

# WHAT A GREAT IDEA! 2.0

*Unlocking Your Creativity  
in Business and in Life*



**CHIC THOMPSON**

# C O N T E N T



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The Edison of Japan *Dr. Yoshiro NakaMats*

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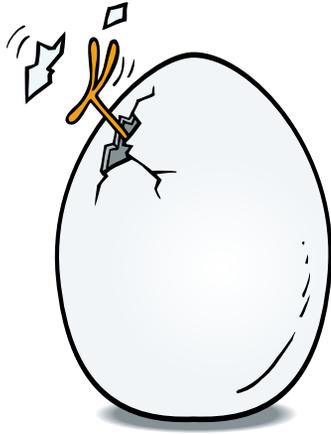
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*A goal of every living creature is to break out of the box.*



*Become the change you seek in the world.*

*—Mahatma Gandhi*

# I N T R O D U C T I O N

## Break Out!

### *Key Steps Creative People Take*

*How ironic that in a world populated by “knowledge workers,” there is virtually no time left to think.*

—Gary Hamel, author of *Leading the Revolution*

**T**his morning, while you are lathering up in the shower, sweating on the treadmill, or stuck in traffic, that little voice inside your head throws out a great idea. Your body gets excited and you ask your mind to remember it.

Unfortunately, by the time you get to your desk—poof!—the idea is gone. Then, like magic, your new idea pops back into your consciousness while you’re doodling through a boring meeting. You quietly whisper your idea to the guy sitting next to you.

Within eight seconds he tells you what’s wrong with it: “It’s not in the budget,” or “It’ll never work,” or “We tried that before.” Your smile turns to a frown; you slump back in your seat—poof!—your idea is gone again.

Being a “knowledge worker” in today’s environment requires persistence. Your day consists of multitasking your way through endless e-mails, instant messages, text messages, phone calls, voice mails, letters, interoffice memos, Post-it™ notes, and express mails. You spend twenty minutes looking for a phone number to place a



two-minute call. Your intuitive thoughts happen a moment too late, instead of just in time. Sooner, rather than later, you're going to find your arms crossed, your teeth clenched, and your eyes staring blankly. Nothing works. Life seems unfair and your stomach is tightening its knot. Face it . . . you're "stuck."

On the other hand, you just think you are stuck. You are in a state that is not creative, and you are not readily able to find new alternatives or directions. You are probably trying too hard to get where you want to go. The good news is that you actually have several choices:

1. Do nothing and wait for the storm to pass.
2. Try even harder to break through the walls.
3. Step out of your own way to find a solution.

What's your choice?

1. Waiting is the most common decision. Are you waiting for things to slow down? Sorry. This seldom happens.
2. Conventional wisdom says, "If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again." And with each try your voice gets louder and your patience gets shorter.
3. Stepping out of your own way is the easiest and most fun way to unstick yourself. Think of stepping out as a short sabbatical or detour rather than procrastination.

If you choose #3, this book is right for you. It is laid out as a four-step strategy to step out of your own way, to set goals and generate new ideas, and then to focus your resources to make the idea happen.

The new questions you'll learn to ask will help you reveal the answers you have been looking for. Simply put, in the mind-set of innovation, the question is the answer. It's the answer to entering a world of new ideas and breakthrough solutions.

### *The First Step: Freedom*

The first step creative people take, whether or not they do it consciously, is to gain the inner freedom to consider new ideas and new possibilities.



### *The Second Step: Expression*

One step beyond the freedom to consider new possibilities is the ability to give voice to the problems and questions that the new ideas will address.

### *The Third Step: Creation*

Freedom and expression take you to the point of creation itself. Here's the heart of generating great ideas, here are the techniques, and here's much of the fun.

### *The Fourth Step: Action*

Action is the most challenging step in the creative process. It's where our new idea meets the real world. It's where we need to believe enough in our idea and in ourselves that a rejection or a suggested improvement doesn't short-circuit our energy.

We need to bring fresh and bold new thinking to all four steps of the innovation mind-set to give our ideas a chance to thrive in this competitive, attention-deficient environment.

## **The World Is Round . . . No, Flat . . .**

Thomas Friedman wrote *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century* so we would understand how today's world differs from that of our childhood. Our parents used to say, "Finish your dinner because people in India and China are starving." Now Friedman tells his daughters, "Finish your homework because people in India and China are starving for your jobs and in a flat world, the job is going to go to the most efficient, smartest, most effective person who can do that job."

Friedman describes the technological and social shifts that have leveled the economic world, and "created a flat world: a global, Web-enabled platform for multiple forms of sharing knowledge and work, irrespective of time, distance, geography, and, increasingly, language." He then points out that "on a flat earth, the most important attribute you can have is a creative imagination."

Indeed, to stay competitive today's companies and individuals will need to harness their creativity to come up with innovative ways to solve problems and create the products that will become the must-haves in tomorrow's

marketplace. Outside the business world, everyone—authors, artists, students, inventors, designers—will also benefit from learning how to access and use the creative imagination Friedman describes.

Based on my own experiences, I see a greater emphasis being placed on creativity all over the “flat world.” I receive almost as many requests to teach creativity workshops in Asia as I do in the United States. Around the world, people are recognizing the benefits of infusing technical know-how with imagination and vision.

## **A Creative Progression**

As a teacher of creativity for more than twenty-five years, I have had the wonderful opportunity to teach, interview, and survey more than 500,000 executives in private and public organizations. My work has consisted largely of helping creative people learn universal ways of discovering and developing new ideas.

In my first book, the original edition of *What a Great Idea!*, published in 1991, I provided proven, yet flexible, techniques that can help any organization generate ideas immediately. *What a Great Idea!* went through twenty-one printings and was translated into six languages. In 2001, Harvard Business School released a case study on my speaking career with the same title: “What a Great Idea!”

Now, as a fellow at the University of Virginia’s Darden Business School and an adjunct faculty member at the American College of Physician Executives, the YPO University (Young Presidents’ Organization), and the Brookings Institution, my scope has broadened. These days I focus on designing creative strategies to reduce medical error-related deaths, fight terrorism, and reform our public school systems.

The call to update *What a Great Idea!* came from people attending my lectures and workshops, who were looking for ways to tap their creativity in the new millennium. So I went back to the *What a Great Idea!* manuscript and expanded on every chapter and, most important, added many new creative voices. New features include:

- An illustrated guide to fighting back against Killer Phrases to overcome the “Yes, *but* . . .”s in your life.
- Additional Great Idea Exercises to steer you through the idea-generation process.

- Fresh examples of innovation in the marketplace.
- New creative techniques to tap into your imagination and keep your brain alive and engaged.
- A nine-step Creative Action Plan to help solve any problem.

## The Final Exam

Studying in school always led up to a final exam—and we all now know why it was called the “final exam.” Because that was the last time that you would remember the answers to the test. We hadn’t learned the lessons; we had just memorized the facts.

In *What a Great Idea! 2.0* there is no final exam. Instead, there are Great Idea Action Sheets, designed to encourage you to practice the idea-generating techniques and gain self-sufficiency in exploring the mind-set of innovation.

As you read through this book, I hope you become even more empowered to make creativity a conscious and powerful part of your life and work. By cultivating our creative freedom, we can all join more fully in the underlying innovation movement of this decade. We begin, as we will end, with recognition of the free human spirit, one of the greatest of the world’s truly great ideas.

Enjoy the journey.

Smiling,



Charles Chic Thompson  
Charlottesville, VA  
chicthompson@whatagreatidea.com

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T H E F I R S T S T E P

# FREEDOM

*Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space lies our freedom and power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.*

—Deepak Chopra

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**W**hether you put a pencil to paper, draw a brush across canvas, or bring a new idea to fruition, you demonstrate your creative capacity to express your freedom. Creativity is a feeling, a mental state. Freedom is a feeling as well.

Most of us have physical freedom, but achieving mental freedom takes personal responsibility. Achieving mental freedom is much more important than acquiring power, because, while power gives you a measure of control, freedom allows you to unleash power in unexpected ways.

The first step creative people take, whether or not they do it consciously, is to gain the inner freedom to consider new ideas and new possibilities. This step is



rarely as easy as it sounds.

Embedded within many of us are obstacles to considering new horizons, particularly when these new vistas involve our own thoughts, our own dreams—our own potentially great ideas. Most of us need help to break the bonds we've placed around our own creativity.

## **Do It for Mickey!**

As you start reading *What a Great Idea! 2.0*, I want you to break a long-ingrained pattern and move your watch from the wrist where you normally wear it to the other one. If you don't wear a watch, just move your cell phone or BlackBerry to the other hip.

Then every time you look at your wrong arm to tell the time, I want you to put a really big smile on your face. This will literally open up your mind to the creative strategies that I'm about to lay out for you.

I recommend that you do this switch every time you pick up this book, because your brain is looking forward to the mental exercise and the smiles. If you are now saying, "I'm not going to move my watch; it's fine just where it is," you are going to have a tougher time making the most of the strategies that I suggest here. I'll be patient if you'll be open-minded.

When I was with Disney and we wanted visitors to the theme park to do something they didn't want to do, we would say, "Do it for Mickey."

**Please move your watch . . . for Mickey.**

## C H A P T E R I

# The Second Right Answer

## *Unlearning the Rules of School*

*We entered school as question marks, but graduated as periods.*

—Dr. John Holt, educator

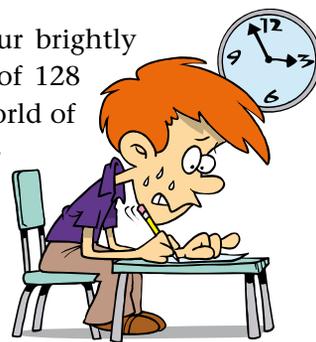
**W**e all started out creative. Remember the sandbox, with your bare toes and your plastic bucket?

Ask children in kindergarten if they like to sing, dance, or draw. All the hands go up. Ask a group of adults and only about 15 percent of the hands go up. Then someone will ask, “What kind of dancing?” or “Can I have two beers first?”

What happened in twenty-five years?

Most of us started school with a full box of sixty-four brightly colored crayons. The really lucky ones had the tin box of 128 colors with a sharpener on the side. But if we lived in a world of purple tree trunks and orange skies for too long, we probably began to hide our creativity.

Why? Because every year more of the colors and colorful wall hangings were taken out of the classroom. We graduated not with sixty-four colors but with two colors—black or blue inside a disposable Bic pen. We



hated the color red because when we saw it in writing, it meant we were wrong.

George Ainsworth Land, author of *Grow or Die*, gave five-year-olds a creativity test used by NASA to select innovative engineers. Ninety-eight percent of the children scored in the “highly creative” range. When these same children were retested at ten years old, only 30 percent were still rated “highly creative.” By the age of fifteen, just 12 percent of them were ranked “highly creative.”

What about the average adult population? Only 2 percent of the adults who took the NASA tests were rated as “highly creative.”

Therefore, our lifetime creativity, measured in terms of our ability to generate a number of new ideas, is at its highest point at five years old and lowest around forty-four years old. It seems that creativity is not just learned, but *un*learned as we advance through life.

Your creativity does, however, start to rebound upon retirement. So what am I going to teach you in this book? *How to retire!* You’ll learn how to retire from your challenges so that you can look at them with fresh, creative eyes. You’ll learn how to unlearn those nagging, ingrained, judgmental rules from elementary school.

## Asking “Why?”

Referring to George Land’s study, at age five, we asked sixty-five questions a day; this number drops to a mere six questions a day at forty-four. And, as those of us with children know, a five-year-old’s questions all start with *why*.

As children, we ask exploratory *whys*. As adults, when we ask *why*, it usually is framed in an accusatory tone, like “Why did you do that?” We spend most of our adult life just giving answers, with a few questions thrown in to sound as if we were listening.

Our lifetime responses can almost be stratified into three ages:

1. The age of “Why?”      Birth–5 years old
2. The age of “Why not?”      5–12 years old
3. The age of “Because!”      12–Retirement

Retirement, however, brings us full circle, giving us a chance to reexperience the joys of childhood, including indulging our creative impulses.



Based on work by the oncologist Dr. Carl Simonton, who introduced the concept that our state of mind could influence our health, our laughter level follows the same curve, dropping from 113 times a day as a child to eleven times a day as a “terminally serious” adult. Some of you are thinking, “Eleven times—that’s a lot.” Many of us know people in the negative numbers on laughter.

In figure 1-1 you’ll see a chart I created that shows the relationship between age and the various aspects of creativity we’re discussing. As you can see, our creativity bottoms out at age forty-four, right when our decision-making skills are being tested on a daily basis.

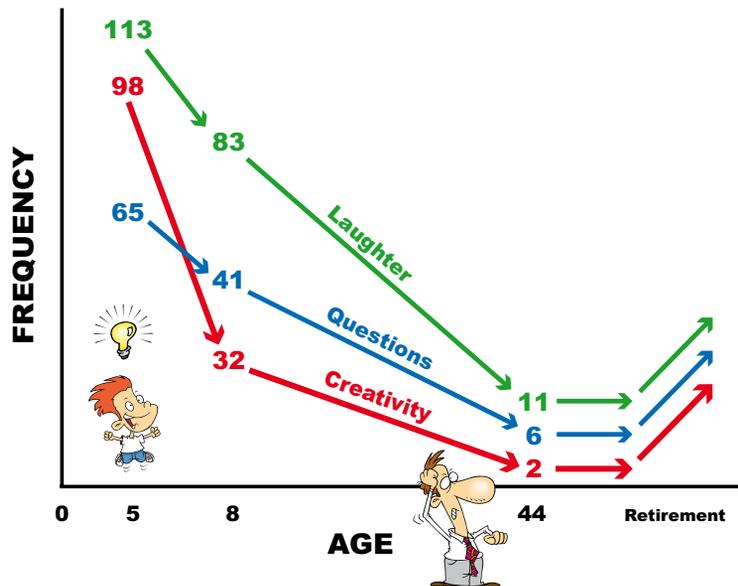


FIGURE 1-1

One of the reasons for these declines is that the experiences children seek out are the ones that we as adults avoid. Remember the old playground teeter-totter? If today’s bureaucratic organizations took the form of a teeter-totter, they’d brace it on both ends to create a level playing field.

How boring. The reason you got on the teeter-totter was to experience the ups and downs.

## Unlearning the Rules

Okay, we know that we all need to be more creative. We think that means devising new “creative solutions” for the challenges we face. However, Dr.

Jonas Salk, who developed the polio vaccine and helped rid the world of this blight, states:

***The answer to any problem preexists. We need to ask the right question to reveal that answer.***

What an important insight. We don't find, create, or invent creative solutions; we reveal them. Therefore, our creative charge is to ask more creative questions that will uncover second and third right answers.

We also need to forget the obsolete answers. Your creative success will be determined by what you know *and* by what you can forget. "Unlearning" those school rules we grew up with may be the quickest way to a breakthrough idea. Here are some "rules of school" that may be holding you back:

1. There is only one right answer.
2. The teacher is always right.
3. The right answer is in the back of the Teacher's Edition.
4. Don't pass notes.
5. The answer is not on the ceiling.

If you were to take a person from one hundred years ago and put him on a street corner, he'd be blown away. But if you were to take that same person and put him in a classroom, within five minutes he would know exactly what's going on. That's because in many schools, it's the same chalkboard; it's the same book-based learning; it's the same directive to sit at your desk in a row and write down what the teacher is saying in the front of the room. In third grade, many of us dreamed of magically finding a copy of the Teacher's Edition so that we would have all the right answers.

These rules worked well in the industrial age, before the advent of information technology, when companies mined the land for their assets. Today, successful organizations mine our minds to extract the precious gems called *ideas*. To create an environment for idea harvesting, the rules definitely have changed:

1. Look for second and third right answers.
2. Challenge management and look for answers from all levels.

3. Constantly revise policy manuals.
4. Pass notes, collaborate, and appreciate diversity.
5. The answers still aren't on the ceiling, but if you look with creative eyes, the questions might be.

## Finding the Second Right Answer

Einstein was once asked what the difference was between him and the average person. He said that if you asked the average person to find a needle in a haystack, she would stop when she found a needle. He, on the other hand, would tear through the entire haystack looking for all possible needles.

When we are confronted with a problem, we feel strong internal pressure to find a solution. When we are encouraged to find a second solution, the second answer is invariably more creative.

Einstein handed out his final exam to a second-year physics class and one student raised his hand and said, "This is the same exam you gave us last year." Einstein replied, "You are very observant, but the answers are different this year."

Plato said, "It is better to answer one question eight different ways than eight different questions one way." Leonardo da Vinci believed that the first way he looked at a problem was too biased toward his usual way of seeing things.

The challenges facing you on your desk and at home probably do not call for true-or-false answers. Let looking for second and third right answers become part of your job description and your family activities.



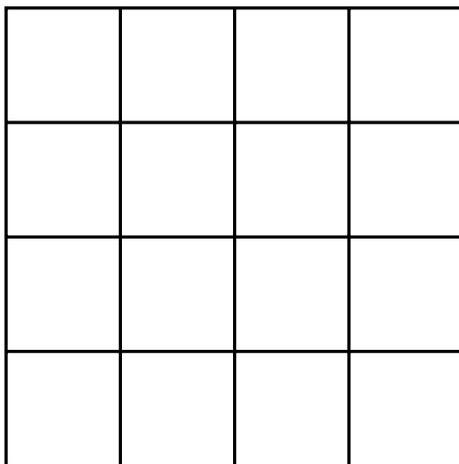
The answers  
are different  
this year.

—Albert Einstein

## THE SECOND RIGHT ANSWER

*This exercise demonstrates the benefits of revisiting your challenges and looking for additional answers.*

Count the number of squares you see in this graphic.



Your first answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Now, look for more: \_\_\_\_\_

Look one more time: \_\_\_\_\_

Your FINAL Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

*Exercise Answer on Next Page (Please Don't Peek)*

During a middle school talk using a laptop computer and PowerPoint slides, a nine-year-old student challenged me. He politely said that there are more than thirty squares, since the graphic is being viewed on a computer screen. Luckily, I asked the child what he saw, and he said he saw the square pixels that compose all the objects on the LCD screen. So based on your computer screen's resolution, the lines making up the graphic comprise millions of square pixels.

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*Exercise Answer*

Most see the sixteen individual squares first. Then they see the big outside  $4 \times 4$  square. Then they see nine more  $2 \times 2$  squares. Finally they see the four  $3 \times 3$  squares for a total of thirty squares. The formula is  $4^2 + 3^2 + 2^2 + 1^2 = 30$ .

## Curiosity in the Classroom

Remember how we used to learn vocabulary words? We memorized the spelling and then we had to write the word in a sentence. Two days after the test, we forgot the spelling because we had only memorized it.

I still remember the first time I was sent out of class into the hall. I couldn't spell *succinct*, much less use it in a sentence. So I went for cleverness and wrote, "The ship se-sinked in the se-sea." My buddies liked it. I also met the other "clever" kids out in the hall; sometimes I would act up just to visit them.

To my distinct pleasure, I recently watched a progressive fifth-grade teacher teach her class the word *curiosity*. The teacher asked the students to find as many words of two or more letters in the word *curiosity* as they could in three minutes. They could rearrange the letters and even spell words in foreign languages. The only rules were that spelling counts and you could not use a letter more than once except for the two "i's." They were to strive for quantity over quality.

Now it's your turn. Grab a piece of paper and go!

Class, *curiosity* is a big word with nine letters, and we are going to learn how to spell it and then define it.

—Fifth-grade teacher

# Curiosity

The class came up with forty-three words. Then they were asked to create their own definition for *curiosity* by only using the words they came up with. They could use nothing else—just those words. The task sounds impossible—or at least like a waste of time—because there are few prepositions with which to make a meaningful sentence.

All the class teams then presented their lists of words and their sentence definitions. Here's my favorite definition for *curiosity* (and imagine it being sung as a rap song):

*Yo . . . your story is crusty.  
Yo . . . your toy is rusty.  
So . . . stir your rut.  
So . . . tour your city.  
Rio is rosy.*

As I was applauding, I wondered if I could use this exercise to help my adult clients define an organizational culture of innovation. So I said to my next group:

*Class, "leadership" is a big word with ten letters and I bet there are numerous words that can be made from those ten letters to help define leadership.*

The class found forty-seven words within the word *leadership* and my favorite definition, using only those words, was this: "Leaders help peers see ripe ideas." Needless to say, the class was jazzed and their brains were alive with curiosity and new insights into the ten-letter word *leadership*.

So the next time you need to define *communications* or *innovation* or *customer service* with your department, you'll know how to start the discussion!

## Where Did the Smiles Go?

All the world loves babies—especially when they smile. According to one doctor I spoke to, babies, on average, smile seventy-five times a day. Where do the smiles go, as we grow older?

Just think! No matter where you go on this planet, your smile is your passport to the best of all human-to-human interactions. We're all different in so many ways: language, education, culture, and customs. But the one thing we do the same the world over is smile.

This is a good thing, because smiling does more for us than just push our cheeks out and show our teeth. A smile is a welcome. It's a reassurance. It's a

A smile is the shortest distance between two people.

—Victor Borge, entertainer

flirtation. It's a job offer. It's acceptance. It's appeasement. It's an apology. It's the bridge from one soul to another.

Behavioral and physiological research has shown us for years that the smile is one of the most important tools in our personal success and survival kits. A smile can boost our self-confidence, help us achieve a state of serene creativity, nurture important relationships, enhance concentration, and combat those blue funks that periodically threaten to drag us down.



A full-face smile also integrates both hemispheres of our brain, which in turn increases our receptivity to new ideas. Next time you are stuck for an idea, try unfolding your arms and turning your “serious” face into a smiling face. You’ll be amazed at how much more receptive conscious smiling makes you to the ideas of others and to your own musings.

Mother Teresa showed us a path to open up our acceptance to new ideas when she stated:

***The smile is the beginning of love. If you can begin to smile naturally upon one another, you will begin to love one another naturally.***

The smile is the first step toward reaching out beyond ourselves and into the hearts of humanity. We all have the will and the ability to smile. And, in an instant, the decision to smile can transform our perceptions and our emotions. The emotions we select for ourselves can change our world in a heartbeat.