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INNOVATION

Two Simple Concepts to Free Up Innovation

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George E.L. Barbee is one of the original Batten fellows at the University of Virginia Darden Graduate School of Business. Before that he was a PwC partner for 20 years. This piece is adapted from his book *63 Innovation Nuggets* (Innovation Etc., 2015).

How often do you really stretch yourself, mentally? Most of us, most of the time, stay in our comfort zone. We know our strengths and what is expected of us, and we hover in this space, secure in the knowledge that we are doing an OK job.

The problem with this approach: Often the greatest learning and innovating takes place when we step outside of our comfort zones and stretch into what I like to call our “yikes zone.”

Moving into the yikes zone makes us uncomfortable, nervous, or downright scared. We worry we will fail and look bad in front of colleagues. Maybe our career will suffer. Often it is comfortable to retreat back into old habits, the ones that made us feel safe. Or to freeze and do nothing as opportunities to learn and grow pass us by. But what might open up for us if instead we stretch ourselves into our yikes zone and tackle those things that give us the most trouble?

There are two steps for doing just that: (1) figuring out where your yikes zone begins, and then (2) working to get yourself safely into it.

Begin by identifying the border between your comfort and yikes zones. Are projects with a long time frame or large scope intimidating? Is speaking up in a group difficult? Or is being quiet and really listening a challenge? Maybe you shy away from new technologies. Perhaps you micromanage and feel uncomfortable letting team members work independently, preferring to do most things yourself, or with an overly watchful eye. Whatever it is, name it, feel it, sit with it. You'll feel that familiar discomfort seeping in, but resist the urge to retreat or freeze.

Next, break the task down into parts and find a piece that you can get started on. You needn't launch headlong into the yikes zone. Rather, you can dip a toe in, acclimate to the discomfort, and then, picking up other pieces one at a time, begin to wade deeper. This leads to experimentation and discovery, which are keys to learning and innovation.

The Power of a Brain Vacation

One of the most powerful experiences I've had of stretching myself into my yikes zone came out of working with George Prince, who wrote prolifically on the subject of creativity and codeveloped a group problem-solving and innovation method called synectics. Essentially, Prince would walk diverse groups through exercises designed to tackle some really big challenges, such as "How do we get jets into outer space?" Yikes, right?

In my case, Prince brought together a group of colleagues from various departments at the Wilkinson Sword razor blade company, where I was a strategist, to brainstorm the next generation of shaving products. This was at a time when most of us felt that we had done all the innovating possible in that space and believed that finding a new razor would be next to impossible. But the group included people who had never worked together before: engineers, marketers, strategists, R&D specialists, and finance people.

As we began, Prince didn't just say, "OK, ladies and gentlemen, shout out ideas for new razors!" No. This would have likely resulted in blank stares, and maybe a few relatively new ideas shared. Instead, he was able to stretch us into our yikes zone — sharing creative ideas for working toward what seemed like an insurmountable task with virtual strangers — by breaking the foreboding problem down into pieces in a number of creative ways.

He ran us through a series of exercises designed to "take your mind on vacation," which allowed us to make creative connections outside of our normal rules. We could offer "absurd" ideas without negative peer value judgments. He

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asked us to delve into “essential paradoxes.” What if a shave was close and comfortable? Could something be firm and soft at the same time? What about soft and rugged? How would that look and feel? What did we like about that? What didn’t we like? In this way we worked small pieces of the larger puzzle until we had hit on an idea that stuck. It resulted in a new encapsulated blade shaving system originated by Wilkinson and further improved upon by Gillette in the Trac II and Mach III razors.

The technique had a tremendous effect on me: I saw that we came out of our shells and were thinking, sharing, and moving forward. Breaking the task down resulted in the eventual launch of some truly revolutionary and innovative products into the marketplace.

Just a Few Phone Calls

In another example, I was part of a group of real-estate executives who were presented with a chance to rezone a piece of land in Alexandria, Va. It was an important opportunity and we were told we had to act soon or it might pass us by, despite the fact that the payoff probably wouldn’t come for another decade.

It’s easy to focus on something that is immediate and needs to be decided on tomorrow or next week. But what about longer-term opportunities? Does taking on a project that will require a decade of work tip you into your yikes zone? If so, consider this: Even something 10 years off can be broken down into more immediate pieces.

With the help of diverse real estate professionals, we identified the most likely steps we would need to take over the 10-year period with benchmarks for progress toward the rezoning. Taking this timeline and pulling out immediate next steps was key. We then formed teams and a budget, and measured ourselves accordingly.

The first piece I took up was to contact eight neighbors of the property. I gave myself a deadline of six weeks to call and meet with them. “OK,” I thought, “I can make a few phone calls.” Once the task was complete, I could take a deep breath, feeling satisfied with my work and motivated to continue to the next step, which was then much easier to take on.

Our small coalition is nearly two years into the project, which is moving ahead and has high morale and active participation.

Don't be afraid to discover your yikes zone. In fact, once you've gone into this exciting new place, you should be more reluctant to stay in your comfort zone. Push yourself. Maybe you are tasked with leading a new initiative that you aren't sure how to tackle. Or you know that in order to successfully complete a project, you will have to take on new skills, or a lengthy and detailed timeline of tasks, or you will need to delegate and trust others. Breaking the imposing task down into doable pieces is likely to be your best opportunity for learning, growing, and innovating.

Link to article on strategy+business:

<https://www.strategy-business.com/blog/Two-Simple-Concepts-to-Free-Up-Innovation?gko=c1865>

Link to George Barbee's website:

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63 Innovation Nuggets (the book)

<https://www.amazon.com/63-Innovation-Nuggets-aspiring-innovators/dp/0996753109>

