

Be an Anthropologist: Explore to Innovate

By: Eliezer Silveira Filho

Three prisoners trapped in a cave from the moment of birth can only see a wall lit by a fire. On this wall are projected shadows of statues representing humans, animals and objects. The shadows are manipulated as daily scenes that are analyzed and judged by the prisoners. Now, imagine if one of them can break free to explore the external world. When you leave the cave and get in touch with the real world, you are enchanted with real beings and real everyday life. When you return and share with the others, you are called crazy. This famous myth told by Plato reinforces the need to explore reality in order to, in fact, know it.



The act of observing and exploring is one of the skills required to be an innovative person. A real challenge, innovation is a question of survival. According to [Peter Diamandis](#), specialist on the subject and rector of Singularity University, "40 percent of Fortune 500 companies will no longer exist in the next 10 years." This transformation leads to new connections, new possibilities and—above all else—leads to changes in the shape of our industries.

Many possibilities lie ahead, generated by the combination of computing, software, connectivity and sensors. According to Moore's law, computer processing capacity would double every 18 months. That rate of advancement has resulted in rapid leaps in developments, especially in the last two decades. And this pace should accelerate even more with quantum computing, allowing for the development of even more agile supercomputers with the ability to process highly complex problems.

When we think of innovation, we often see the image of those laboratories with inventors doing tests, often without knowing what will come. But there is a big difference between innovation and invention. Invention comes from the Latin *inventio* and means something that has been found, discovered. Innovation is the intersection of invention with need. Put fundamentally, an innovation must fulfill a need.

Innovation can be both incremental and disruptive, but it always has the clear goal to fulfill a need. The challenge is to know what the real need is, what is the "job to be done." It is important to understand this real goal, regardless of the technology applied. An incandescent light bulb company, for example, that sold a lamp that had to be changed every three months, must have been hit by LED lighting, which takes up to 10 years to be replaced. But if this same company understands that its purpose is to provide lighting, it must adapt to the technological changes and pressures to transform its business.

There are five key points to developing creative potential and, with this set of capabilities, lead transformation in this volatile, uncertainly, complex and ambiguous scenario.

Connecting

Paul Romer, an economist at New York University, says that "true sustainable economic growth does not stem from new resources but from existing resources that are rearranged to make them more valuable." We live the remix era, where ideas and innovations come from the association of things, and the cognitive ability to build these associations is a gigantic source of creativity.

An example of this exercise is the Apple iPod. Putting hundreds of songs into a multimedia player created the challenge of quick navigation through the new (and vast) library. An engineer, seeing a classic rotating padlock, had the idea of integrating the disk-like interaction to get through the library quickly. This relatively simple association created a new interface form that had years of success. Infinite associations can be created by connecting objects, people, and exploring various possibilities. As Steve Jobs said, "Creativity is connecting things ... Creative people connect experiences that they have had and synthesize new things."

Questioning

Returning to Plato's myth, when we are conditioned to an environment, we often lose sight of the various possibilities and realities around. Therefore, a questioning mind helps the process of finding new ways. Plato reinforced this by saying that "asking the right questions is often more important than having the correct answers."

One brainstorming technique is "star-bursting," where the questions raise new questions. When thinking about a new product, questions like "what resources should we include?" or "who is our client?" help organize the creative process. The interrogative words *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why* and *how* are essential in this process of finding solutions.

Observing

Anthropology is the science dedicated to a deep understanding of the human being. The term has Greek origin, joining "anthropos" (man, human being) and "logos" (knowledge). Observation is a method of anthropology. It consists of the researcher who enters the group he is studying in order to understand the logic that moves this community. This is one of the fundamental exercises in the innovation process.

Through observation, we go beyond the theory about how we imagine the interaction of a user with a product and come to understand in fact how the process works in the real world. In the myth of the cave, the prisoner who left the cave stopped observing the daily life in the shadows. He came to understand reality, which opened up a universe of possibilities.

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Experimenting

In 2017, [Amazon was considered the most innovative company](#) by *Fast Company*. The main reason for this recognition is given to the culture of experimentation of the company. According to Jeff Bezos, the company's CEO, one of the things that made the company innovate is how staff managed to grow the number of experiments, reducing their production cost. "If you can increase the number of experiments from 100 to 1,000, you dramatically increase the innovations you produce."

Experimenting is learning new techniques, testing hypotheses, and allowing yourself to err in order to learn from it. The best way to learn is by testing. Thus, we are able to answer questions that we did not find answers to in observation or research.

Networking

Innovators tend to excel at networking. Marc Benioff, founder and CEO of Salesforce, has a habit of interacting with younger entrepreneurs. One of the examples is Drew Houston, the 28-year-old cofounder of Dropbox. "He grew up on the Internet, I did not. So he can see things in ways I do not. That perspective is really important." When developing a network of contacts, considering diversity is an important point. People with different cultures, from diverse industries, and in different roles help bring different perspectives.

These are simple points, but they are challenging in implementation. With this effort, we fail to observe "geniuses" like Jobs and Bezos, and we begin to learn from this process to be able to innovate as much as they have succeeded. Innovative behavior can be assimilated, but for that we need to take a risk and leave the cave. Only in this way can we open our horizons and find exponential possibilities.