

Trying to engage people in ways that enhance quality, nurture appropriate innovation, and deliver more compelling value to customers? If so, maybe it's time to take a fresh look at what it takes to bring out the real genius in yourself, your colleagues, and your organization...

Unlocking Genius in Yourself and Your Organization

Alan Gregerman

Picture this scene repeated almost every day in companies and organizations around the globe as groups of all shapes and sizes meet to attack a pressing business problem or unlock an amazing new opportunity.

They gather in conference rooms, boardrooms, lunchrooms, corner offices, hallways lined with pictures of past successes, private rooms at local restaurants, conference or “retreat” centers, or sometimes outside if the weather permits. They are armed with flipcharts, brightly colored markers, Post It® notes, spreadsheets, Microsoft® PowerPoint® presentations, market studies, customer surveys,

competitive intelligence, boat loads of important information downloaded from the Internet, props and toys, a trained or untrained facilitator, a sense of urgency and a list of questions quite possibly inspired by Socrates. Each element is intended to spark their creativity, get them “out-of-the-box,” free them from the powerful grip of everyday thinking (and their current reality), and lead to a breakthrough that will, at a minimum, ensure their organization’s survival and at best revolutionize their world and life as they—and hopefully the customers—know it.

At the epic moment when the late arrivals have finally appeared,

received kidding and absolution for their tardiness, secured the essential super-sized mug of caffeine and taken their seats, the leader of the session begins. “We are at a critical point,” he or she laments in a tone reminiscent of some classic movies, “when the future of our group, product, service, organization, entire civilization or _____ (you can fill in the blank) hangs in the balance. The clock is ticking,” (which I always assume is a good thing) he or she continues, “our backs are to the wall,”

(which generally beats having our fronts to the wall since it suggests that we might be able to see ahead) and we must come up with a newer, better, faster, stronger, easier or otherwise more innovative approach”—e.g., we must build a better mousetrap and a better mouse. Then after a dramatic pause,

he or she utters the dreaded and overused phrase: “So, who has an out-of-the-box idea?”

Then there’s a moment of silence—quite possibly to pay tribute to those who have tried before them. Though more likely it’s because everyone in the room has either wrestled with this issue unsuccessfully before, has no idea why they were chosen for this assignment, is less than eager to put the first marginal idea on the table, or is just plain clueless about what to do. Even though they are told, “there is no such thing as a bad idea,” those with ideas fear for the silent scorn and cleverly crafted smirks that might accompany the floating of some half-baked thought. Amid the crash of pins dropping the subtle sound of sarcasm quickly begins to fill the room.

“Ohhhh!?!? You want out-of-the-box ideas!” is the quiet yet resounding cry of those who, in an earlier life, would have been the first to step out on a limb or swing from the monkey bars without a net or a parent to catch them. Then after a moment of silent meditation, a spokesperson for the creatively challenged summons the courage to speak.

“Are we talking about totally new ideas here?” he or she wonders aloud. “I mean things we’ve never thought of before or are we just supposed to come up with a better way of doing what we’re already doing?” In other words, should we dust off the same tired

old lame ideas that we’ve always had for solving this problem? (And hope that the customer thinks it’s at least a semi-quantum leap forward?)

“Some new ideas would be great,” encourages the group’s leader. “After all, the world and our market are changing faster than we ever imagined.” Which means, without beating a dead horse around the bush, that: “Competitor X has just redefined quality by launching its amazing new self-fixing wismo,” or “Competitor Y

has just unveiled its new proactive service warranty,” or “Competitor Z has just dropped prices 25%” in an insane (and possibly quite effective) move to crush us like a bug, or the “Citizens we serve are about to revolt if we don’t figure out how to dramatically reduce response time.”

Now the cat, cleverly disguised as a culture of plodding incrementalism parading as a deer in the headlights, is out of the bag. A scary picture in any world, let alone one that requires

dramatic change and fresh thinking.

“We need really new ideas,” he or she continues. “Breakthrough ideas. Ideas that will shake up the way we do our business. They need to be implementable by the start of next quarter or before the next total eclipse of our bottom line—whichever comes first.”

Then he or she scans the room in the hope that someone, inspired by the moment, will say: “In that case, I have a whole pocketful of new, creative, and totally brilliant ideas to put on the table.” Alas, it is not to be.

Lacking a better alternative, they do what any group of self-respecting adults would do. They roll up their sleeves, grab their coffee or soda, and get started. Everyone tries to “brainstorm” as hard as they can, which is no small feat given the big-time constraints of their collective years of formal education combined with the time they’ve spent in this or any other similar organization (that has been systematically sucking the creativity right out of them since the day they arrived).

For a brief moment at the outset there is some hope that the stars will align and the gods or at least the Tooth Fairy will bring forth from their collective knowledge, wisdom, and experience at least one great and novel idea that will light up the white board, gather momentum, and move into the marketplace (after

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About the Book

In *Surrounded by Geniuses*, Alan Gregerman presents a revolutionary guide to personal, professional, and organizational success based on two powerfully simple ideas. First, he contends that there is genius hidden in all of us. Furthermore, we are surrounded by a world filled with genius that can be used to transform any company or organization to deliver compelling customer value.

Gregerman then shows us in clear and practical ways how to unlock the genius in ourselves and our organizations by discovering and applying insight from the worlds of business, history, popular culture, nature, science, and even science fiction—taking us on 10 remarkable journeys to learn essential lessons from a world-class shock trauma unit, eight-year-old “salespeople,” rocket scientists, aerobics instructors, cheetahs, *Seinfeld* reruns, Spiderman, and others. By the end, you will be astounded to find yourself surrounded by so many brilliant people and ideas.

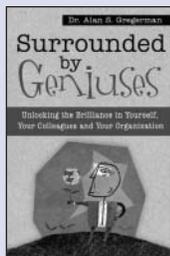
Innovation specialist and author of the highly successful *Lessons From the Sandbox*, Gregerman presents an insightful, practical, and motivational program to challenge the way people think about themselves and their colleagues and to bring out the brilliance of any team. The program’s simple, actionable formula is presented in ten true stories (or “journeys”) that give the reader an easy way to learn deep principles and immediately put them into action.

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Breakthroughs Require Engagement and Imagination

Breakthroughs occur when we leave our comfortable confines and engage the world around us with our senses turned on full blast with a real spirit of curiosity and a readiness to notice and question everything. They occur when we find new stuff—ideas, insights, and things that are remarkable—to stir in the pot and when we test the bounds of other people’s (and even other creatures’) best thinking against the needs of our customers and our industry. They occur when smart and engaged people are challenged to rediscover the wonder and curiosity of their childhood in a focused and passionate way—by wandering purposefully beyond the boundaries of what we already know. Barring this, our best intentions are doomed to fail.

Breakthroughs typically happen when we build on something that already exists—though not always something that exists in our own industry, marketplace, or discipline. Even the most brilliant ideas have always been inspired by something that someone else has done, thought, or dreamed—in another company or organization, another country or culture, another walk of life, or on a walk in the woods, across the jungle, along the shore, through a museum, or down a bustling city street. Burrs inspired Velcro, birds inspired planes, the powerful sound of gospel music in the streets of Memphis and other cities inspired rock and roll, a boot maker with small-town values named Leon Leonwood Bean inspired important thinking about the value of guaranteeing customer satisfaction, a time 150 years ago when milk was delivered to everyone’s door inspired pizza delivery today, the idea of eliminating the middleman inspired one of the world’s largest personal computer makers, and so on. It is this inspiration that can rarely be reproduced by simply convening and “brainstorming.” Like Benjamin Franklin, we have to stand in a storm to truly be inspired (or electrified) by it. But when we do—as individuals and organizations—something starts to click.

They Also Require Us to be Different

Business and organizational success is all about being different in ways that deliver greater value to our customers. We can only do things differently if we see things differently. This sense of “vision” and of seeing new and better possibilities is what makes truly great companies, organizations, and people stand out

overcoming a host of internal barriers along the way). But beyond the retreaded concepts and modest enhancements to existing efforts, magic rarely ever springs forth from the confines of their home for the day.

Few breakthroughs happen this way. It’s hard to be brilliant sitting on our butts.

from the pack. Being different doesn't mean that we have to create brilliant and "valuable" ideas from scratch, though that would certainly be nice. We can win by unlocking the possibilities in someone else's great ideas and being the first (or the best) at adapting them to our world. Our real task is to find the right ideas and make them "ours" in ways that truly matter to those we serve. The only skills we really need are an understanding of what is important to our customers, an open mind, and a sense of curiosity.

Commit to casting a wider net—to hanging out in places filled with inspiration, to reading things you would not normally read, to asking questions you would not routinely ask, to talking with strangers who know nothing about your world but a lot about their own, to walking in someone else's shoes, pursuing a new hobby, or looking at the world with different eyes. Begin with the belief that you can make a compelling difference. Then all you need are a moment of inspiration, the right circumstances, and the right insight.

Getting Started

For a while I have had the unusual habit of looking in our customers' "in boxes" to see what they read, where they hang out, and who and what is on their radar screens. I typically find cause for concern and real insight on why there is a lack of genius and creativity in so many companies and organizations. Most people spend their few free minutes a day reading stuff that doesn't really matter. Or, I should clarify, doesn't really matter if we are trying to provide different and compelling value as individuals and organizations. This stuff is typically about their own industries or their specific fields of expertise.

People in an information technology company tend to read magazines, journals, and blogs about I.T. They tend to get invitations to meetings and conferences about I.T. Folks who are in human resources tend to read magazines, journals, and blogs about H.R. Talk about corporate and functional inbreeding. The good news is everyone else in your industry or your functional area is reading, hearing, and learning the same things. If you are really good at keeping on top of this stuff you can be just as good as your best colleagues and competitors in other companies who are all keeping on top of the very same stuff—or you can look at very different things.

As leading pharmaceutical companies struggle to discover the next generation of blockbuster drugs,

most of their people are reading the same scientific journals, attending the same meetings, and talking about the latest insights from the very same science. After all, they have made multi-billion dollar investments in brilliant researchers, world-class laboratories, and information technology that enables them to slice through data and possible compounds faster and more efficiently than ever before. But this research model is producing fewer and fewer breakthroughs at the same time that the lives of more and more people depend on their genius.

A few enlightened ones are actually taking journeys to places filled with very different inspiration and insight. Everyday geniuses in companies like Novartis are now traveling around the world and back in time to explore the possibilities of ancient remedies in countries like China. Maybe there are lessons to learn from herbs and treatments and acupuncture that we will never discover in the finest labs. Maybe there are equally important lessons about diet, meditation, and exercise that hold some of the keys to success. Perhaps there is an even more compelling lesson to learn in the combination of ideas from different places and different domains. A drug, an herb, some yoga, and regular participation in an aerobics class might be the essential cure for what ails so many of us. Maybe the adage "better life through chemistry" has kept us from seeing the real answer. Could the right combination of ancient wisdom and modern technology be the right approach? Perhaps we should focus our research on a much broader form of curiosity.

Da Vinci didn't talk to humans about how to fly because they had no idea how to do it (though Icarus did make a valiant attempt). Instead he wandered around and studied birds. It would take several more centuries for it to happen, but it wasn't for a lack of thinking differently about the world and the magic of flight.

Start by thinking where your curiosity could lead you, because inside that curiosity is the beginning of what it takes to enhance quality and deliver more compelling value. If you'd like a bit more help getting comfortable with your own amazing potential to explore, think, and create, here are six things you can do today to strengthen your ability and genius and that of your team:

- *Expand your reading horizons.* Subscribe to and read enthusiastically at least three magazines or journals that interest you. Focus on new ideas that have

nothing to do with your company, organization, or job. Then start to broaden your array of books and other sources of information and inspiration. You might also want to make regular visits to your favorite bookstore or library to see what ideas are hot and promising.

- *Hit the road in search of new ideas.* Take mini-excursions into the world around you to unlock fresh ideas and new ways of doing things. Create a mix of “planned” activities where you go to a specific place that is likely to offer real insight for a particular problem or opportunity and unplanned wanderings with your eyes wide open to any and all possibilities. Pay particular attention to all of the nothings that really seem to matter and all of the promises that are made and kept. Look at signs and billboards along the way and pause to overhear other people’s conversations.
- *Asking stimulating questions whenever you have the chance.* Start asking more questions in every meeting you lead or are invited to attend. Try to challenge yourself and your colleagues in a positive way, to question everything you are doing with the objective of determining whether there might be a better way. You might even ask people to think about what should be done to be perfect, faster, more responsive, or more remarkable. Think about what it means to create the most compelling performance.
- *Become your customer’s best student.* Hang out with your customers and commit to learning as much as you can about their world and the challenges they face. Then invite them on some of your journeys of discovery to explore and unlock new ideas and possibilities together. Create a new and more compelling conversation together that challenges both of you to anticipate their evolving needs and imagine a more compelling picture of their future success.
- *Make friends with unusual people.* Talk to strangers whose work and ideas fascinate you and better understand how others use their curiosity and passion to deliver compelling value for those they choose to serve. Befriend people in businesses and organizations you admire. Get to know artists who are constantly trying to stretch our thinking and do

something different that matters. Get involved in organizations that are really making a difference in your community, especially ones that bring together people from many walks of life. Tutor a child who will also mentor you on how they see the world. Commit to building the best and most diverse network possible. Nurturing relationships with people who have different interests, perspectives, and ways of thinking about things that matter to them is a great way to keep your own thinking fresh and relevant.

- *Cast an even wider net.* Look to nature, history, geography, and the genius of other people and other cultures as an untapped source of great inspiration. Dare yourself to understand what other people and other creatures know so clearly and how it might apply to your world and the world of your customers.

By doing each of these things you are likely to strengthen your ability to unlock the genius in yourself and the genius in the world around to deliver greater value for the customers you serve. The greatest skill that any person or organization can possess is a sense of curiosity and possibilities, so stop saying that you are not curious and creative. These are gifts that you and all of the geniuses in your organization were born with, so why not use them? Now is your chance to dust them off and put them to great use!

Note: This article is adapted from the new book Surrounded by Geniuses: Unlocking the Brilliance in Yourself, Your Colleagues, and Your Organization.



Alan Gregerman is the author of *Surrounded by Geniuses: Unlocking the Brilliance in Yourself, Your Colleagues, and Your Organization*. He is the president and chief innovation officer of VENTURE WORKS Inc., a consulting firm based in Silver Spring, MD, that helps leading companies grow and prosper by bringing out the genius in all of their people. A leading authority on business strategy and innovation, he has been called “one of the most original and inspiring thinkers in business today.” Gregerman can be reached via e-mail at innovate@venture-works.com or by telephone at 301-585-1600.