



CREATIVE CONFIDENCE




UNLEASHING THE CREATIVE
POTENTIAL WITHIN US ALL.

by TOM KELLEY

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE ART
OF INNOVATION

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PREFACE

This is a book from two brothers who have been close all our lives. As children in small-town Ohio, we played baseball on the same Tigers Little League teams in the summer and built snow forts together in the winter. We shared a bedroom for 14 years, tacking up posters of muscle cars on the knotty-pine walls in the kind of finished basement that was popular in the Midwest. We went to the same grade school, joined the same Boy Scout troop, went on family vacations to Lake Erie, and once camped all the way to California and back with our parents and two sisters. We took many things apart, and put some of them back together.

But a close-knit relationship and overlapping lives do not mean our paths were the same. David has always been a bit unconventional. His favorite class in high school was art. He played in a local rock band called The Sabers with his friends. He built giant plywood structures like jukeboxes and grandfather clocks for the annual spring carnival at Carnegie Mellon. He started a firm called Intergalactic Destruction Company (the month Star Wars debuted in theaters) so he and his friends could do construction work together for the summer. Just for fun, he painted a bright

green graphic stripe three feet tall along the back wall of our parents' house that is still there 40 years later. And he always loved creating one-of-a-kind gifts, like the time he made his girlfriend a phone that would only dial his number, no matter what buttons she pushed.

Tom, on the other hand, followed a path that seemed more traditional. After studying liberal arts in college, he considered going to law school, tried working at an accounting firm for a while, and played an IT-related role for General Electric. After getting an MBA, he worked in a spreadsheet-intensive position as a management consultant. Along the way, his jobs were mostly predictable, both in their day-to-day work and the longer-term career paths each offered. Then he joined the design world and discovered there was more fun to be had coloring outside the lines.

We remained close all this time and spoke to each other most weeks, even when we lived 8,000 miles apart. After David founded the design and innovation firm that would become IDEO, Tom helped out there during business school and then rejoined full time in 1987. We have worked together ever since, as the firm continued to grow: David as CEO and then chairman, Tom in leadership roles that included marketing, business development, and storytelling.

The story of this book begins in April of 2007, when David—the older of us—got a call from his doctor, who uttered one of the scariest, most dreaded words in the medical lexicon: cancer. He was at his daughter's fourth-grade class helping 9-year-olds think about how to redesign backpacks when the call came through, and he managed to spend another hour with the young students before breaking away to process this new setback. David had been diagnosed with a squamous cell carcinoma—throat cancer—and given a 40 percent chance of surviving the ordeal.

At that moment, Tom had just wrapped up a presentation to 2,000 executives in São Paulo, Brazil. As he sat down backstage and switched his cell phone back on, it rang almost immediately. When he got the sobering news of David's diagnosis, he abandoned the rest of his South American trip and headed immediately for the airport. Although he knew there was little he could do to help, he had to get home to see David.

We had always been close, but David's illness further cemented our bond that year. Through the next six months of chemotherapy, radiation, hydration, morphine, and finally surgery, we saw each other almost every day, sometimes talking endlessly and other times passing hours together while speaking barely a word. At the Stanford Cancer Center, we crossed paths with patients who

eventually lost their battle with cancer. We couldn't help wondering whether time was running out for David too.

If there is an upside of that terrible disease, it's that cancer forces deep reflection, causing you to think about purpose and meaning in your life. Everyone we know who has survived cancer says that they look at life differently in its aftermath. Late in the year, as David recovered from surgery, we saw the first real hope of pushing cancer into the background of our lives. Faced with that joyous possibility, we vowed that if David survived, we would do two things together that involved neither doctors nor hospitals:

First, we'd take a fun brother/brother trip together somewhere in the world, which we had never done in our adult lives.

And second, we would work together side-by-side on a project that would allow us to share ideas with each other and the world.

The trip was an unforgettable week in Tokyo and Kyoto, exploring the best of modern and ancient Japanese cultures. And the collaborative project was creating the book you now hold in your hands.

Why a book about creative confidence? Because we have noticed from thirty years at IDEO that innovation can be both fun and rewarding. But as you look at the sweep of your life and start to think of a legacy that survives beyond it, giving others the opportunity to live up to their creative capacity seems like a worthy purpose. In the midst of cancer in 2007, a recurring question was, "What was I put on Earth to do?" This book is part of the answer: To reach out to as many people as possible. To give future innovators the opportunity to follow their passions. To help individuals and organizations unleash their full potential—and build their own creative confidence.

—David and Tom Kelley

Belief in your creative capacity lies at the heart of innovation.

INTRODUCTION

THE HEART OF INNOVATION

When you hear the word “creativity,” what do you think of next?

If you are like many people, your mind immediately leaps to artistic endeavors like sculpture, drawing, music, or dance.

You may equate “creative” with “artistic.”

You may believe that architects and designers are paid to be creative thinkers, but CEOs, lawyers, and doctors are not.

Or you may feel that being creative is a fixed trait, like having brown eyes—either you’re born with creative genes, or you’re not.

As brothers who’ve worked together for 30 years at the forefront of innovation, we have come to see this set of misconceptions as “the creativity myth.” It is a myth that far too many people share. This book is about the opposite of that myth. It is about what we call “creative confidence.” And at its foundation is the belief that we are all creative.

The truth is, we all have far more creative potential waiting to be tapped.

We’ve helped thousands of companies bring break-

through ideas to market—from Apple’s first computer mouse to next-generation surgical tools for Medtronic to fresh brand strategies for The North Face in China. And we’ve also seen that our methods can produce a new, creative mindset in people that can dramatically enhance their lives, whether they work in the fields of medicine, law, business, education, or science.

Over the past three decades, we’ve helped countless people nurture their creativity and put it to valuable use. They’ve created housing optimized for the needs of service men and women returning from war zones. They’ve set up an ad hoc innovation team in a corporate hallway, generating so much energy and noise that the company gave them a dedicated project space. They’ve developed a low-cost system for screening and fitting hearing aids among elderly people in remote villages of developing countries, helping some of the 360 million people in the world who suffer from disabling hearing loss. These people have many backgrounds but share one common trait. They all have gained creative confidence.

At its core, creative confidence is about believing in your ability to create change in the world around you. It is the conviction that you can achieve what you set out to do. We think this self-assurance, this belief in your creative capacity, lies at the heart of innovation.

Creative confidence is like a muscle—it can be strengthened and nurtured through effort and experience. Our goal is to help build that confidence in you.

Whether you think of yourself as “the creative type” or not, we believe reading this book will help you unlock and draw on more of the creative potential that is within us all.

CREATIVITY NOW

Creativity is much broader and more universal than what people typically consider “artistic” fields. We think of creativity as using your imagination to create something new in the world. Creativity comes into play wherever you have the opportunity to generate new ideas, solutions, or approaches. And we believe everyone should have access to that resource.

For much of the 20th century the so-called “creative types”—designers, art directors, copy writers—were relegated to the kids’ table, far from serious discussions. Meanwhile, all the important business conversations took place among the “grown-ups” in boardrooms and meeting spaces down the hall.

But the creative endeavors that seemed fanciful or extracurricular a decade ago have now gone mainstream. Education thought leader Sir Ken Robinson—whose riveting 2006 TED Talk asking “Do Schools Kill Creativity?” was the most popular in history—says that creativity “is as important in education as literacy, and we should treat it with the same status.”

In the business world, creativity manifests itself as innovation. Tech stars such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter have unleashed their employees’ creativity to change the lives of billions of people. Today, people in every department—from customer service to finance—have opportunities to experiment with new solutions. Companies desperately need employees’ insights from across the organization. No individual executive or division holds a monopoly on new ideas.

Whether you live in Silicon Valley or Shanghai, Munich or Mumbai, you’ve already felt the effects of seismic market shifts. Most businesses today realize that the key to growth, and even survival, is innovation. One recent IBM survey of more than 1,500 CEOs reports that creativity is the single most important leadership competency for enterprises facing the complexity of global commerce today. An Adobe Systems poll of 5,000 people on three continents reports that 80 percent of people see unlocking creative potential as key to economic growth. Yet only 25 percent of these individuals feel that they’re living up to their creative potential in their own lives and careers. That’s a lot of wasted talent.

How might we shift that balance? How might we help the other 75 percent unleash their creative potential?

In 2005, David founded the d.school (formally known as the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design) to teach design thinking—a methodology for innovating routinely—to future entrepreneurs from Stanford’s graduate schools. Originally, we thought that the primary challenge would be to teach creativity to people who saw themselves as “analytical types.” We soon realized that all of the individuals we worked with already had creativity in spades.¹ Our job was simply to help them recapture it, by sharing new skills and mindsets.

We have been stunned at how quickly people’s imagination, curiosity, courage, and fresh ideas are renewed, with just a small amount of practice and encouragement.

For the people we’ve worked with, opening up the flow of creativity in them is like discovering that you’ve been driving a car with the emergency brake on—and

suddenly experiencing what it feels like when you release the brake and can drive freely. We see this with executives a lot when we have a workshop, or when we have clients in to collaborate with us side-by-side. They’ve sat through seminars about innovation before, and they are convinced they know how creative—or how uncreative—they’re going to be. So when we get to a point that’s fuzzy or unconventional—like doing an improv exercise—suddenly they whip out their smartphones, heading for the exits to make “really important” phone calls.

Why? Because they are unsure of their abilities in that setting. They instinctively fall back on the defense that “I’m just not the creative type.”

In our experience, everybody is the creative type. We know that if we can get individuals to stick with it awhile, they will end up doing amazing things. They come up with breakthrough ideas or suggestions, and work creatively with a team to develop something truly innovative. They surprise themselves with the realization that they are a lot more creative than they had thought. That early success shakes up how they see themselves, and makes them eager to do more.

What we’ve found is that we don’t have to generate creativity from scratch. We just need to help people rediscover what they already have: the capacity to imagine or build upon new-to-the world ideas. But the real value of creativity doesn’t emerge until you are brave enough to act on those ideas. That combination of thought and action defines creative confidence: the ability to come up with new ideas and the courage to try them out.

Geshe Thupten Jinpa, who has been the Dalai Lama’s chief English translator for more than 20 years, shared an insight with us recently about the nature of creativity. Jinpa pointed out that there’s no word in the Tibetan language for “creativity” or “being creative.” The closest translation is “natural.” In other words, if you want to be more creative, you just have to be more natural. We forget that back in kindergarten, we were all creative. We all played and experimented and tried out weird things without fear or shame. We didn’t know enough not to. The fear of social rejection is something we learned as we got older. And that’s why it’s possible to regain our creative abilities so swiftly and powerfully, even decades later.

It turns out that creativity isn’t some rare gift to be enjoyed by the lucky few—it’s a natural part of human

¹A note about “we”: this book has two authors, so you will see the first person plural a lot. When talking about just one of us, we will say “David” or “Tom.” In some contexts, however, the “we” will mean the team at IDEO where the two of us work, or the faculty and staff of the d.school where David (but not Tom) spends time.

thinking and behavior. In too many of us it gets blocked. But it can be unblocked. And unblocking that creative spark can have far-reaching implications for yourself, your organization, and your community.

We believe that our creative energy is one of our most precious resources. It can help us to find innovative solutions to some of our most intractable problems.

Our creative energy is one of our most precious resources.

CREATIVE CONFIDENCE IN ACTION

Creative confidence is a way of experiencing the world that generates new approaches and solutions. We know that anyone can gain creative confidence. We have witnessed it in people from diverse backgrounds and careers. Everyone—from scientists in their labs to senior managers at Fortune 500 companies—can approach their lives differently, with a new outlook and a larger toolset. Here are a few examples of people who have embraced creative confidence:

A former Olympian entered the airline industry and developed the confidence to tackle her company’s crisis management problems head-on. She gathered a volunteer task force of pilots, dispatchers, crew schedulers, and others to prototype procedures following weather-related flight disruptions, leading to a forty percent faster recovery time.

An Army Captain who served in Iraq and Afghanistan rallied over 1700 people to petition for a pedestrian mall in the local community, proving you don’t have to be a general to have an impact.

Going beyond just the raw facts of a case, a law school student took a human-centered approach to her mock

trial. She had the jury picture themselves at the scene of the incident, to imagine what it felt like. And through harnessing their empathy, she won—the first time a jury had ever favored her side of that particular case.

An ex-government executive started a grassroots innovation movement in Washington, DC that has grown to over a thousand members. Through workshops and networking events, she is spreading her new perspective on organizational change to other leaders and aspiring entrepreneurs.

After four decades of experience, an elementary school teacher restructured her curriculum into design challenges. Instead of teaching discrete subjects, she created engaging projects that covered the same topics but got students to step away from their desks and think more critically. Their test scores improved, but more importantly, parents noticed their children were more engaged and inquisitive.

You don’t have to switch careers or move to the Silicon Valley to change your mindset. You don’t have to become a design consultant or quit your job. The world needs more creative policymakers, office managers, and real estate agents. Whatever your profession, when you approach it with creativity, you’ll come up with new and better solutions and more successes. Creative confidence can inspire whatever work you already do.

Because what happens is that you gain a new tool to enhance your problem-solving practices, without having to abandon any of your existing techniques. We’ve talked to doctors who have found new ways to empathize with (and more effectively treat) their patients, looking beyond the surface symptoms. We’ve talked to executive recruiters who use our methods to find new matchups between talented people and the companies who need them most. We’ve talked to social workers who use human-centered approaches to help people in the community understand confusing application forms.

People with creative confidence have a greater impact on the world around them—whether that means getting involved with their child’s school, turning a storage room into a vibrant innovation space, or harnessing social media to recruit more bone marrow donors.

As legendary psychologist and Stanford professor Albert Bandura has shown, our belief systems affect our actions, goals, and perception. Individuals who come to believe that they can effect change are more likely to accomplish what they set out to do. Bandura calls that conviction “self-efficacy.” People with self-efficacy set their

sights higher, try harder, persevere longer, and show more resilience in the face of failure.

Our practical experience in the world of innovation and creative confidence aligns closely with his findings. When people transcend the fears that block their creativity, all sorts of new possibilities emerge. Instead of the prospect of failure paralyzing them, they see every experience as an opportunity they can learn from. The need for control keeps some people stuck at the planning stage of a project. With creative confidence, they become comfortable with uncertainty and are able to leap into action. Instead of resigning themselves to the status quo, or what others have told them to do, they are freed to speak their mind and challenge existing ways of doing things. They act with greater courage, and have more persistence in tackling obstacles.

We believe this book will help you overcome the mental blocks that hold back your creativity. Chapter by chapter, we will give you tools that empower you to pursue new ideas with confidence. The stories, methods, and practices that we will share draw on decades of collaboration with creative thinkers everywhere, and we believe they will help you too.

THE CREATIVE CONFIDENCE QUEST

Today, our mission as authors is to help as many people as possible rediscover their creative potential.

Confronted with their newfound creativity, people sometimes confide in us that their mother was a dancer, or their father was an architect. They seem to be rationalizing their spark of creative energy, as if they are searching for concrete evidence. What they don’t realize is that their creative potential was always a part of them—not because of any family history or genetic predisposition, but because it is a natural human ability within us all.

Creative confidence is a way of seeing that potential and your place in the world more clearly, unclouded by anxiety and doubt.

We hope you’ll join us on our quest to embrace creative confidence in our lives. Together, we can all make the world a better place.

Tom Kelley is the bestselling author of *The Art of Innovation* and *The Ten Faces of Innovation* as well as a partner at the renowned design and innovation consultancy IDEO. Over the years, he has spoken in more than thirty countries and helped IDEO grow from 15 designers to a staff of more than 600, while leading diverse areas such as business development, marketing, human resources, and operations. Tom is an Executive Fellow at the Haas School of Business at UC Berkeley and holds a similar role at the University of Tokyo.

In 1978, **David Kelley** co-founded the design firm that ultimately became IDEO. Today, he serves as chair of IDEO and is the Donald W. Whittier Professor at Stanford. Preparing the design thinkers of tomorrow earned David the Sir Misha Black Medal for his “distinguished contribution to design education.” He has also won the Edison Achievement Award for Innovation, as well as the Chrysler Design Award and National Design Award in Product Design from the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum.

IDEO applies its human-centered approach to drive innovation and growth for the world’s leading companies as well as for government, education, health care, and social sectors.

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