a foundation for more creative and innovative endeavors and work to be initiated, at all levels of the system.

Ponder

An organization's goals and commitments serve as necessary constraints to push and shape the direction of the creative and innovative work of those within. While we may think that total freedom is the best route to more creativity and innovation, constraints are necessary and needed 'guardrails' to both guide and push back against.

Too often, permission without constraints, allows creativity and innovation to stall and stagnate.

Constraints are created to not only make sure that creativity and innovation are geared towards creating value, they are created as the impetus for push back towards initiating positive conflict. Constraints are not meant to be rigid and inflexible, but to serve as conversational 'guardrails' to spur and push forward more creative and innovative thinking. Constraints are meant to initially confine, and then expand. Push in and flex out. We often find that our creative and innovative thinking hits its peak when we have obstacles to overcome.

A great way to approach constraints can be initiated through a strategy called 'skin in the game' ...and it works great with permission. Too often we see permission as an open invitation, especially in our meetings. So to engage the creative and innovative thinking of our people, we ask open-ended questions, such as "What do you think?" Or, "What should we do?" And then become frustrated when those questions are met with crickets and mumbles.

Which is why 'skin in the game' is so important to initiating the conversations and thinking. Most people don't engage, even when asked in meetings, because they have no 'skin in the game', meaning they have nothing to lose, or gain. You have to pose questions or scenarios that make people have 'skin in the game', or something to lose or gain. Instead of posing a "What do you think?" question, begin with "What if we..." or

“Let’s try...” are just a few starters that initiate some type of change. And whenever any type of change is involved, we become much more interested in the outcome, in where the conversation is going.

‘Skin in the game’ constraints are like red flags that alert people that if I don’t speak up, I have something to lose, here. Just remember, these constraints are to initiate the conversation, not hold people to set mandates. ‘Skin in the game’ constraints are focused on enhancing and inducing more divergent thinking and ideas of your people. Give it a try the next time your, “What do you think?” is met with crickets.

Actions to Initiate

- **Over the next month, create at least one opportunity to provide individuals or learning teams with the permission to engage their curiosity, to explore and discover, to experiment, to take a risk, to push out beyond their current comfort level.**

One way to approach this is by moving the idea of the Google 80/20 or genius hour to the adults in your school or district. We are exploring this as the Creativity and Innovation hour for teachers. The goal is to give your teachers the time, space and opportunity to explore a passion that will lead to more creativity and innovation in their classroom. The goal is to get people started, to make discovery and trial and error learning a habit. To consider technology, tools and strategies that they have been too busy, tired, or scared to engage in to improve their professional learning and practice.

- **In order to flush out the creative and innovative thinking and ideas of your people, determine a constraint to impose in your next meeting that will not only induce push-back, but encourage positive conflict and divergent thinking.**

One of the easiest and best places to create 'skin in the game' and engage the creative and innovative thinking of your people and teams is around resources. Creativity and innovation are all about overcoming obstacles and seeing new perspectives and angles to solving difficult problems and issues. Resources always cause a visceral reaction in our schools, because resources are often limited at best. Think of a limited resource that is a struggle in your school or district, and pose a question or solution that invite push-back and new ideas and thinking. You might find that you have found a variety of ways or methods to overcome an obstacle that has been holding you back.

- **Our greatest learning often springs from our stories. Spend time collecting stories to share that highlight how and when our creative and innovative thinking and ideas did not lead to positive results. Focus on how those missteps, miscues and flat-out failures led to learning. And how that learning enhanced the overall capacity and resiliency of the individuals and the organization.**

Questions to Consider

Scaling up creativity and innovation in a team, an institution, or an organization is not an all or nothing proposition. It is a process...and not a quick or easy one at that. It takes time, trust, intentionality, dedicated effort and willingness. Providing deliberate opportunities and permission, not only piques our imagination and curiosity, it begins to awaken our often dormant and diminished creative nature. Permission gets us started on the path...

- **How are we providing permission to scale up the creative and innovative thinking and doing?**
- **How are we aligning permission to our goals and commitments as teams, schools and districts?**

- **Where is one area we can start to provide permission that will help to engage the creative and innovative nature of our people and teams?**
- **What tools, technologies, environments and spaces can we intentionally provide permission towards that will engage the creative and innovative spirit of our teachers, administrators, teams, schools and districts?**
- **Where are we limiting and diminishing the creative and innovative thinking and work in teachers, administrators, classrooms, schools and districts?
What strategies can we employ to overcome these obstacles we have created?**

Protection

Don't be so quick...

“Originality is fragile. And in its first moments, it’s often far from pretty.” -Ed Catmull *‘Creativity, Inc.’*

In most educational (schools and districts) cultures and environments, we have this natural disposition for protecting the old, much more than embracing the ‘new’. We have an innate tendency to push back against the ‘new’, not because it is new, but because it is unfamiliar, unknown and untested. We have this predisposition to choose the known, even when that known is neither positive nor conducive to progress. Which is why we will need not only pioneers to encourage the ‘new’, but those protectors who give the ‘new’ a chance and opportunity to determine its worth, before deciding its fate.

Otherwise, the ‘new’ is vulnerable and susceptible to being overwhelmed and overcome by the power and strength of the status quo from its very inception...

A lesson that creative catalysts and innovative pioneers must internalize and comprehend deeply, if they are to have the ability and insight to move their people, teams, schools, and districts towards more creative and innovative ways of thinking and doing. Especially, if they aim to establish more creative and innovative school environments and district cultures. They must be cognizant and very aware that...

The status quo will fight and push back every step of the way.

Every classroom, school and district has their own unique and individual culture. Most, littered with a plethora of current and remnants of past practices and protocols that influence its people and their work on a daily basis. Ingrained attitudes, dispositions and mindsets that can overwhelm and undercut any type of change effort or initiative.

New ideas, new ways of thinking, and new ways of doing disrupt these processes and protocols. Disturbing the system. Disturbing the comfort and equilibrium that the status quo has established. Disruption and disturbance that raise red flags and set off alarms and warning bells across the landscape of our educational systems.

Many creative and innovative thinkers and leaders have a much more romantic vision of the *'new'*, than most people. They are quicker to see the possibilities of the *'new'* and willingly embrace the change that it will initiate. A vision of the *'new'* that is very different from reality that they will have to face. It is this tendency to romanticize the *'new'* that is often at odds with the reality of implementing it. What most creative and innovative thinkers and leaders fail to realize is that we like the sound and the idea of the *'new'* much more than the reality of it. The *'new'* is a great concept to consider, until we come face to face with the disorderly nature that it extolls upon our individuals, teams, schools, districts, and educational organizations.

The *'new'* is disruptive. The *'new'* disturbs. The *'new'* requires change. The *'new'* is not easy.

And though we love to sing it's praises, when the rubber hits the road, we struggle to embrace the *'new'* and all the ambiguity, uncertainty, turbulence and chaos that can and will arrive with it.

Which is why most new ideas and new ways of thinking are cut down immediately. Quickly and effectively removed and erased. The *'new'* has a tendency to evoke a torrent

of critical voices. Creative and innovative thinkers and leaders must be aware of this phenomena and become much more comfortable wearing two hats during the idea gathering process.

Consider the difficulties teachers, schools and districts face when they try and initiate change and the ‘new’. Think about the push-back schools and districts face, internally and externally, when they move to change policies on; homework, awards, grading, curriculum, assessments and testing, technology, social media, and a variety of other shifts.

The pioneer and the protector.

We need not only pioneers encouraging the ‘*new*’ but protectors of the ‘*new*’ in our teams, our schools and our districts. And especially in our meetings where those discussions and conversations take place. Those who can and will give new ideas and new ways of thinking the space necessary to percolate, incubate and gain their wobbly legs. It is only then - with a sufficient amount of time - that we can determine if an idea will have the legs necessary to garner consensus enough from the learning community to have the strength to cross the finish line. It is not enough to just determine if an idea is new, novel, creative, innovative, rather we must be able to determine whether or not it provides the necessary and needed value to and for the people, schools and districts it has been created to serve.

If we constantly spend our limited time and energy focused on criticizing and cutting down the ‘*new*’ we will face a declining effort towards creative and innovative thinking and ideas in our people, teams, schools, and districts. Not because creative and innovative ideas no longer exist or have run out, but rather, because people will no longer be willing or eager to share their ideas and thinking. People will learn to keep their ideas and thinking to themselves.

Which is why, protecting ideas is important, but not enough in the scheme of things. We have to protect our people and environments, as well. We have to protect those spaces where the ‘new’ can have room to evolve. Which requires us to build up environments and cultures infused with trust and empathy, where fear, judgment and condemnation have effectively been filtered out. Environments where divergent thinking, positive conflict and creative and innovative ideas and thinking are not only encouraged, but embraced.

However, before we get ahead of ourselves, don’t misinterpret protecting the ‘new’ as holding too tightly to our ideas. While we have to create the environment and culture where the ‘new’ has an opportunity to exist, in some ways, we have to take a more impersonal approach to the ideas we share in these environments. Too often, we have this propensity to hold on to our ideas too tightly, too close to the chest. We have to be willing to set our ideas free and allow them to stand on their own. When we hold our ideas too close, too tightly, we take it personal when others want to grow, change or move away from the idea entirely.

We need to create trusting and open environments where we make it less about ‘whose’ idea, and more about the ‘best’ idea.

Which is why divergent and convergent thinking are not just necessary, but critical.

And for that process to be authentic, to have real worth, there needs to be a strong foundation of trust, openness and honesty. First, it is necessary if we are to get people willing to share their thinking and their ideas (*divergent*). Second, it is necessary so that people are willing to let go of their ideas in order to whittle down those ideas to the ones worth acting upon (*convergent*). To those ideas that have real opportunity to add value and create change that people will accept and adopt. When done right, it can be exhilarating. When done wrong, it can lead to stagnant and dysfunctional environments and cultures.

Let's be clear, protection is not about shielding our ideas from questions, scrutiny, examination, and even dismissal. Ideas ultimately need to be discussed, explored, debated, contended, adjusted, reformed, transformed, sifted, and filtered to determine if they are worth pursuing, if they are worth acting upon.

Just not immediately, just not as soon as they are conceived and birthed.

Constant negative and critical feedback can and will dampen and diminish the creative and innovative spirit of your people. It happens to children in classrooms, and it happens to adults in our schools and districts. Ideas are like babies when they are first birthed, they need people to look out for them, protect them, nurture and raise them, before putting them out their on their own.

Creative and innovative thinkers and leaders often have to serve as surrogate parents for ideas, knowing when they need to be supported, when they need to be nurtured, protected, fed, loved...and when they need to be nudged out of the nest to stand on their own.

Actions to Initiate

Too often we spend our precious time protecting the old, at the expense of the ‘new’. We have a tendency to view the ‘new’ as an intruder breaking in on the old...so we find ways to protect the old from this intruder. Which often shows itself through the quickness of our critical and negative voices.

Too often, especially in education, the ‘new’ is defeated in our meetings. When the ‘new’ is introduced it can bring on a wave of ferocity from the defenders of the status quo. A wave that can be overwhelming, especially to one leading the meeting. A tremendous wave that can and will overcome and buckle you at the knees, sweeping you away before you know what happened or hit you. I know, it has happened to me many times, in many settings. Leaving the status quo sitting, confident with arms crossed, smug smiles, and an air of arrogance emanating.

Today’s creative and innovative leaders need to approach their meetings and collaborations ready and prepared for the status quo push-back. Allowing space for positive conflict to occur, between the ‘new’ and the status quo. It is not about getting on one side or the other, but finding ideas that provide the highest level of value and outcome for your staff, school and district. When you approach it from that perspective, you keep yourself and the meeting from becoming overwhelmed.

Instead of treating the ‘new’ as a chance for positive change and growth, we shelter the old from it. The problem is that the old will always oppose the ‘new’. Inability to protect the ‘new’ from the power and will of the status quo will ultimately diminish our attempts to scale creativity and innovation.

- **Whether as a leader or a participant, become more observant in your meetings to how well your teachers, administrators, and teams approach new ideas and thinking. Watch and reflect upon how new ideas are presented, how they are treated, and how the people in the meetings react to the process.**

- **In those same meetings, monitor and observe how people respond to new ideas; are they open, closed-off, positive, or critical. Take some time to reflect on these observations to determine if current processes are initiating and instigating or stifling and stagnating the creative and innovative thinking and work of those in your school and district.**
- **At the end of this observation process, determine at least one action you could initiate to gain more acceptance and openness towards the ‘new’ in your team, school or district.**

Questions to Consider

In the end, it will be our questions, more than our answers that will engage us deeper learning and stoke our engines of curiosity and imagination. Here are few to consider as we look to enhance creativity and innovation in our teams, schools and districts.

- **Are we allowing the power and strength of the status quo (old) to chase away the ‘new’ in our ideas and thinking?**
- **How are we creating spaces, environments and cultures where new ideas and thinking are not only encouraged, but receive the necessary and needed room to grow and flourish?**
- **How are you making it safe for people to share their ideas and thinking without fear of judgment and or condemnation from colleagues and leadership?**
- **How are you balancing the necessity of and for wearing the two hats; (1) the pioneer and (2) the protector?**

Push

You must make room...

“As people push back on your idea, it can be a good indication that you’re entering uncharted, potentially important territory...” -Warren Berger *‘A More Beautiful Question’*

In a recent parent conference, my son’s third grade teacher discussed how their class was working on a project in which they were required to build, create and sustain a community. For this project, each child had petitioned for and was assigned a unique role, for which my son had been given the position of community leader. One of the first tasks of the team was to determine how to get electricity to the community. As the community leader, my son had to gather all of the ideas from the (team) people in the community to determine how they would go about solving this problem.

In the conference, his teacher shared how my son came to her to say, *“This is incredibly hard.”* *“Everyone has their own idea and they want it to be THE idea.”*

How often does this happen in our own teams, schools and districts? We are all pushing for OUR idea to be the ONE idea. We are naturally inclined to feel and believe that our idea is the best idea. And we hold on tightly to that perspective. Unfortunately, what we

fail to grasp, is that no idea comes out fully developed and ready to roll. While some ideas are better than others, they all have rough edges to smooth out.

In all actuality, ideas need an opportunity to mix with other ideas. Ideas need to push up against other ideas, providing the potential for remixes, and possibly the opportunity to grow them into bigger and better ideas. Sometimes they need to be blended and baked into something greater. The problem we face is that we are so busy pushing for our own ideas to make the cut that we fail to see the promise in the process. Too often, intellectual pride, poor collegial relationships, and adversarial leadership inhibit and prevent our idea mix and remixes. We refuse to allow our ideas to intermingle because we see our own ideas as wholes, as complete. Instead of parts that can be enhanced and improved.

Too often we fail to see the beauty in the variety and diversity of thinking that surrounds us. We fail to embrace and utilize it to allow for far better thinking and ideas to emerge. In fact, too often, we see leaders stamping out, rather than engaging the diversity of thinking that exists in and around them. Unfortunately, we have this tendency to take an all or nothing approach to our ideas. It is only when we allow our ideas to be played and tinkered with, deconstructed, rearranged, altered, reconstructed and transformed that we actually arrive upon new and novel ideas and more creative and innovative ways of thinking and doing.

However, this will not happen naturally or accidentally...and neither can it be forced.

And while pushing our ideas is essential to scaling creativity and innovation in our teams and schools, it is not enough. While serendipity is important and has its place, neither can we count on that as our path for scaling up creativity and innovation.

And yet, neither can we force a formula.

But we can learn to be more intentional in provoking and generating opportunities that engage and require more creative ways of thinking and more innovative ways of operating. Sometimes we have to give people a bit of a push if we are going to get them to jump off the ledge. Just remember though, if you want people to give it more than one try, make sure that the gentle push provided comes attached with a parachute and possibly a safety net.

We will never get to the real work of scaling up creativity and innovation by remaining in our comfortable however, safe environments will be crucial for this journey.

In essence, we are going to have to be intentional in determining opportunities to give people a bit of a nudge into the new. We have to intentionally look for opportunities to push into ambiguity, uncertainty the unfamiliar, and even the unknown. Most often, because we don't want to go their on our own. And in most cases, we won't, unless we feel safe enough to allow ourselves to be nudged and pushed forward.

Which is why we need leaders in today's educational system that are not only creative and innovative, but engaged learners. Learners of their people, as well as new, novel, creative and innovative ideas. Leaders who can match-up those ideas with the passions and interests of those they lead. Leaders and learners who can give those they lead, from the classroom to the boardroom, that positive push. You can't get people to explore Twitter, Blogging, PBL, Genius Hour, Coding, Gaming, or many other creative and innovative ways of engaging new learning, if you don't know what they are, or that they even exist.

Being intentional, equipping people with that parachute, emboldens us to try new things, to utilize new tools, to investigate new technologies, explore new ways to learn, and discover different ways to connect.

Creative catalysts and innovative pioneers realize that they not only have to stay current in their understanding and knowledge of the tools and technologies that exist, but to constantly push themselves beyond that point, to think around the corner. Past where we are now, to where we are headed.

This is not to suggest that we must be proficient at utilizing all of the tools and technologies that exist. But, having knowledge and understanding of allows us to connect and personalize these tools, technologies and platforms to those that can adopt and benefit from them the best.

Creative catalysts and innovative pioneers understand their limitations and use that knowledge to their advantage, so that they don't become the lid. They recognize that in no way can they have all the answers to the problems that their individuals, teams, schools, and districts must face and solve. However, they also realize that neither can they serve as the lid that limits the thinking and ideas that lead us towards more creative and innovative ways of bringing solutions and resolution to those problems.

Instead, they acquire enough knowledge and understanding to put those tools and technologies in the hands of individuals and teams that can actually benefit and run with them. They create organizational 'runners', and in the process build more and more capacity into the whole of the system.

They push themselves and their learning enough to ensure that they neither inhibit nor diminish the creative and innovative capacity of the organization. Instead, they find ways to lift that lid and allow their people expand, grow, flourish, and run.

This requires creative catalysts and innovative pioneers to push the boundaries and limits of current circumstances. They realize, that if we are always working in the known, there is seldom anything new, novel, original, or innovative in what you are doing or creating. Once permission and protection are in place, we can begin to push the boundaries. We can begin to experiment and explore as individuals, teams and organizations.

And for this to happen, we are going to have to learn to be much more reflective in determining the quantity and quality of the questions we ask...and the answers we accept.

Remember, for far too long, most people have been living under the guise that they are no longer or never were creative, let alone innovative with their ideas or their thinking. And while most won't admit it, deep down inside, they know that their creative and innovative side still exists. It creeps in every once in awhile. And it feels good. When they are making or fixing something, when they are doodling during a long meeting, or find themselves coloring away on the child's menu at their favorite restaurant. They feel at the core of their being. When it is reengaged, it pulses and reverberates inside them.

Take a vacant classroom and turning it into a Maker Lab with items like Legos and old computers to tinker, explore, build with, or even just tear apart. Or using a platform, such as Edmodo for collaborating and sharing ideas, both within and outside your building and district. Setting time aside for Creativity and Innovation Hour for your teachers. Provide an activity to begin each meeting that requires your people to engage in creative and innovative thinking and ideas, such as the 30 circles exercise shared by Tom and David Kelley in 'Creative Confidence'. Build something. Draw something. Engage PBL with the adults in your building with a real world problem that needs to be solved, such as:

- How can we innovate upon our school schedule?
- How can we be creative with the school day?
- How do we become a 'green' school?
- How do create more meaningful meetings?

The job of a creative leader is to feed, fuel and unleash the creative and innovative side of the people on their teams. This requires it intentional opportunities, such as those listed above.

While the creative leader must design opportunities that spark and rekindle that creative and innovative flame inside their people, it will take more. It will take purposeful questions. It will require questions that drive and push us to explore and experiment. Questions that provoke our imagination and rouse our curiosity.

Most leaders have spent their professional career focused on providing solutions, solving problems, and fixing the ailments in our systems. Today's creative leaders are going to have to learn to put on a completely different lens, to approach their work from a much different perspective and mindset. The 19th century factory model mindset (*command and control*) is outdated in its ability to serve our schools and districts effectively in the 21st century (*mastery and motivation*). We need to build the capacity of all our people to face the rate of change and ever-evolving issues and problems that we will face in the future. We need educators who are intrinsically motivated and idea(ly) equipped to move our schools and districts into this new era. We need leaders who can engage those they lead, in a time when more and more people are becoming disengaged (*according to the Gallup Poll 2013, worldwide, only 13% of employees are engaged at work*).

Today's creative leaders are going to have to spend less time providing answers...and more time provoking and engaging with questions.

We will never build the necessary capacity or scale creativity and innovation across our schools and districts by having leaders that believe they are responsible for providing all the answers. We need creative leaders who realize that the growth and capacity of their organization lies less in them, and more in their people. And the only way to get to that growth and capacity, will be through the questions we present, the questions we entertain, and the questions we determine to ask of others, and of ourselves.

The overarching goal is not to just create creative and innovative bright spots. The goal is to cascade it across the entire system, at all levels, whether that is a school or a district. And this will never happen if we are constantly trying to provide our people with the

right answers. It is in our questions, that we will create the push and power to build up the creative and innovative capacity of our people.

It will be through our questions, not our answers...

Through our questions we will begin to reengage our people with their creative and innovative self. Through our questions we will engage our people in their capacity to solve problems and overcome obstacles. Through our questions we will hone and refine our creative and innovative abilities and skill-sets.

To push creativity and innovation forward, to push it to scale, requires creating paths and processes that reengage people around creative and innovative opportunities and ventures. When we rekindle the creative and innovative juices of those in our teams and within our organization, it will be all that we can do to hold it down, let alone find the need to *'force'* it. Our questions can often serve as the spark, initiating and igniting the fire and fanning the flames of more creative and innovative thinking and ideas at all levels of the system, from classroom to the boardroom.

Actions to Initiate

Let's consider a few ways we can begin to *'push'* and nudge creativity and innovation into and across our organizations:

- **Flows and Idea Wells** – if we are going to push forward and disrupt our current level of what we consider to be possible, we will need access to an ongoing flow of ideas and thinking. Too often, we buy into the myth that creativity and innovation falls out of the sky as some *eureka* moment. What we fail to realize, is that these *eureka* a-ha moments are the result of perseverance and hard work. A remix of the many ideas, thoughts and learnings we come across and encounter each day. So instead of waiting for that one original idea to fall from the sky, we need to be connecting around the *'idea well'* on a daily basis. Gathering and feeding the flow of ideas. Remixing and remaking towards more creative and innovative ways of thinking and doing.

Social media and platforms like Twitter are the new virtual water fountain or staff room that we gather around for ideas, discussions, sharing, learning, collaborating. It is our idea well. And it is not just enough to learn from others, we learn as we share and reflect in these spaces. One of the best ways to share and reflect, is through blogging. It is a tremendous method for sharing, connecting and reflecting with a wide variety of educators and thinkers. The goal is to find your place of flow, your 'third space' that provides an ongoing stream of ideas that provide constant and ongoing professional and personal growth.

- **Interior and Exterior** – in the much the same manner that we have our *'idea well'* to draw from, we have realize that this exists both inside and outside of our walls. It is not one or the other, as it is a combination of the two. We have to engage and pull from the creativity that exists within our organization, as

well as being willing to search beyond our walls for ideas and thinking that can and will disrupt our current view of what is...and what can be.

We live in a time when collaboration and communication are not only more readily available, but greatly necessary and needed. We need to continually push our selves, our colleagues, our classrooms, schools and even districts away from the silo mentalities, both internally and externally. We need to work to build our Professional Learning Communities (internally) and our Professional Learning Networks (externally) in ways that support our ongoing learning and help to build our capacity as educators and leaders.

- **Connections and Networks – We’ve had a tendency in our organizations to spend too much time focusing on the parts in isolation. We need to push for a bigger, whole system approach. Especially as we consider the necessity for engaging and sustaining creativity and innovation. We have to begin to think more in terms of networks and connections. The more collaborative our approach, the more opportunities we have to express our own thinking, as well as consider the ideas and thinking others. The more opportunities we have as an organization to dip into the ‘idea well’, the better.**

One way to do this is to begin to view things from an ecosystem, rather than a hierarchical approach. Moving away from top-down or bottom-up approaches, to more collaborative flows that bridge gaps in our schools and districts. Look for ways that connect and network people, rather than engaging in hierarchical charts that silo off and disconnect our conversations, thinking, and ideas of others. This requires creating opportunities, platforms and arenas where ALL voices have an opportunity to be heard. Remember, great leaders understand that great ideas can come from anywhere.

- **Empathy, Value and Self-Worth – to push forward with any type of collaborative community that can sustain creative and innovative ideas and**

thinking, trust must exist. Trust is the foundation that it can and will be built upon. It is not enough to look for value in ideas, we have to make those in our organization feel valued for what they contribute and bring to the table. When people don't feel valued for what they share and contribute, not only will they choose to no longer share their ideas and thinking, we will no longer find that the best ideas even make to the organizational table. Which is why empathy is vital to creating more creative and innovative organizations. Being able to 'see through the eyes of others' creates the environments where people not only feel valued, but see that their contributions have worth.

Much like common sense, empathy is not always common. We sometimes have to intentionally evoke empathy and understanding. One thing we have done is to make empathy a part of our vision. This requires us to spend a little time at each collaborative meeting discussing what empathy is, watching a video that displays some form of empathy, and intentionally making empathy a part of the language of the community. This allows us to build up feelings of trust and value each other for what they add and bring to community.

Questions to Consider

- **Begin by reflecting individually, then monitor in your teams and your organization, on the ratio of questions to answers? Are you answer or question-driven?**
- **How can you create or engage in technologies and platforms that allow individuals, teams and your organization to connect in ways that expands and deepens their 'idea well' and provokes more creative and innovative thinking?**

- **What processes are in place that push for more empathy, as well as make people to feel valued for their ideas, their thinking, and their contributions to the learning of their teams and organization?**

Path

Start a journey...

Discovery learning rarely happens when we continually choose and never veer from the well-worn path.

Growing up, I have to say my two greatest loves were sports and music. I can't even begin to count the hours that I spent practicing guitar, soccer, baseball, hockey or basketball. The thing was, it was never work. I couldn't wait to get out there on the field or pick up a guitar to practice. It was all about improving and getting better, daily. And it was hard work.

But I enjoyed every minute of the journey to getting better.

But it was through that hard work, through that persistence and practice that my creativity as an athlete or musician would begin to unfold and evolve. Unfortunately, we often ride the myth of the 'aha' moment, instead getting down to doing the hard work that is required of creativity and innovation. Hard work, persistence and practice. The 'aha' moment is just that point of realization where all of the hard work, persistence and practice pay off.

Creativity and innovation needs to be a daily endeavor, a habit, a way of doing and thinking, a mindset. Experimenting and discovering ways to not only improve, but to see

your work from new and novel perspectives, whether as a musician, an athlete, educator, entrepreneur, or leader.

The path to more creativity and innovation requires walking that road daily. It requires hard, diligent work...daily. Perspiration leads to the inspiration. Not the other way around.

The interesting thing, especially in education, is that we often see creativity and innovation as an add-on, something we pin on to the work at the end to make it more interesting, or engaging. But when I look back to those years of practice as an athlete or musician...I did not practice and then think, “How can I make what I’ve learned more creative or innovative?” Rather, that creativity and innovative way of thinking, doing, practicing was part of the learning and growing. It wasn’t an add-on, it was woven into the experience itself. We just did not look at it as being creative or innovative. We saw it as part of the learning process to becoming better at that which we were working on. Whether it was crafting a song or creating a better move on the soccer field.

As we move from push to path, we have to look towards making creativity and innovation less of an add-on, and more of an everyday part of how we think, do and operate.

The problem is that we often choose to travel the same well-worn path. We practice what we already know, we work to improve things we are already strong at, and wonder why new insights and ideas allude us.

The best fuel to feed the fires of our creative and innovative core is learning. New learning, learning that stretches us. (Learn how to play an instrument, or how to code, begin to blog, try new recipes, read a book outside of your profession, build something, etc.) What we have to remember is that revving up our creative and innovative core will happen more readily when we take a new path, when we move outside of our strengths

and engage in learning beyond our current comfort zones. When we choose to take a new path.

The problem is that education has not been built for this approach. Rather, it has been created on a 19th century conveyor belt, linear mindset.

Begin here and end there, one straight path to a destination. The problem is...creativity and innovation seldom work in that fashion. They are neither predictable, nor linear. Even though we try to confine it in that manner. It is much more about a journey, than a destination. A process rather than a formula. For us to build a path to more creativity and innovation, we are going to have to have a strong grasp of our goals, deep clarity towards our commitments, and a clear picture of the vision, without defining and determining the path to that destination.

Today's creative catalysts and innovative pioneers are the explorers, the experimenters, the imaginative, the curious, the cross-pollinators...they are the modern-day idea peddlers. They are not just willing to try different, they search out the path that leads them to different, different ideas, different ways of thinking, and different ways of doing and being.

Today's creative catalysts and innovative pioneers are the learners.

This path requires the cross-pollinating of ideas and thinking from a variety of content areas and thought leaders. Which requires a '*learner*' mindset, one focused on questions, curiosity, inquiry, and the journey. Compared to the '*expert*' mindset, which is focused on answers and a destination. We must be willing to veer off the well-worn path to the fringes of our strengths, if we want to induce more creative and innovative ideas and thinking. A path that requires us to put aside short-term wins for long-term success.

Just remember, any new learning, whether that is a new strategy, a new tool, or a new technology, takes time to gain the familiarity that allows implementation to occur. Acceptance and adoption are neither quick nor easy. High-stakes tests and accountability systems can move us away from those long-term visions for short-term wins. For creative and innovative change to happen, we must create safe environments where people can explore, experiment, try new learnings, ideas, tools, and technologies. Otherwise, our classrooms, schools and districts will remain mired in the stasis of stagnant, status quo waters. Implementing some of the previous examples, such as Creativity and Innovation Hour, will help to lead the way.

This will be difficult for many educators, schools and districts to embrace under the trepidation and apprehension caused from current accountability systems.

By its very nature, we acknowledge that the process is unpredictable. When creativity and innovation are occurring at an authentic level, it is unfolding, evolving and changing as it progresses. Which is why it becomes more about unleashing it, than prescribing and implementing it.

Traversing this path will require pioneers at all levels of the organization, those willing to be the early adopters, trailblazers, and very often, the outliers. They will become the *'architects of change'*. Idea explorers who push the boundaries of our organizational thinking. They will open the way for our organizational outlines to bleed and seep out and into these voids, these fringes where learning is increased and capacity is grown and enhanced.

Just remember, if the destination has been pre-determined...how creative and innovative can it truly be?

And while this is true, we can't lose sight of our pioneers, either. We have to ensure that the exploration process is bridged with support for our settlers. For us to sustain more creative and innovative work, we need settlers and pioneers who understand and support

each other. When the gap becomes too big between our pioneers and settlers, creative and innovative thinking stalls and stagnates. We find that we end up only with ideas, without the action and support necessary to implement and sustain them.

Settlers provide our organizations with the action necessary to implement the creative and innovative ideas and work of our pioneers. Settlers not only follow, they sustain the work along the way.

Creative leaders realize that scaling creativity and innovation can neither be attained nor sustained with all pioneers, or all settlers. Organizations need a balance of both to keep creativity and innovation stimulated and maintained. And they make sure that they are traveling the path in support of one another.

And most important of all, the path must be paved with trust. Trust in their leaders and trust in their colleagues. Trust allows us to walk this path without trepidation. We will be hard-pressed to make any headway towards more creative and innovative environments and cultures if trust is absent or lacking.

Creative catalysts and innovative pioneers realize that the path is already difficult enough, but without trust, it is nearly impossible. They understand that the path to more creative and innovative environments and cultures is often severely damaged under the weight of fear, judgment and condemnation. And for that reason, they work diligently to create the trust necessary to lessen these burdens, remove obstacles and smooth out the path for the journey.

We don't often appreciate the journey when we are in the midst of it. I was brought up in what was considered a blue-collar environment. My dad was a welder and I learned early on the value and importance of working hard. At the early age of fifteen I began working summers for a construction company and putting in full working days every summer all the way through college. I learned the importance of education, as well as the value of a strong work ethic. Even though I may not have appreciated it at the time, those lessons

have served me well. I remember the stories he used to share from his work experiences. Many of which, were him being chided by a boss for working too slow, compared to those who were working much at a much faster pace. And how, inevitably, he was often called back to repair the work that the others had rushed through and done poorly. Lessons about rushing through the process, when you may be better served taking your time and doing it right. That sometimes we have to go slow, in order to go fast. We have to ask the deep questions that eventually take us down the path to the best answers. When we hurry, we often have to retrace our steps, or find ourselves headed towards a destination that is not in our best long-term interest. We end up wasting valuable time, energy and resources. It is about not just determining the destination of the path we are to travel, but being willing to make the journey about the process and not just the outcome. Because that is where deep learning and capacity flow forth from.

Actions to Initiate

Due to the turbulent and disruptive rate of change in our current world, if we're truly being innovative, we may be required to make up new rules as we go. There are often few if any models to follow...

By its very nature, creativity and innovation struggle to be determined and or defined, you have to poke and prod at it until it decides to reveal or show itself.

- **Over the next few months, determine at least one activity in each of your meetings that require your people or teams to engage in learning that is removed from their strength areas and out of their comfort zone. Making it fun and stress-free will alleviate anxiety. Remember, adults need time to play as well as children. The new learning will not only raise the capacity of your people, it will reengage their creative and innovative core.**

This activity is a good opportunity for discussion, as well as engaging the empathy component. Provide time in the following meeting to discuss how moving out of their comfort zone made them feel, good or bad. Have people share out their feelings. Then turn this towards the classroom. How do students feel when they are pushed out of their comfort zones? Do they have the same feelings? Great empathy insights for the adults and the students.

- **Determine someone at each meeting to be the Chief Question Instigator and Monitor (CQIM). The job of this individual is to make sure that we are exploring questions and not just accepting answers.**

This will not be easy. It will not be comfortable. However, it will eventually begin to grow the capacity and learning of our organizations and begin to move us down the path to more creative and innovative people, teams, schools and districts.

Questions to Consider

- **How do you first verify who your pioneers and your settlers are? How do you make sure that you don't pigeonhole these individuals, so that, depending on the path, that each have the opportunity to serve as pioneers and settlers?**
- **How are you determining to meet the needs of your pioneers and settlers, making sure that the gap between the two does not become too big?**
- **How will you go about focusing creativity and innovation in your organization, while still allowing it to unfold and evolve organically?**
- **What is one activity that you can initiate that requires your people to learn outside of their comfort zone, that pushes them to the fringes, beyond their circle of strength?**
- **What is one activity that you can incorporate that requires the cross-pollinating of ideas? To get your people to begin connecting ideas from a wide-variety of thinking and content areas.**

Prioritize

Find value...

“Ideas aren’t cheap at all – they’re free. And they’re amazingly valuable.” -Tina Seelig *‘InGenius’*

Creative leaders never lose sight of the goal, but they also realize that mistakes, modifications, restarts, and redirections will have to occur along the way. As said before, creativity and innovation is neither linear nor predictable. It is not the well-worn road. You will have to go down a few paths that were neither considered nor determined along the way. And you will have to chase a few rabbits down holes on this journey.

It is important that we understand that there is no guarantee that even the best of ideas will be accepted, approved, implemented, and or lead to any type of sustained change.

However, if we are never willing to chase any rabbits, stasis and stagnation will determine we never move beyond status quo. We will not begin to approach any more creativity and innovation than already exists in our organizations.

And while creativity and innovation are deeply steeped in our ability to amass more and more ideas, we have to understand that idea collecting is not enough. You have to be able to recognize and determine which ideas truly have value. Which ideas are worth pursuing, with our time, effort, action and resources.

We have to be able to prioritize...

Inability to prioritize, as individuals, teams, schools and districts will lead us to chasing every rabbit we find down a hole. When we do this, not only do we not infuse value, we create confusion, as well as diffusing focus. People end up either not knowing what rabbit to follow or trying to follow all the rabbits at the same time. Either way, we diminish the value proposition of our ideas, stalling and stagnating our creative and innovative focus and momentum. Creating chaos over clarity and confusion over commitment.

Our division was brought together one morning to determine one, no more than two goals for the school year. To determine a goal or goals that would define us as a division and set our vision for that year. Easy, right? Yeah, not so much. As usual, we have this overwhelming need to take the simple and make it overtly complex. What started out as one goal, became an ongoing “yeah, but” session. “Yeah, but we need this.” “Yeah, but we can’t forget this.” Each person in the division engaged in a process of looking out for the interests of the individual, over of the interests of the whole. What should have one or two goals, quickly became a binder of change. Instead of committing to clarity, we committed to everything. Too often, our inability to prioritize bogs our schools and districts down in a myriad of goals and initiatives, far too vast and complex to complete effectively, let alone proficiently. And too often, instead of a few goals, we end up with ineffective binders of change.

As we discussed in the last section, we must begin by first determining what questions we are trying to answer and what problems we are trying to solve. It does not help to amass more and more ideas, if they are aligned to the wrong question or aimed at solving the wrong problems.

Remember, this work is not about creativity and innovation for creativity and innovation’s sake. It’s about value. And when we are asking or answering the wrong question, when we are trying to solve the wrong problem or problems, our creative and

innovative thinking and work are often in vain. We will find ourselves unable to provide the value we seek.

We will be unable scale creativity and innovation effectively if we are chasing down every idea that looks good or sounds great.

Somewhere within the process, we have to effectively funnel down the idea factory. We have to determine the idea or ideas that best support the creative and innovative direction of the organization. And while the process is still organic and somewhat unpredictable, a path still needs to be determined, an outcome decided.

Which requires your people and leaders to engage in both divergent and convergent thinking. Too often, our teams and organizations are good at only one or the other. They have the ability to amass a tremendous amount of ideas, but are unable to determine which ones to pursue. Or they utilize their critical voices to invoke an answer-driven culture to cut right to the chase, quickly whittling the process down to one idea, before getting all ideas out on the table.

The best way to describe and visualize divergent and convergent thinking is to picture a funnel. A funnel has a large hole on one end (divergent), to capture all of the ideas that are considered and proposed. The funnel then scales down to a small hole on the other end (convergent), from which only a few ideas can emerge. Divergent and convergent thinking is the process of funneling down from a plethora of ideas to a single, or a few choice ideas.

The divergent, or idea gathering part of the process necessitates safe environments where people are willing and able to share their ideas openly, without fear of judgment or condemnation. It is where we allow our imaginations to engage and flow freely. It is a venue for all ideas to be heard and considered without naysayers and critical voices shutting down the process. However, just understand, the divergent side of the process is only half the work that needs to be completed and can only take us so far.

Once we've squeezed the most out of our imaginations, once we've amassed our ideas, once we've provided sufficient time for those ideas to incubate and percolate, we move into the convergent phase. Equipped with the understanding that we can't chase down every idea, no matter how great, we begin the process of shaving those ideas down. Just be aware, we will have to let go of some good, even great ideas along the way (just don't throw them away, keep those ideas for possible use at a later time).

However, if we are going to move our creative and innovative work forward, we will have to utilize convergent thinking and processes to narrow down our ideas to those that provide the most value. Down to ideas that are worth putting action towards. Down to ideas that will best lead us forward in meeting our goals and shared commitments. Down to ideas that will best serve our people and our schools and districts in moving forward.

It is important we understand, as we begin this work, that conflict will be involved. Today's creative catalysts and innovative pioneers must be adept in leading their people in and through this conflict in a positive manner. Remember, ideas are personal. When those ideas are not embraced or considered, we tend to take it personally. Creative catalysts and innovative pioneers create environments and cultures not only based on trust, but on our ability to be honest and forthright with each other, and our ideas.

They create environments and cultures where we learn not to hold our ideas too close to the chest. Where we understand that candid discussion about an idea is not an attack on us, or our thinking. Rather, it is about determining the worth of an idea how it will best serve our people, our teams, our schools, and districts. It is in these environments that we learn to let our ideas go, where we allow them to stand on their own. In truly creative and innovative organizations, it is not about *'whose'* idea, as much as it is about the *'best'* idea. And we will never get to that level or depth of collaboration and sharing if we hold too tightly to our ideas. We have to be willing to allow our ideas to be considered, changed, altered, reworked, reconsidered, and hopefully improved and eventually transformed.

We must remember, we are only as creative and innovative as the ideas and thinking that we can create and produce. If we don't engage in processes that take us to the 'best' ideas, we will spend our time, resources and energy on ideas that are not only not the 'best', but are often not in the best interest of our people and organization.

Once we funnel down to those best ideas, we have to be vitally aware of the perseverance necessary to birth them into existence.

Consider the phrase, "*Ideas are a dime a dozen.*" There is a lot of truth to take from that as we prioritize our ideas into existence. It's not so much that "*ideas are a dime a dozen,*" but that really great ideas are often few and far between. And even fewer of them actually turn into an action that creates change. It's not enough to have great ideas, if you don't engage the stamina and perseverance that turns them into something tangible. It is not enough to have a good or even a great idea, if it is never realized, if we never put into any type of action towards it.

Our imagination is what fuels our creativity that stimulates and feeds our idea factory, but it is the gritty determination to do something with those ideas that leads us into innovation.

There are millions of great ideas that die daily because of the effort required to carry them through. You have to be fully invested for an idea to reach full fruition. And even then, it is often a gamble. Putting a new idea into play is like pushing a boulder up a hill. It requires an immense amount of constant energy and steady strength. Once you let up, the boulder has a tendency to roll back down, losing any ground that you've gained.

Until you reach the crest, until you reach some type of tipping point with a new idea, it will be an uphill push. Great ideas only become great when you push them past this point. It is here that they gain momentum and learn to survive on their own. Until you crest that

climb, you must have awareness of the uphill battle that you will wage to turn a good idea into a new, creative, innovative way of thinking and doing.

Ideas are like seeds and need to be nourished, watered and protected early on. For any idea to take root, it requires understanding and clarity to achieve any type of commitment. You can't just throw an idea out there and believe that people will see the value in it. You have to create that understanding through discussions, conversations, and educating people on that value that the idea proposes to provide. And then it takes listening, listening to the feedback, concerns and reaction that others provide in return. It is hard work, pushing an idea forward. Requires persistence, patience, resilience, and passion.

The problem is that most people quit. They give up too soon. The constant stamina and perseverance wears them out before they can reach that tipping point. Which is why birthing an idea must be infused with a bit of passion. It will often take all that you have to push it forward. It will take dollops of determination.

You will face more closed doors than warm welcomes. You will hear an ongoing chorus of critical voices and face the full brunt of the status quo. It will be slow and tedious. But once you cross that crest, once an idea or a way of thinking picks up momentum, it is often all you can do to slow it down. You just have to understand the work it takes to get it too that place.

But never concede the understanding that no matter how forward thinking the environment and culture of the school or district, leading new ideas forward will always require determination and perseverance. Which is why it is so important to prioritize those ideas to move forward and act upon. You have to be resolute and unwavering in this because of the sheer effort, diligence, dedication, drive and tenacity that will be required to see the idea through to the end.

As you face ambiguity, uncertainty, indecision, insecurity, doubt, and push-back that will often override your confidence, you will begin to fully realize why most ideas never make it past being “*a dime a dozen.*”

Actions to Initiate

Let's try this...

- **With your next problem or obstacle that you are trying to *'fix'* or solve, instead of stopping at the first good answer, tease out as many ideas and 'answers' as possible. However, don't stop there. Put a new perspective towards or angle the problem to look at it from new direction and with a different lens. Now pull out as many ideas as possible to solve the problem from this new perspective and angle.**
- **Try this with as many perspective and lenses that you can put towards the problem. Now, instead of just choosing the best *'first'* answer to the problem, you have a plethora of ideas and a variety of perspectives and angles from which to approach and solve the problem. Not only does this provide more innovative ways to attack the problem, it engages the creative thinking of our people, our team and our organization.**

Questions to Consider

- **Have you created the conditions, the environment and culture that will allow for the positive conflict and forthrightness necessary to allow divergent and convergent thinking and processes to take your individuals, your teams and your organization to the best ideas?**
- **How do you prioritize? How do you determine what problems are worth solving and what ideas are best suited to solve them?**

- **How do you keep people focused on the ‘best’, rather than ‘whose’ ideas? To focus on the best creative and innovative thinking, rather than allowing people to push their own ideas and agendas?**
- **What processes do you have in place to determine if you are asking the right questions? To determine if you are solving right problems?**
- **What processes do you have in place to not only encourage divergent thinking in the organization, but to make sure that a steady stream of creative and innovative ideas are flowing on an ongoing basis?**
- **How do you incorporate convergent thinking in a way that helps your teams and organization consolidate and prioritize ideas in a manner that positively moves the best ideas forward?**
- **It is important to have an accountability or leadership team during the action part of the process that can support the effort and perseverance required to move an idea forward to fruition. Otherwise, many good ideas never make to the level of real change. Make sure that those who are working through the divergent and convergent processes can also provide support during the action part of the process.**

Produce

Make Something...

“To overcome inertia, good ideas are not enough. Careful planning is not enough. The organizations, communities, and nations that thrive are the ones that initiate action, that launch rapid innovation cycles, that learn by doing as soon as they can.”

-David and Tom Kelley *‘Creative Confidence’*

While creative and innovative thinking should be a mental state that we consciously (and unconsciously) place ourselves into, it is ultimately about the work. It is about the work of creating change, of creating better. It is about making something, something of value and use that makes peoples lives better, fuller. Whether that is a lesson plan, a blog, a creative schedule, a new tool, or even changes in the environment or culture.

Several years back I was fortunate enough to be included on a team to visit Gettysburg and partake in a multi-day leadership conference that tied the lessons of the Civil War to the issues that our schools, districts and organizations struggle with in the 21st century. The impact and lessons learned from that trip were invaluable, to say the least. Lessons and learning that stay with me to this day. Lessons and learning that I wanted to be able share and discuss with others, to expand the power of what I received from those few powerful days. Which eventually led me into blogging and one of my earliest posts, *‘The Power of a Professional.’* And while the post was mostly ignored, it was passed on and

shared by Solution Tree. It was that small initial support that truly got the ball rolling, that got me moving on this connected journey (over 250 posts later). The writing, the connections, the relationships and the collaborations have truly left its mark on my life as an educator, a leader, a professional and as a learner. It has provided the impetus to get up every morning at 4:00 am, weekend or not, and begin reading and writing. It has allowed me to serve as a co-moderator for #satchatwc. It has opened up doors to bring me closer to the incredible things people are doing all over the globe, and not just in education. From design thinkers to thought leaders, it has been an all access pass to learning. It has allowed me to engage my creative and innovative spirit, often when those wings were clipped or limited within my own professional circumstances. It gave me access to learning, when attending conferences and other learning events was limited or non-existent. It provided a platform to explore my ideas with pushback and feedback, from honing and polishing to throwing away and rethinking. It made learning an ongoing process, rather than an event.

It is ultimately about designing a better school, district and future. Designing a better way forward. Whether that design is a process, or a product...

And it is not only in the process or product that we add value for others, it is in the process of creating that we learn and add value, as well. Too often we miss the value of the journey, when we spend our time focused on a destination. It keeps us too rigid towards an end, than allowing an organic evolution to take place. An evolution that eventually enhances the growth and learning of the entire organization.

As weird as it sounds, think of it a bit like bowling. There are a lot of ways to knock down those ten pins. Yet, people have to do it in their own way, according to their own style, talent and abilities. As each person practices, they improve, and their style, talent and abilities evolve. And yet, there is neither total freedom in the process, either. There are constraints. A line not to cross, a gutter to stay out of, neither of which hamper the creative process, while keeping us on the path towards a destination, an outcome.

Which is why producing something tangible is so important. Too often, much of what happens in organizations seems to exist in a cloud. It exists in silos at different levels of the organization. The upper levels feel like they are working hard, spending time in meetings, discussing ideas, the vision, next steps and how to move forward. Unfortunately, even though they feel they are working hard, to everyone else it seems like nothing is getting done, if nothing is produced. While these discussions are long and mentally demanding, if nothing is produced, then nobody below the cloud knows or believes that anything is being accomplished. They just see that decisions aren't being made, a vision is not created or communicated, and there is a lack of direction on how to move the organization forward.

And while there might be a lot of creative and innovative ideas being discussed, being mulled over, being considered, it still does not equate to an action. Especially, if nothing is being produced. Which is why we must realize that while ideas may be incredibly important, they are not enough to push forward and scale more creative and innovative thinking in our individuals, teams and organization.

Creativity and innovation do little if they are unable to support and provide solutions to the big and little problems that our people and organizations face on a daily basis. Creativity and innovation must be about adding value. To do that, we have to produce something. And until we do, we won't truly know if our ideas have the potential to add that value.

The problem is that we often wait too long to put our ideas out there. We wait and wait and wait, until they are perfected. Unfortunately, we often wait too long or fail to act at all. We have to push our ideas out quicker, with the mindset that changes will be necessary and ongoing.

Producing is about making your ideas real. Breathing life into them, and then determining if they are worth pursuing. And to do this, we need to be able to experiment with them. Too often, we put all of our eggs into one idea basket. Then we hold on too tightly to that

basket, because we've wrapped our resources and vision and everything we have into that one basket, into that one idea. When we do that, we box ourselves in, we tie ourselves down. Which requires us to hold onto that one idea too tightly and try to ride it out, even though we see that it is not working, diminishing and damaging our effectiveness and influence as a leader, and as an organization.

We have to find ways to put our ideas out there quickly, easily, and cheaply so that we don't have to hold them so tightly. So we don't make this mistake. So that we can determine if they are worth pursuing, if they add value to the organization and those we serve.

Unfortunately, we have a tendency to serve our ideas, instead of letting our ideas serve us.

And to make sure that our ideas are serving us, instead of us serving them, empathy should be infused into the process. You have to get out there and see how those ideas are fairing with your constituency. You have to watch and listen to determine the appropriateness and effectiveness of those ideas. You have to ask questions, you have to engage in conversations and discussions around those ideas.

Are they serving others well? Do they need to be reworked? Revised? Removed? Replaced? We have this tendency to waste time, especially in education, trying to force ideas forward that are not working or meeting the needs of our people. Especially when we have put so much of *'us'*, our *'work'* and our *'time'* into them.

When we allow those ideas to be produced and prototyped with a *'draft'* mindset, so we aren't so slow to make changes when they are necessary and needed. When we engage and infuse empathy into the process, when we *'see through the eyes of others'* we are quicker to let go of our hold on those ideas and pull the plug when they're not serving people in a positive or supportive manner.

Actions to Initiate

Too often, our educational organizations move to slowly to initiate ideas and hold on to them long after they no longer shown their ability to provide value to those they are to serve. We spend inordinate amounts of time trying to make sure that everything we put out is ready to implement. And for this reason, we struggle to change course in a timely fashion, when a course correction is deemed necessary. Which flies in the face of building up a more creative and innovative organization. And in most instances, keeps us mired in the status quo. To be more creative and innovative as organizations, requires us to be much more agile as well.

- With that said, reflect on your school or district and begin to determine how many of the things that are produced and implemented are provided as a ‘draft’ that can be reworked and improved? And how many of those things are implemented as the way we will do things from here on out? Or at least until the end of the year, when we reconvene to determine what worked and what didn’t.
- Take a few opportunities to engage in a *‘fail fast, fail quick’* model of implementing ideas. Almost a ‘draft’ mindset to some ideas that you want to take on a practice run. Give people a chance for input, feedback and revision. Model processes that allow for growth and improvement, over mandates and requirements. This process will not only enhance the viability of ideas that may be considered, it raises the level of creative and innovative thinking and input across the entire organization.
- Now that you’ve been open to trying a more draft, ‘fail fast, fail quick’ approach to implementing a new idea or ideas, engage empathy into the process. Get out there and see how those ideas are fairing with the people who are trying them out. Ask questions. Get feedback. Invite input. That

way, you will be able to determine if, and how much value the idea provides to people.

Questions to Consider

- **How are you determining to move your creative and innovative ideas past consideration, into something tangible? What is being produced that can determine the value and worth of the idea for individuals, the team or organization?**
- **For any creative or innovative idea to take hold, it needs to gain acceptance. How are you taking your ideas from the ‘cloud’ to a prototype, in order that people can experiment, tinker and explore to determine if it is worth pursuing? To determine if it is worth pushing towards acceptance?**
- **How do you infuse empathy to determine the acceptance and adoption of ideas in our classrooms, teams, schools and districts?**

Publish

Don't be afraid to share...

“Make stuff you love and talk about stuff you love and you’ll attract people who love that kind of stuff. It’s that simple.” -Austin Kleon ‘Show Your Work’

Don't focus on perfection. Don't worry as much about what others will think. Find your platform. Find your Personal Learning Network (PLN). Find those that you can engage with...and those that inspire your thinking and reframe your idea of possible. And get to sharing. Sharing your creative and innovative ideas.

Don't be afraid to put your ideas out for others to see. For others to comment on. For others to expand upon. Set your work and your ideas free. Don't worry about others stealing your ideas (there will always be more). Be more concerned with the creative and innovative interactions and collaborations that your ideas can excite and incite.

Tweet. Blog. Share. Post. Reflect. Engage.

The important thing is to find your platform. This will be your place to practice. Your place to explore, discover and experiment. This will be your arena to tinker with your ideas, and the ideas of others.

Find your platform where you can begin to dig your *'idea well'*. Your idea factory, where you can mix, remix and create. A place where your ideas and thinking can grow and evolve.

Do not misunderstand what is required to be connected; it will require time, it will require effort, it will require investing in others, and it will require investing in and sharing of yourself. Not an easy proposition.

But well worth it...

Take a chance. Put yourself and your ideas out there. Be less scared of others stealing your ideas, and more worried about not having ideas to share. Be open. Be transparent. Be authentic. Be kind. Be caring. Be compassionate. Be empathetic.

And your connections and networks will continue to support your ability to grow, evolve, and remain creative and innovative now, and in the future.

Proceed

Go forth and feel worthy...

We retain this tendency to think of creativity and innovation in big, rather than small, incremental terms. We tend to think of the latest product that disrupts entire markets. The lone genius lost in their laboratory dreaming up inventions that will change our world. Or the divinely anointed experts who are creating new, novel and original ideas that will change how we think and do in the future.

Which is all good and great, but limiting in its scope.

If this is the only way we think of and consider creativity and innovation, it will severely limit us, our teams, our schools, and districts both now, and in the future. When we see creativity in these terms, we avoid it because we see it as an insurmountable mountain to scale. It has a negative affect on our mindset. Hindering our efforts to scale creativity across our organizations.

If we want more creativity, if we want to become more innovative, we have to begin to think in *'everyday'* terms. We must begin the processes that make creativity and innovation an inherent and integral part of our everyday work.