

ACCELERATE INNOVATION USING A POSSIBILITY MINDSET

Albert Einstein once called imagination a greater force than knowledge itself. His reasoning: knowledge only tells us what *is*, while imagination gives birth to what *could be*. This is where synthesis and invention are born. Embracing the imagination mentality could reveal solutions to our most pressing problems, and pave the way for innovative future growth. Our journey toward unimaginable progress is fueled by what I like to call the Possibility Mindset.

The Possibility Mindset is not some special gift bestowed upon a select few, but a way of thinking that, with sufficient practice and leadership support, can be cultivated by any individual or team.

So, what is the Possibility Mindset?

Consider this: In the middle of the 19th century, the city of Chicago faced a peculiar problem with its sewerage system. Since water didn't drain out of the low lying city, and digging was too expensive and difficult, the city needed a unique solution. Luckily, a young engineer named George Pullman answered the call. Instead of digging, he lifted the buildings using jackscrews. Entire structures were lifted and supported with timber. Then, new foundations were constructed and the buildings were lowered back into place. All this while people carried on with business-as-usual inside. This remarkable engineering feat was made possible because George Pullman had a Possibility Mindset.

The Possibility Mindset represents the ability to generate, consider, and pursue a multitude of unconventional, untested, and sometimes conflicting options after exhausting all the usual methods.

Here are a few specific steps that you can take to develop a Possibility Mindset:

- 1) *Start with "I don't know!"* – Some of the biggest scientific breakthroughs throughout history have been achieved by people who had absolutely no clue about how they were going to find a solution. Epiphanies usually begin with uncertainties and that is okay. Innovation flourishes in cultures where it is acceptable to say "I don't know." Curiosity, the bedrock of discovery, comes naturally from the act of not knowing. In an ever-changing world, where new trends and disruptive technologies are emerging at break-neck speed, complete control is impossible. In the words of the Zen Master Osho, "Only the dead are absolutely sure. Life is always full of unknowns and uncertainties."
- 2) *Learn the Art of Reframing* – As Professor Tina Seelig of Stanford University says, try "Frame-Storming before Brainstorming." Basically, you should try asking a different question. The quality of an answer depends on the type of question you ask. For example, if employee retention is an issue for which you need innovative solutions, instead of asking how you can retain more employees, perhaps you should ask, "How can we improve our recruitment processes so that we select people who will fit well within our culture?" Another frame of reference could be to examine what leadership practices need to change to allow employees to speak up before they accept another job.
- 3) *Fuel possibilities using Divergent Thinking* – Let's try an exercise. Look at your shoes right now! Can you think of 10 different uses for your footwear apart from the most apparent one? Like most people, chances are you'll struggle to list more than three. Most kids, however, excel at this kind of activity and would come up with all sorts of creative (and funny!) answers. The ability to diverge before you converge on a single solution allows you to choose what would work best for you. After all, who knew the humble jackscrew could lift entire building blocks in Chicago before George Pullman came along?

- 4) *Persist* – If you stick with problems long enough and entertain divergent (and even conflicting) solutions, then your chances of achieving a breakthrough receive a sizable neurological boost. Epiphanies don't just happen randomly; they are the outcome of complex neurological networking that happened long before. Eureka moments invariably follow dull, laborious work that promised no guaranteed breakthroughs. As the old saying goes, don't give up, though the pace seems slow, you may succeed with another blow.

Thomas Edison is perhaps best known as one of the most prolific inventors of our times, having filed hundreds of patents. During the invention of the light bulb, his team tested hundreds of different materials including several varieties of bamboo, tropical grass, plant fibers, and even human hair until they finally found something suitable for the job: carbonized cotton filament. As an avid reader of Jules Verne, one could speculate that those fantastical stories fueled Edison's wild imagination and, in turn, fed his Possibility Mindset.

- 5) *Provide Safety Nets* – If you help your teams jump into the unknown for a breakthrough, make sure that you are holding their safety net. A recent study of innovation at Google points out that *psychological safety* represented one of the most important factors in determining a team's innovation success. A leader who chases risk needs to go out of the way to support his or her employees. What I see in many organizations are people who fabricate answers to please others, or because they fear looking stupid for not knowing a particular answer.

Leaders bear the responsibility for creating an environment where people feel safe and comfortable saying *we don't know yet but we can find out*. Countless stories exist of avoidable blunders committed simply because someone did not want to appear stupid. The Possibility Mindset can flourish only in an organizational culture where stupid questions, crazy ideas, and failed experiments are accepted and considered an integral part of growth.

As organizations seek to innovate and explore new streams of revenue growth and sustainable development, their leaders must allow team members to speak their mind. Sometimes, the best ideas come from people who are low in the hierarchy. However, if they are stymied by layers of bureaucracy, many useful ideas will suffocate, and, ultimately, many ground-breaking and possibly lucrative opportunities will be lost forever.



About the Author: *If you are interested in accelerating growth, cultivating leadership excellence, and inspiring entrepreneurship – **Simerjeet Singh** can help. His philosophy stems from one core belief: that all people in all places contain untapped potential waiting to be unleashed. Simerjeet strives to help his audiences identify their strengths and ignite their motivation enabling them to harness the dormant power within to achieve success. For more information, visit his interactive website – <http://www.simerjeetsingh.com>*