



# DISCIPLINED DREAMING

How to Build Your Organization's Creativity Mojo Josh Linkner

*“When people believe in boundaries,  
they become part of them.”*

Don Cherry, Jazz Musician

Legendary jazz trumpeter Miles Davis believed that musical creativity was an act of discovery. Simply put, he thought that the music already existed, and it was his role as an artist to explore, to look for a sound that lay outside traditional boundaries. Davis knew that spontaneous creativity was the business of jazz. With less than one percent of the notes on the written page, Davis made up the rest on the fly—no going back to correct mistakes or rethink a passage. His passion and skill joined to form something new, something that worked, something that was both technically sound and infused with improvisation. Over the four decades of his career, Davis continued to create new frontiers in music and, in the process, became a legend.

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Today, people and organizations around the world are scrambling to tap into that same type of spontaneous creativity to drive success in their own pursuits. We're caught in an ever-escalating battle for competitive edge, a creativity arms race driven by four factors:

1. **Commoditization:** New information is free and easy to access online, making knowledge a readily available commodity.
2. **Speed:** Business cycles that used to span a decade or more now play out in a matter of months, and "fast" trumps "big" almost every time.
3. **Low Barriers:** Forget about the huge resource requirements that used to limit the number of our competitors and make them easy to spot. Today, a college kid with a high speed Internet connection in his dorm room launches Facebook and becomes a billionaire in 24 months.
4. **Lower Costs:** Globalization, outsourcing, and an intense cost-cutting mentality have driven costs to their lowest levels in history, making the Price War just one skirmish in a much more complex business battleground.

In the new era of business (and life), playing it safe is the riskiest choice of all. The world isn't looking for another "me-too" player. Success is driven by our ability to stand out and be truly remarkable—an ability to tap into creativity, break the mold, introduce disruptive change, and dislodge the status quo. And yet, with a constant focus on cost cutting, efficiency gains, and top-down control, too many organizations have lost their mojo. By exhausting their creative supply in a time of peak demand, most companies today find themselves teetering on the edge of a growing "creativity gap" that separates them from success.

The good news is that most businesses and individuals don't lack raw creative talent—what they lack is a system for unleashing it. Organizations with systems for nearly every aspect of their business, from answering the phone to setting the security alarm, have no such structure in place for developing and supporting creativity. And so, the most important thing a company can do is left to chance.

I developed the Disciplined Dreaming system to give creativity its own place and practice, to provide everyone in the organization a structure for developing their own creative ideas, and to bring creativity back to the heart of business—where it belongs.

Disciplined Dreaming isn't a stifling, rigid “innovation process”, but an open system. It provides a strong and flexible framework that frees individuals and organizations to improvise and explore—and, in the process, develop their creative chops. The ideas, processes, and practices of Disciplined Dreaming will help you build *your* chops by expanding your creative capacity and targeting your creative energy. The Disciplined Dreaming framework involves just five steps:

**Step 1 | ASK:** This step is all about defining your creative challenge, asking questions, awakening your curiosity, and exploring possibilities.

**Step 2 | PREPARE:** In this step you “warm up” your culture, your mindset, and your environment to promote your best performance.

**Step 3 | DISCOVER:** Here, you use specific group and individual activities to help seek out creative ideas and inspiration for jumpstarting imagination throughout your organization.

**Step 4 | IGNITE:** With the foundation in place from Steps 1-3, you use this phase to develop the creative sparks you've generated into fully-formed ideas.

**Step 5 | LAUNCH:** Your analytical side reconnects with your creativity in this step. Whole Brain Thinking goes to work, as you select your best ideas, determine key metrics for measurement, and build an action plan to bring your ideas to life.

Let's take a look at each of these steps in detail.

## Step 1: Ask

You begin the Disciplined Dreaming process by setting clearly defined objectives for finding a creative solution to a specific problem—your Creativity Challenge. Your goal is to fully articulate the situation at hand, so you can direct raw creativity (yours and your team's) in a purposeful way. Every other step in the Disciplined Dreaming process will be aimed at solving the challenge you identify here, so detail is critical in this step.

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Imagine that a friend dumped a 5000-piece puzzle on your desk, then ran off with the picture on the box cover. Putting that puzzle together would become infinitely more difficult without the picture to guide you. You can think of the Creativity Challenge as your “box cover.” The clearer the picture, the more effective you will be at putting the right pieces in the right places.

Defining your Creativity Challenge is a detailed process. In tackling it, you might use your own form of the creativity brief—a mainstay of the advertising industry, that describes such elements as the project overview, history, target audience, timeline, budget and so on.

Your own creativity brief should include similar information, specifying:

- Your desired outcome
- The challenges you face in achieving that outcome
- The resistance you must overcome in the process
- The audience to whom you'll have to sell your solution
- Techniques for communicating your plan, beating your competition, and putting your plan into action.

Once completed, the brief will make the process of meeting your Creativity Challenge go much more smoothly. Like any strong structure, the brief enables creativity while keeping things running efficiently.

That's the detailed, analytical approach to clearly articulating your Creativity Challenge. But the Disciplined Dreaming process is designed to ignite both your left brain (logical, analytical) and your right brain (creative, abstract). You know the story—accountant meets artist; engineer meets poet. To awaken your right-brain and develop the brief's framework into a larger creative picture, you just need to ask three questions. Tape these simple but powerful questions to the walls, make them into a screen saver, and tattoo them on your teammates:

1. **Why?**
2. **What if?**
3. **Why not?**

Asking “why?” helps you understand the current state of affairs. These are questions that challenge the status quo and conventional wisdom. Questions like:

- Why do some brands command a price premium while others don’t?
- Why do traffic patterns change from city to city?
- Why is classical music less popular than rap?
- Why do we always start and end our meetings 5 minutes late?

When you ask “what if?” you are exploring fresh possibilities, wondering how the world would look if you made a change or if a new idea came to life:

- What if we charged for our product as a subscription instead of a per-unit fee?
- What if we eliminated all meetings at our company?
- What if all tax deductions were eliminated?
- What if gasoline was \$11.00 per gallon?

Asking “Why not?” helps you understand constraints, to connect with the limiting factors that are currently blocking positive change:

- The number of books read each year by the average American is declining. Why isn’t it increasing?
- People in my company don’t often share controversial ideas. Why not?
- Why not offer our customers free car washes when they buy a new car from our dealership?

To encourage fresh thinking, make these basic, yet powerful questions part of your daily routine.

Just as you bring a pen and paper to every meeting, make sure to keep these questions handy, in order to drive curiosity and awareness—the building blocks of creativity. Remember, this is your first step in forming the structure that you’ll use to reach new heights of creativity.

## Step 2: Prepare

Creativity demands preparation. When Yo Yo Ma, one of the world's most accomplished cellists, is scheduled to perform, his preparation goes well beyond weeks of intense practice. He arrives early at the hall to tune his cello, check in with the conductor, make sure his tuxedo is in order, meet his accompanying musicians, and gauge the acoustics. Top performers in every field, from surgeons to space shuttle pilots to computer chip manufacturers, go through similar types of preparation. Why, then, do so few individuals and businesses embrace the concept of preparation to enable creativity in their own performance? The budget for landscaping at most companies geometrically outweighs the investment in creativity preparation, yet fresh thinking and new ideas are infinitely more important to organizational success than well-trimmed shrubbery.

Step 2 of the Disciplined Dreaming process is all about preparation—you use this step to make sure that you are mentally poised for creativity and that you will be tackling the creative process in a culture and environment that promotes your greatest creative capacity.

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A great way to begin warming up your mindset is by clearing the hurdles of some common myths and pitfalls that can block the creative process. Questioning, adopting outsider perspectives, abandoning the common wisdom and imagining the outcomes of outrageous alternatives are just some of the tools you can use when building a strong framework for creativity within your organization. Some simple activities and games can get your brain firing and prime your team's creative pump. I encourage you to come up with your own "mental gymnastics," but here are a few sample exercises:

1. **The Beach Ball:** Bring a beach ball to your next meeting, and toss it around for 90 seconds before you get to work. This will change the energy in the room and get your creative juices flowing.
2. **Rock the House:** Blast three minutes of your favorite music. LOUD. Ask members of your team to suggest a favorite song, and combine 30-second cuts of each song into a quick pump-up playlist.
3. **The Field Trip:** Get out of the office! Go to a museum, park, coffee shop, the Eiffel Tower, or anywhere else that is inspiring and outside the norm.
4. **Games:** Play a game—a board game, riddle, puzzle, card game, even Xbox—for five minutes, to get into a different state of mind, escape the daily grind, and open up your imagination.

Creative minds need a creative culture in which to flourish. There are two lethal traps that contribute to the stifling culture that inhibits creativity in many organizations. First, lack of awareness has a gravitational pull that drags people into a semi-sleepwalking state, brains turned off and senses on hold. Second, bureaucratic rules and processes are powerful things. People are quick to follow along, equating "obedience" with "excellence". It takes guts and creativity to question the system and claim ownership of your role. But those skills are exactly what we need to stand out and create sustainable advantages in today's ultra-competitive business environment. And that means we need to create a *new* culture within our organizations. One that rewards team members for questioning outdated policies.

Through extensive research and 20+ years of experience, I've discovered seven key principles for building and maintaining a creative culture:

1. **Fuel passion:** Companies that can rally their teams around a clear and important purpose and create a fun and inspiring environment for achieving that purpose inject passion deep into their teams.
2. **Celebrate ideas:** This isn't just about handing out bonus checks for great ideas (although, that is a good start). Celebrate creativity with praise (both public and private), career opportunities, and perks.
3. **Foster autonomy:** The act of creativity is one of self-expression. Tell your team what results you're looking for, then get out of their way.
4. **Encourage courage:** Encourage your employees to say what they think, make tough decisions without excessive agonizing, take smart risks, and question anything that's inconsistent with your organization's core values.
5. **Fail forward:** Some bets will pay off, some will fail. The key is to fail quickly by experimenting with ideas and letting go of those that don't pan out.
6. **Think small:** Whatever your organization's size, try to approach creativity like one of the 'small,' by being curious and nimble, maintaining a sense of urgency, and embracing change.
7. **Maximize diversity:** Human diversity—in thought, work experience, religions, nationalities, hobbies, political beliefs, races, sexual preference, age, musical tastes, and even favorite sports teams—helps build creative cultures.

Finally, you need to prepare your physical environment to provide an atmosphere that's fun, surprising, and a fertile garden for growing creativity. Have you ever noticed how much of Corporate America looks like a sensory deprivation chamber? Beige walls, faded carpet, high cubical walls, no windows, bad lighting, and a total lack of artistic stimulus—your bathroom's shower stall is probably light years ahead of your office environment when it comes to encouraging original thought. Use this step to change that.

## Creative minds need a creative culture in which to flourish.

Your workspace should provide common spaces and busy crossroads that keep people actively engaged and interacting with colleagues and clients in a variety of environments. Decorating with bright colors, providing spaces to accommodate “heads up” interaction and collaboration, in addition to the “heads down” areas devoted to intense concentration, are just some of the ways you can prepare your environment to support the creative process. Comfortable furniture, games, surprising artworks, even art supplies contribute to a creative environment that recruits and retains creative employees. Whatever path you choose, take specific steps to ensure that your physical environment is prepared to nurture creativity, so that your creative mind and organizational culture can take root and flourish.

## Step 3: Discover

If you've ever watched kids at play, you probably realize that most of us are born with an abundance of creativity. However well-hidden that creativity may be in our adulthood, it's still there within us. The DISCOVER phase gives you the treasure map to uncover creative ideas and bring them to the surface—to break free of the straightjacket of *we've always done it that way*, or *this is our usual approach*, or *we don't have the luxury of trying something new*.

We've seen how your mental, cultural, and physical state can boost your creative abilities by preparing you for the creative journey of discovery. Here are just a few of the techniques you can use to launch that journey:

- **Capitalize on Inflection Points:** By examining emerging ideas or trends that form the “before” and “after” moments in your culture and industry—changes in political administrations, climate, consumer preferences, foreign relations, technology, health and fitness, travel habits, fashion, and, music, for example—you can find ways to capitalize on those changes and the opportunities they create.
- **Examine Challenges Upside Down:** Try turning problems around, solving for something different in order to succeed. Ask “Instead of” questions: “*Instead* of trying to offer our customers lower rates at our bank, *what if* we offered the best service?” “*Instead* of monitoring our employees' time sheets, *what if* we created a reward system that encouraged them to be more productive and at the same time provided them with more control of their schedules?”
- **Identify and exploit patterns:** Patterns are a powerful source of creativity and can lead to breakthrough thinking and results. By learning to identify and exploit patterns—in nature, governments, industries, and even within your own organization—you can find new avenues for creative solutions and evolutionary growth.

Creativity exists all around us. I encourage you to put these and other techniques to work in order to find creativity wherever it hides within your organization or creative pursuits. The Discovery process takes bravery, curiosity, and awareness, but—as is true for all explorers—there are enormous rewards for those willing to seek and find the sources of creativity.

By learning to identify and exploit patterns ...  
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## Step 4: Ignite

With the foundation of your creative structure in place from Steps 1 through 3, you are now ready to let your ideas fly free. You begin this step by generating creative sparks, and protecting those first, fragile ideas so that they have an opportunity to ignite.

Allow yourself to begin without knowing all the answers. A creative spark doesn't need to be a fully-baked idea. In fact, most aren't. Remember these two points:

1. Start with a number of small sparks, no matter how incomplete, to begin the creative process;  
and
2. Be very careful not to quickly extinguish those sparks.

Look for little flashes of inspiration or thoughts to get your work underway, and use specific techniques to generate them within groups or teams. Here are a few ideas that might help you fan those sparks into a creative flame:

- **Imbizo Groups:** *Imbizo* is the Zulu expression for gatherings of people from diverse backgrounds and disciplines who have come together to discuss an idea. Adopting this tradition within your creative process can provide a powerful tool for developing ideas. Your Imbizo groups should be free-form and have no specific end-goal in place, other than exploring. The key to success in these gatherings is to let go of the outcomes and simply allow the discussion to flow.
- **The Reese's Peanut Butter Cup:** Peanut butter and chocolate—two unlikely companions that form a perfect flavor union. Try thinking up your own combinations of seemingly disparate concepts to form a single great idea. We've seen the power of such "combo-concepts": The SUV is a combination of a car and a truck; the Snuggie is a combination of a blanket and a sweater; the recliner is a combination of a bed and a chair. Working from lists of "ingredients", create as many random combinations as possible to help generate breakthrough ideas.
- **RoleStorming:** Understanding how Dexter Gordon crafts his solos, or how Sonny Rollins builds excitement, or how Oscar Peterson uses unison octaves to inform his technique helps up-and-coming jazz musicians gain both perspective and inspiration. How would Edison have approached your product design challenge? How would Einstein tackle your research project? How would Mark Zuckerberg attack your new social media strategy? Go ahead, act out your next brainstorming session playing the role of a notable person, and you'll be amazed at the great ideas "they" unleash.

As you work to develop your ideas, don't forget to keep your creativity directed toward solving your central Creativity Challenge. Focus on finding the best—not the most complex—solutions. Think of yourself as a jazz musician, taking risks and constantly exploring new techniques for improvising fresh and original ideas. Imagination will flow. Inspiration will hit. Sparks will ignite. And that blank page will be no match for your unbridled creativity.

## Step 5: Launch

In the final phase of Disciplined Dreaming, your analytical side is reconnected with your creativity, as Whole Brain Thinking goes to work. The tasks you perform in this phase put your creative ideas into action, as you select your best ideas, determine key metrics for measuring the success of those ideas, and build an action plan that brings those ideas to life. Entire books have been devoted to each of these tasks, but here are a few general ideas for tackling them in your creative process.

To select your best ideas, try using these tools:

- **Matrix Scoring:** This is a classic business-school concept and a powerful technique that can help you choose your best ideas and sell them to outside stakeholders. Take a handful of your best ideas and score them using a matrix that compares their effectiveness in addressing the issues that matter most to you and your organization. Then, add up the total scores so you can compare one idea to another - with multiple factors and on an even playing field.
- **Trial by Jury:** Put your ideas before the jury, by setting up a mock trial in which proponents present and defend ideas before a jury of peers. Using the same guidelines and time limits, let each proponent present an opening argument, defense, and closing argument. Then, let the jury deliberate for a set time before coming to a decision. The Trial by Jury Method can be tremendous fun, but it also provides a structured forum to debate the merits of competing ideas.
- **Prototyping:** Test the ideas you've selected, using prototyping, modeling, simulation, and other techniques that explore the feasibility and profitability of creative solutions. Role-playing, computer modeling, even Play Doh can be used to test-drive your ideas before committing major resources to them.

Every Creativity Challenge should have key metrics of success that are clearly defined and capable of providing insights you can use to adjust and adapt your idea for maximum results. If you are working on a marketing campaign, key metrics may include the number of in-bound inquiries, closing sales rates, increases in revenue, and decreases in customer attrition. If your Creativity Challenge is to launch a new online service, your metrics may include the number of new subscribers, average length of stay on your site per visit, and referral rates of members inviting other members to join. Whatever challenge you're addressing, here are your most important tasks when establishing metrics:

- Clearly define a small number of key metrics
- Quantify and standardize your metrics so they are consistent
- Align your team and other stakeholders (bosses, partners, and so on) around the same key metrics
- Create a scoreboard so you and your team can constantly monitor results
- Use the insight gained from closely monitoring your key metrics to adjust and adapt your idea in order to maximize results

The Discovery process takes bravery, curiosity, and awareness, but—as is true for all explorers—there are enormous rewards for those willing to seek and find the sources of creativity.

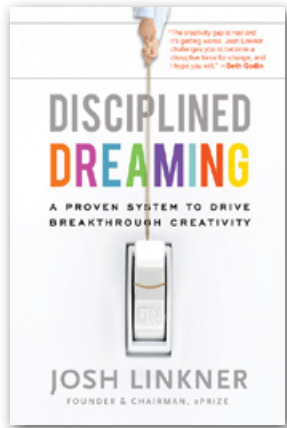
Finally, you must build a detailed execution plan to bring your idea to life, and to ensure that your great idea doesn't explode on takeoff. Your plan should cover the basics, including:

- Budget, forecast, and anticipated return-on-investment model
- Roles and responsibilities of team members during the execution phase
- Detailed timeline with clear milestones and checkpoints
- List of the top risks and contingency plans if they occur
- Resources needed (money, people, time, equipment, facilities, travel, etc)
- Communication / roll-out plan

## Taking Care of the Business of Creativity

By following the Disciplined Dreaming process, you will have identified your Creativity Challenge, awakened your curiosity, raised your level of awareness, prepared your mind, culture, and environment, discovered creativity where it hides, generated creative sparks, ignited fresh ideas through powerful brainstorming techniques, selected the best idea, and established key measurements and action plans for ensuring its success. Congratulations! Now, you are ready to release your best creative idea into the world.

Whether big or small, every creative idea you generate makes a difference and, in some way, changes the world. I hope you will use learn to use Disciplined Dreaming to move forward with boldness, thoughtfulness, urgency, passion, and a renewed sense of purpose and wonder. The creative chops you build in the process will help you break down boundaries and open up new frontiers in business, in art, and in everything you do. 📌



## BUY THE BOOK

Get more details or buy a copy of Josh Linkner's [\*Disciplined Dreaming\*](#).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Josh Linkner is the CEO and managing partner at Detroit Venture Partners. He is also the founder and chairman of ePrize, a dominant player in the promotion industry, serving 74 of the top 100 brands. He has won several business, technology, and design awards, including the Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award, Crain's 40 under 40, Automation Alley's CEO of the Year, and Detroit Executive of the Year. In addition to his success as an entrepreneur, venture capitalist, and highly sought-after keynote speaker, he is an accomplished jazz musician and the author of *Disciplined Dreaming* (Jossey-Bass, February, 2011).

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