



Stanford eCorner

Imagination Starts with Engagement

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Stanford Professor of the Practice Tina Seelig explains how imagination requires active engagement, which reveals opportunities to envision what might be different. Imagination is the first stage of a four-step process that Seelig details for bringing ideas to life.



Transcript

So imagination requires two things: engaging and envisioning. Now, there's a little bit of a surprise in here, because most people think that for imagination you start with envisioning, right. You sit by yourself - at the base of a tree and you shut your eyes and you envision a world that would be different and then you go out and engage. But it's actually the opposite. You need to start with engagement. Engagement gives you the place to start envisioning what might be different. If you don't have data, if you are not paying attention, if you won't see those opportunities, but most people do not pay attention, most people go through life with blinders on and they don't see the opportunities whether they are problems to be solved or opportunities to be seized that are right in front of them. Consider something even simple like working as a waiter at a restaurant. If you are a waiter at a restaurant, you can go through life just with your blinders on, doing your job, go home and flip on the TV. But if you are really paying attention, you're going to learn an amazing number of things.

You're going to learn about customer service, you're going to learn a lot about customer service. You're going to learn about dietary preferences, you're going to get to meet different customers and learn about the issues that are important to them. If you do that, you might unlock an entire world of opportunities starting by just being a waiter at a restaurant. For - many people, they don't know that they have a passion until they're engaged with something. Let me tell you a story that actually was shared right here on this stage. This is a story that was shared by Scott Harrison, the founder of charity: water. Were any of you in the room when he was here last year? Great, a couple of you. What an impressive talk and I really recommend it. But this guy was not so impressive when he was 20 years old. When he was 20 years old, do you know what he was doing? He was a promoter at a nightclub in New York and his job was to get people drunk and the drunker he got them, the better.

And he was really good at this. And as a result, he became an alcoholic, he became a drug addict, his life was just a terrible mess. And you know what happened? One day, he woke up and said, do you know what? I hate my life, my life is horrible, I need the opposite of my life. So what he did is he wrote to all of these charities around the world and he said, I want to volunteer, I want to volunteer to be helpful. And they all wrote back and said no. They said, you don't look like someone who could be very helpful. So he kept writing letters and he finally got a letter back from an organization called Mercy Ships. And Mercy Ships sends to doctors to places in the world where they go for a couple of weeks to really under-served areas and they provide medicine and procedures. Well, they said, you know what, you can come along if you pay us, okay? And why don't you take photos because you have some background in photography from when you were in college, so you can be the journalist to capture what's going on. He jumped to the task, he signed his name to his check and he took off.

He ended up going to Liberia. And in Liberia, he saw people who were suffering from incredible waterborne diseases. He became impassioned about how to solve this problem. He became incredibly driven and motivated to do something. And the fact is he went back to New York and started this organization called charity: water that has had now a profound impact on

helping those 80 million people around the planet who don't have access to clean water. But the fact is he would not have found out this idea sitting in his apartment in New York. This came about by engaging. So the fact is you need to engage before you can envision things that would be different.