



Stanford eCorner

Innovation Demands Focus and Reframing

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Stanford Professor of the Practice Tina Seelig stresses the importance of asking questions in ways that will unlock the full potential for innovation. "The question you ask is the frame into which the answers will fall," Seelig says. She also explains why focus is key to pushing through the initial wave of obvious and incremental answers to achieve truly breakthrough ideas.



Transcript

But what happens if you want to come up with breakthrough ideas? Real innovations. This requires focus and reframing. Now, focus. What is focus? Focus is about a real deep commitment because once you've done your little experimenting to see if it might work, now you have to dive in and say, I'm going to learn everything about this, I'm going to focus my time and attention and this is when you start reframing. Reframing is when you start looking at the problem from all different angles. And this is what I spend most of my time in my class on creativity doing, is teaching students how to do this, okay? Let's look at this. What does reframing mean? This is a problem that has one right answer. But if you end up taking the same math concept, and asking it this way, you now have an infinite number of solutions. So wasn't that amazing? You went from one answer to an infinite number of answers. The way you ask the question is profound.

The question you ask is the frame into which the answers will fall. Let me demonstrate this. I'm going to guess in a room this big, somebody has a birthday today. Does someone have a birthday today? Anyone? How about this week, someone has a birthday this week who would let me - so, okay. What's your name? Morgan. What's that? Morgan. Morgan. Okay. So all of us here could plan a big birthday party for Morgan. Would that be a good idea? Yeah.

Great. Everyone thinks okay. Morgan, we're all planning a birthday party. If we change one word in that prompt to instead of planning a birthday party, we're going to plan a birthday celebration. What happened to the set of solutions? What happened? It completely expanded. What if we said we're going to find the best way to mark Morgan's birthday? Maybe she wants a statue on the quad, okay? The fact is the question you ask is the frame into which it will fall - the answers will fall. So what happens is, if you don't ask the right question, you're not going to get the right answers. So being able to question the questions you ask is incredibly critical if you want to come up with true innovations. So I spend a lot of time in my classes doing this and I have been fortunate to teach several online classes. I have taught three classes called A Crash Course on Creativity with several like 20,000, 30,000 people in each class, okay? And so we go through all of these projects where they learn how to reframe problems and challenge assumptions and question the way they look at things and then I give them a prompt.

I give them a problem. They are working on global teams and the problem I give them might be something like one word. The word might be pets and the team has to figure out how to frame a problem related to pets. They then have to come up with at least 100 solutions to that problem. Why do you think I ask them to come up with 100 solutions? Why not 10, why not 5? It's because it takes getting to that many solutions to start coming up with the ones that are really innovative. The first ideas you come up with are really incremental, they are expected, they are obvious. The next wave of solutions start getting more interesting, the next wave, more interesting. In fact, often I have the students come up with the craziest ideas, the stupidest ideas. In fact, even ways to make the problem worse as ways to unlock new ways of looking at this challenge.