

# 3 steps you can take now to unlock your inner innovator

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BUSTER**

Some of the greatest innovators may eat, sleep and breathe in Silicon Valley, but you don't have to live there to be innovative. In fact, you don't even need to be an entrepreneur.

We all have the potential to drive innovation -- not just in business, but in every aspect of life. That's because innovation isn't in the clouds. It's in the details. We see it in the products and services we rely on in our daily lives.

So how do we become more innovative? You can learn how to unlock your inner innovator with these three steps.

## **1. Break down the elements.**

Innovators rarely invent a new product. Most innovation comes when someone tweaks, enhances or changes a product that's already out there.

Steve Jobs didn't invent the phone, mp3 player or camera; he packaged them together. Uber didn't invent cabs; it modernized communication between riders and drivers.

Because innovation often hides in the changes we make to existing products and services, you need to break an item or process down to its core elements. Start examining the various components that make up the whole.

Take eyeglasses, for instance. They're comprised of frames and lenses. Remove the frames and voila -- you've got contacts. Switch out the lens for a darker piece of glass, and sunglasses appear. Get rid of the prescription and behold, fashion glasses. (You'd be surprised how many people wear frames just to get the look.)

The better you see a product or service for its fundamental parts, the better able you are to identify specific aspects that could be modified or improved.

Whenever you look at a product or service, ask yourself, "Where can I subtract, change or add something to one component that would make it better or serve a new purpose?" This approach will set you on a path toward innovation.

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## **2. Show a little empathy.**

Boiled down to its essence, innovation is simply a new way to solve an existing problem. And you can't solve problems without cultivating empathy. Empathy enables you to share another's feelings and relate to the pain, struggle and conflict experienced by an individual or a group. When you appreciate someone's struggle, you're in a greater position to figure out a way to help.

Don't mistake sympathy for empathy. Sympathy is feeling sorry for people. Empathy is putting yourself in their shoes and walking a few miles.

Do you sympathize with your clients, boss or colleagues, or do you empathize with them? Sure, it's important to care about them, but do you stop to think bothers them? What keeps them up at night? Really challenge yourself to identify with their needs.

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### **3. Visualize the ideal solution.**

To implement true change, you must visit the world of the ideal. The most creative ideas emerge when you have room to think freely.

Here's the problem with most visualization exercises: The moment we get an idea, we start dissecting how to make it work on a practical level. We get so constricted by "real-world" restrictions that we miss out on great opportunities for change. If you want to be an innovator, leave reality and all of its limitations at the door for a little while.

Albert Einstein learned the power of visualization at an early age. His school applied the teaching methods of Johann Pestalozzi, a Swiss educational reformer who believed . Pestalozzi championed the idea that imagery is where all knowledge begins.

At 16, Einstein used visualization and thought experiments to discover the speed of light is always constant. Later in his life, he told a reporter for the : "I am enough of an artist to draw freely upon my imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination circles the world."

Sit down and visualize how your product would work in a perfect world. How would an ideal solution look? After you've conceptualized the ultimate vision, you can start exploring how much of the ideal you can make real.

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Innovation isn't reserved for a few MIT grads working in Silicon Valley. Every one of us can tap into a more innovative way of thinking and make new realities possible. What are you waiting for?