



Seeing tomorrow's ideas...Today

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Focus on Innovation

Focus on Innovation is a monthly electronic newsletter designed to provoke thoughts and ideas on how to bring innovation to life within the organizations in which we work.

For Those on the Run

Associative barriers that control how we think and the range of ideas that come to us can impede our ability to be innovative. Read this month's newsletter to learn how to overcome associative barriers and become more innovative.

Overcoming Associative Barriers

Innovative ideas emerge most often at "Intersections" of different ways of thinking/viewing the world. Many authors in the field have told us that to become more innovative we must:

- ✚ Partner with those with different expertise or perspectives (to do this we must break out of our own "value networks" that shape and constrain our thinking);
- ✚ Train ourselves in a wide variety of fields (with depth in at least one of them); and
- ✚ Take time to let our "intersectional" ideas percolate to sift through the good ideas from the bad.

This may not be groundbreaking information, however, how many people actually do these things? And how do we overcome the barrier that affects us the most - those associative barriers that limit how we think and the range of ideas that come to us.

Frans Johansson, author of the book *The Medici Effect: Breakthrough Insights at the Intersection of Ideas, Concepts & Cultures* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2004), illustrates the notion of associative barriers by sharing with us the story of young New York chef Marcus Samuelsson and his unusually mixed Swedish-based dishes. Samuelsson combines foods from all over the world, giving his restaurant guests a unique and stellar adventure in tastes and flavors. How does he do this? The answer is that Samuelsson has low associative barriers. He has an ability to easily connect different concepts across fields. Specifically, he has an ability to find winning combinations of foods from Sweden and the rest of the world.

"Psychologists have an explanation for what happens during this process: They say that the mind unravels a chain of associations. By simply hearing a word or seeing an image, the mind unlocks a whole string of associated ideas, each one connecting to another. These chains of associations tend to be clustered around domains related to our own experience. When a chef sees a cod in a fish market she may think of

a particular recipe, which in turn makes her think of the menu items for the upcoming evening. But a writer for a sport-fishing magazine may see something very different. He may think instead of his latest fishing trip, instantly recalling the tackle he used and a story he should write about it. The mind works this way because it follows the simplest path—a previous association. Although the chef may know of sport-fishing, and even have done it on occasion, it is much more likely for her mind to quickly lead the thought pattern, with little or no effort, to the field she uses most—cooking. Chains of associations are efficient; they allow us to move quickly from analysis to action. Although chains of associations have huge benefits, they also carry costs. They inhibit our ability to think broadly. We do not question assumptions as readily; we jump to conclusions faster and create barriers to alternate ways of thinking about a particular situation” (Johansson, 2004, p.39-40).

Low associative barriers are advantageous when trying to find the intersections. People who have succeeded at overcoming their associative barriers have done one or more of the following things:

- ✦ **Expose themselves to a range of cultures.** By living and working in different cultures and spending significant time learning to appreciate them, one can easily overcome associative barriers or even avoid building them in the first place.
- ✦ **Learn differently.** Spend significant amount of time reading and drawing, learning and experimenting, without guidance from instructors, peers and experts. Many innovators of our time - Darwin, Edison, Steve Jobs - consider what they have learned of most value was to be self-taught.
- ✦ **Reversed their assumptions.** Overcoming our associative barriers means directing the mind to take unusual paths while thinking about a situation, issue or problem. Assumption reversal is one of the most effective ways to do this. By reversing assumptions the mind is encouraged to view a situation from a completely different perspective, clearing the path to the intersection. For more on the assumption reversal technique, refer to Michael Michalko's book, *Cracking Creativity* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2001).
- ✦ **Took on multiple perspectives.** View a situation from many different perspectives, specifically those that are radically different from the ones you usually work with. Like assumption reversals the point is not to come up with a specific idea per se, but rather to free up the mind and escape the routine chains of associations. Try applying the idea to someone or something else, or creating constraints by accident or on purpose, to help push you to explore alternative ways to a given problem.

What's the Bottom line

We all have the ability to overcome our associative barriers. In fact, if we wish to find the “Intersections” of ideas, it is a requirement.



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If you would like more information about the ideas and topics listed in this issue, contact Judy Laws, Ph.D. at jlaws@foursightconsulting.com.

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