

How to Come up With a Breakthrough Idea

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Feeling stuck? Here's a tried-and-true method to jumpstart the creative process.

Scenario 1: You've encountered a problem at work, but all your usual tactics can't solve it. You sense you need a more creative approach, but your imagination isn't delivering the goods. What now?

Scenario 2: You feel like your firm is stuck and its products are somehow missing the mark. You sense that you've got to do *something* to improve your business but you're not sure what that something might be. What next?

In these two situations (and many others), you need is a [breakthrough idea](#)--an idea that literally "breaks through" the mental barriers that are keeping you from achieving the next level of success.

Contrary to popular belief, breakthrough ideas don't always come out of the blue like a sudden stroke of lightning. Based on my experience, it's possible to create breakthroughs pretty much whenever you want. Here's how:

1. Believe that a breakthrough is always possible.

Oddly, this basic idea is often the most difficult part for people to get their minds around. Which is a bit odd, considering that the human brain--including yours--is by far the most complex and creative single object in the known universe.

The mere fact that you're seeking a breakthrough means that your brain is capable of creating one. Your "sense" that something is wrong or that something can be handled more creatively is a certain sign your brain is ready to deliver the goods.

There will always be constraints under which an idea must fit. Even so, there are always creative ideas and new approaches that transcend those constraints.

2. Release the "what" and the "how."

The "what" is the goal that you're seeking, like a creative solution to a problem or a great idea for a new product. The "how" consists of ways that you've sought to achieve those goals in the past.

The reason you need a breakthrough is that your "how" isn't getting you to your "what." Therefore, the more you think about that "what" and the "how," the more you'll knock your head against the barrier that's preventing you from getting there.

Therefore, even though you desperately want that "what," you've got to let it go and stop dwelling on it. At the same time, you must shrug off the "how" as something that's in the past and no longer significant. Only then are you free to...

3. Vividly imagine the "why."

The "why" is the desire that's driving you to achieve the "what" and attempt the "how."

For example, you don't really want a solution to a problem. What you actually want is the feeling of relief and satisfaction when the problem is solved. That's your "why."

Similarly, you don't really want to have a new product idea. What you actually want is probably the certain knowledge that you're improving other people's lives and the feeling of achievement that comes from changing the world.

Here's what to do: Set aside three minutes of alone time, twice a day, for three days. Close your eyes, and imagine yourself experiencing the emotional state that you'll feel when you're on the other side, after having a breakthrough.

Imagine what you're seeing. Imagine what you're hearing. Imagine how your body feels. Make it as real as possible, because this exercise inspires your brain to generate the breakthrough.

4. Embrace the unfamiliar.

Most of us do our best work when we're someplace familiar, using tools we know well.

In this case, however, a major reason you're in a rut (and thus need a breakthrough) is that your brain associates your surroundings with all the stuff you've done, and the thoughts you've had, in the past.

You must therefore get yourself out of the physical location where you feel comfortable and into someplace that lacks associations. This can be anywhere that you can sit and think without being interrupted.

Similarly, the tools you use at work--like your computer or your tablet--also encourage you to follow well-worn lines of thought. Shake things up. Rather than depending upon your tablet, pull out pencil and paper. Or a huge sharpie and a piece of cardboard.

5. Jot down everything.

Re-imagine your "why," then write down everything that pops into your mind about how to get to the "why," even if it's not the "what" that you'd thought you wanted.

This process is similar to [brainstorming](#) except that you're doing it by yourself rather than with a group. However, it's superior to brainstorming in two ways.

First, there are no personalities involved, other than your own. You don't have to worry if you come up with "dumb" ideas because, well, because you're the only one who will know that they're dumb.

Second, and more importantly, your "why" motivation is individual to you, rather than diffused among multiple people with multiple agendas. Because it's personal, it can more easily pull down the barriers to create the breakthrough.

6. Select the best breakthrough.

If you've followed the recipe above, you'll end up with a list of ideas, many of which weren't even in the ballpark of what you originally envisioned. They may have different "whats"--like a new service rather than a new product. They will certainly have different "hows," even if the "what" remains the same.

I can personally vouch for this system because I've used it, unconsciously at first and consciously over the past few years, to generate creative ideas that have moved my career and my life forward.

One of those breakthroughs was in 2007, when the realization struck me that my future would be in blogging rather than magazine writing. Another, more recent major breakthrough was coming up with the [title for my new book](#).

I also use this method for minor breakthroughs, like when I can't decide what to write in this blog. In fact, *this very post* came out of a pen and pencil session at the local YMCA while my son was playing basketball.

Anyway, if you follow the method above, I can almost guarantee that you'll come up with something unexpected.