

JEFF DEGRAFF AND STANEY DEGRAFF

AUTHORS OF *THE INNOVATION CODE*

**THE
CREATIVE
MINDSET**



**MASTERING THE SIX SKILLS THAT
EMPOWER INNOVATION**

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Mastering the *Six Skills* That
Empower Innovation

JEFF DEGRAFF
AND STANEY DEGRAFF



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The Creative Mindset

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To our wonderful parents, who taught us
the Creative Mindset.

To our beloved Shelties, who show us that
anyone can be creative.

To all those incredible and invisible innovators who
help us create a better way.

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PREFACE

DO WE REALLY NEED ANOTHER BOOK ABOUT CREATIVITY? Take a quick lap around your favorite bookstore and you will surely find volumes on how creativity can transform you into a successful entrepreneur. Others celebrate the lives of the heroes of our imagination. Still others encourage us to relax and let creativity flow as we conjure up silhouettes in the clouds that float above us. This book takes a very different approach.

The Creative Mindset is about practical, everyday creativity—the kind of creativity you use when you are trying to come up with something a little special. Maybe you would like to take a fresh approach to your blog to make it stand out. Or perhaps you are trying to come up with a unique side hustle to bring in a little extra cash. It could be that you are just looking for ways to generate some inspired ideas that liven up your work routine. This book is a how-to guide for anyone trying to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary. Creativity starts with creating a better mindset, a new mindset, a creative mindset. As the celebrated Apple ad put it, “Think Different.”

Although a creative mindset is necessary for most imaginative endeavors, it's not sufficient. Creativity, like any competency, requires real skill for you to take purposeful action. Even the most accomplished artists like Leonardo da Vinci and writers like Charles Dickens focused on the craft of creativity. These skills are what moves you from coming up with an interesting idea to

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producing something remarkable and tangible. It all starts by developing the ability to clarify the challenge and continues on to skills for ideation, communication, and evaluation, among others.

However, creative work is never fully completed. Think about how there are versions of software or editions of books. There are always more ideas and improvements to make, even though you may lose interest in a project or simply run out of time or money. With each project, you build your creative abilities and confidence. After all, you are your greatest work of art.

The Democratization of Creativity

If you're a creative genius, congratulations; this book is not for you. If you are not, however, this book might be just what you need. *The Creative Mindset* is designed for a wide range of readers—from individuals looking to make changes in their own lives to leaders who wish to empower others with the creativity tools and techniques necessary to make innovation happen. From accountants to zoologists, *The Creative Mindset* can be used as a personal road map and useful field guide.

Corporations spend billions of dollars each year trying to get their employees to innovate. What they miss is that the personal creativity of individuals is the driver of innovation. Here lies the blind spot of innovation that so many leaders miss: the space where the corporation and the individual meet. A company is at its most creative when its people find personal inspiration in their own lives. We need to understand creativity as a force that doesn't exist in a single fixed place like an office, boardroom, or workshop but one that pervades all aspects of our everyday lives. Innovation is about doing the creative work the company can't. All we need is a creative mindset and some basic creativity skills.

Our personal creativity allows us to level the playing field and democratize innovation. As the spirit of Chef Gusteau pro-

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claims in the Pixar classic *Ratatouille*, “Anyone can cook.” Everyone, every day and everywhere, can be creative in his or her own way. All they really need is an effective way of thinking and a few inventive skills to overcome their challenges and capture their opportunities.

How to Use This Book

Anyone can learn to be more creative. *The Creative Mindset* introduces six essential creative thinking skills that can be easily mastered with limited practice and remembered as the mnemonic acronym CREATE: Clarify, Replicate, Elaborate, Associate, Translate, and Evaluate. These terms are carefully selected as the key elements of a creative mindset. They are a mental road map to guide you from a creative idea to a successful result. These six skills emerged from the most important research on creative thinking, simplified and summarized, and are drawn from over thirty years of real-world application in some of the most innovative organizations around the globe.

Each of these six skills has its own dedicated chapter in this book, complete with examples and space to practice. These skills are arranged like stages in a process. We suggest that as you read this book, you follow the sequence in order. However, *The Creative Mindset* is designed so that you can skip around as needed. Still, you may find it useful to start with getting the challenge right (Clarify) and finish by assessing the best ideas (Evaluate). The four skills in the middle—Replicate, Elaborate, Associate, and Translate—focus on different creativity techniques and tools to generate diverse and varied ideas and to transform your ordinary idea into something extraordinary. These four skills are arranged from the simpler (Replicate) to the more elaborate (Translate).

Some readers may find that the latter skills are more difficult to master than the previous ones. This is natural. It's important

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that you get comfortable practicing these skills. The more you are immersed in developing a skill, the easier it will be for you to achieve a level of mastery.

If the order of the skills doesn't work for you, just follow what does work. Understanding your own creative power and how it works is a part of developing your creative mind. As Lewis Carroll (2011) put it in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, "Begin at the beginning . . . and go on till you come to the end: then stop" (p. 114).

Developing Our Creativity

For more than thirty years, Professor Jeff DeGraff has taught some of the world's leading innovators in his classes at the University of Michigan. Through their Innovatrium Institute for Innovation, Jeff and Staney together have worked with over half of all Fortune 500 companies on ways to make innovation happen. *The Creative Mindset* provides this proven systematic approach to mastering creative and design thinking to everyone.

Creative breakthroughs can and do materialize anywhere, at any moment. Being creative doesn't require an advanced education or a particular technical skill set. Creativity is a naturally occurring process. Our brains assimilate and accommodate information and experiences to generate new and unique connections. Although we use our creativity in our everyday endeavors, such as finding an alternative way to prepare a meal when we discover that we are out of a specific ingredient, we are often unaware of how we do it.

Over the past few decades, researchers have gained a new understanding of how the brain functions, and new theories about how our mind works have emerged, such as the impact of meditation, dreaming, and creativity on brain development. Yet the term *creative thinking* covers a wide array of cognitive processes.

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In *The Creative Mindset*, each of the six skills we introduce requires a different pattern of thinking. For example, the way in which you use an analogy to make something strange seem familiar is distinctly different from the way in which you evaluate and select a winning idea. There are hundreds of different ways in which your mind makes inquiries and gains insight. This book has reduced them to the six essential skills that you need to make your projects, your daily routines, and yourself better and new. Using the six skills, you can apply little acts of imagination to the challenges of the day—developing your mindset and skills to create works of art, products and services, and solutions to pressing problems, or simply experience the joy that comes from expressing a fresh idea that is personally meaningful. This is the essence of *The Creative Mindset*.

Introduction

Demystifying Creativity

MIRACULOUS, SINGULAR, PORTENTOUS: these are the earth-shattering, grandiose words we normally use to describe acts of creativity. In our collective imagination, creativity is an epic breakthrough achieved by lone geniuses with extraordinary intellectual powers. Surrounding creativity is a magical, rarefied—indeed unapproachable—aura: it's a realm widely considered accessible only to the privileged few who have been endowed with the innate gift of invention. In the popular mind, creativity is a kind of divine state—we mere mortals, excluded from its process, may only enjoy its fruits.

Yet the most game-changing innovations in all domains of our world are minor, incremental, *simple*. They don't burst forth in the middle of the night in the isolated labs or studies of masterminds and virtuosos—they arise in crowded rooms of diverse thinkers, during late afternoons in the middle of the week. These people don't completely reimagine the game or start totally anew. Instead, they make slight adjustments or modifications to existing things, which in turn have surprisingly far-reaching implications. They think big by working small.

Consider Jim, a real estate agent who was looking for ways to increase his business in a housing market that had never really

come back after a recent recession. He had tried numerous innovative approaches to marketing and financing, but nothing seemed to work. One day, while driving past a row of houses near the local university usually occupied by students, he noticed something unusual. At the end of the street was a house in much better condition than the others. On the porch was an old couple talking to a student. In an uncharacteristic move, Jim got out of his car and walked up to the couple. He asked how long they had been in the home. He naturally assumed that they had been in the neighborhood before it became mostly student housing. Much to his surprise, they had purchased the house only four years earlier. Even more astonishing, they were not a married couple but friends. In fact, they had been classmates at the university fifty years earlier. Along with two other classmates, they had purchased the house. The couple noted that several of their other classmates were looking to do something similar. Living together in a learning environment gave them a newfound energy and sense of community. This strange encounter profoundly changed Jim's approach to real estate. He started marketing student houses for sale to retirees. The response was overwhelming, and business picked up. Simply by paying attention to something unexpected, Jim discovered an opportunity in plain sight that had gone unnoticed by his competitors.

Similarly, the story of Starbucks' meteoric, but gradual, rise to the top of the industry it invented also starts from a much smaller opportunity space. Although today we think of the company as an unstoppable force responsible for spawning a mass obsession with coffee, Starbucks began modestly, and its growth was incremental. When writer Gordon Bowker and teachers Jerry Baldwin and Zev Siegl put their funds together and took out loans to found Starbucks in 1971, their intent was merely to sell coffee beans.

Less than a decade later, Starbucks emerged as Washington's biggest coffee roaster. Still only a coffee bean distributor, Starbucks saw early visions of becoming something more in the early 1980s,

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when then–marketing director Howard Schultz went on a trip to Italy, with the goal of collecting new kinds of beans and new ideas. Schultz fell in love with Italian coffee—but became even more enamored with the Italian cafés where people drank it.

Schultz returned to the US with a wild suggestion: let's start brewing and serving coffee at Starbucks. Baldwin and Bowker turned the idea down, so Schultz left Starbucks to launch his own coffee venture, Il Giornale. The chain of coffee bars was off-the-charts successful. Riding on the triumph of Il Giornale and the support of new investors, Schultz bought Starbucks himself and merged it with Il Giornale to create a coffee-roasting and coffee-making enterprise. The new conglomerate became a publicly traded company in 1992.

Schultz's initial hope was to bring Starbucks beyond Seattle to more locations. The new cafés were a sensation. The immediate years were ones of staggering growth. Eventually, Starbucks added new dimensions to its café experience, branching out into pastries and then making music a key part of its java culture, acquiring Hear Music in 1999.

Starbucks is a case study in the power of simplicity when it comes to innovation. Its architects understood that in order to make a splash, they needed to do something new, but they didn't need to reinvent the wheel. While McDonald's, the largest coffee establishment at the time, was focusing on keeping everything the same, Starbucks was incrementally adding to its offerings: moving from commodity product (coffee) to upscale product (cappuccino) to theater experience (modern coffee house).

This is exactly what *The Creative Mindset* is about: being creative in small ways that have big consequences. These small creative sparks can come together to produce innovations that change the way we live.

One reason for contrasting a singularly fortunate case with a more modest one is to make it easier to identify what traits both

cases share. At first, it may seem that Jim, the real estate agent, and Howard Shultz, the founder of the Starbucks we know today, have little in common. One is someone whom we might call an average person with an ordinary opportunity; the other is a celebrated billionaire. However, the path each took to success is surprisingly similar. Both saw what others had overlooked. Both challenged the conventional boundaries of their profession. Both escaped assumptions about how their business should work. In other words, both exhibited many of the traits of a creative mindset.

Creativity and Innovation

It's important here to make a distinction between creativity and innovation. For the purposes of this book, we are not taking an academic perspective on creativity. Instead, we're approaching this subject from the experience of seasoned practitioners, teachers, and consultants who have worked with organizations in various industries to differentiate themselves in the marketplace and make innovation happen.

Creativity is the conception of a useful novelty, and innovation is applying that creativity into a desired result. In other words, innovation is the tangible “product,” or the result or outcome of a creative endeavor. Creativity is the power that generates innovation. To learn to innovate, we need to learn to be creative. To become creative, we need to first develop our creative mindset and learn various tools and techniques to enhance our creative skills.

The Creative Mindset is a state of mind—a way of thinking, a way of seeing opportunities to sprinkle creativity into ordinary practices. When we are using our creative mindset, we are more aware of the problem or challenge we're working on and where we can add a little creativity to change it. The act of adding creativity to ordinary items to transform them into something extraordinary is what we call *creativizing*.

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Creativize is a neologism—a made-up term. It is the act of adding creativity into something, thus transforming it into something more: more beautiful, more useful, more novel, and so on. We assume the role of a *creativizer* when we make the ordinary extraordinary. Creativizing is taking something that already exists and building something new onto it. Creativizing is taking a creative mindset and putting it into action.

We see a creative mindset everywhere. Great product design firms often start the innovation process by building mock-ups with cheap plastic tubing or carving prototypes from a bar of soap. Famously, the *Apollo 13* crew and Mission Control Center brought the spacecraft safely back to earth through the imaginative use of spare parts that would have impressed MacGyver. Successful software firms mash up code and content from existing products and websites to quickly determine what is functional and beautiful before they invest in a big plan of action. It's no wonder that according to the 2010 IBM Global CEO Study (2010), creativity is considered the most important attribute in managing the increasingly complex business environment. The study described the characteristics of creative leaders who can translate their creativity into future success. These individuals are

- Hungry for change
- Innovative beyond customer imagination
- Globally integrated
- Disruptive by nature
- Genuine, not just generous

Those who adopt and master a creative mindset are ordinary people who make things extraordinary just through their ability to see options, create solutions, and gather the resources