



Stanford eCorner

Stop Pondering, Start Prototyping

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Dave Evans of the Life Design Lab at Stanford talks about how to prototype an idea for trying something new in work or life, and how the exercise should be fast, cheap and, most of all, a learning process. He explains that this type of prototyping takes two forms — talking to other people and trying things out — and likens the concept of “networking” to the innocuous task of asking someone for directions.



Transcript

we expose our assumptions, we involve others with our ideas, which begins to actually create collaboration, and most importantly in life design, we sneak up on the future. That thing you're wondering, maybe I'd like to try this, somebody is living the life you're imaging already. And by prototyping it, you get into a time machine and go find people who are already in the future today that you're thinking about tomorrow. Good prototyping is cheap, fast, and teaches us something. It's really about cheap and fast. The cheaper, the faster, the better, as long as we learn something. Now, in life, how do you, you know, it's not foam core and glue guns when you're doing life design. So life design prototypes are in two very simple forms: a conversation or an experience. Talk to people. Do stuff.

So the prototype conversation, you know, which we call the life design interview is essentially the same thing as an informational interview. Who's heard the term 'informational interview'? Or done those kind of things? Yeah, where you're asking for the story, not the job. You know, this is the prototype conversation is a very simple thing to do. It turns out "Gee, what's it really like to be, you know, a DJ on a web channel, as opposed to on a traditional radio station?" "What's it really like to be involved in the private space transport industry?" "What's it really like to be involved in nanotechnology?" "What's it really like to be working on an organic farm in Siberia?" You can go talk to people to have that conversation and the reason it's an interesting conversation is because you and they, that person you want to talk to, have a very, very common base of experience and awareness and values. She thinks her life is really interesting, you think her life is really interesting. You have the same point of view. You should get together. You know, it's really simple. It's like, I've done the research, you're the most interesting person in the world, you think so too, let's get together and share that interest. Just tell me your story.

And what prototype experience is means actually trying stuff on. So keeping in mind that, 'cause some things you've gotta experience, like with that woman who's made out of about four different real people, she had lots of conversations with people who knew things about writing a book or about working on the nonprofit world. Do I really want to go back to grad school or not, boy I haven't been in school in a long, long time. We said, look, go experience. Just sit in on a class, do, start working on a paper, see whether or not the young students treat you like a leper or they think it's cool you came back. You know, which she was really worried about. So just go do it. I mean, literally, four or five hours of your life invested over a week's time is a piece of cake. Now, keeping in mind, all those experiences, those prototypes of conversations and experiences come from collaborating with other people. They're pretty much done with other people.

Which means to find the opportunity for those interviews and those activities, you have to have idea number four, which is it's time to network. Okay, I noticed there are not many MBAs in the room so this is probably like, oh! A lot of you are saying, "Finally, the networking section of the talk. I'm so glad we're going to talk about networking, it's my favorite thing. I love networking." So who are those people? The network? I got one, I got two, okay, God bless you. Most of you probably kind of

feel more like this young woman, eh, it's not really my thing, I don't really like this. Networking is kind of slimy, kind of sleazy, who would say that? It's not really what I do. Yeah, okay. No, that's wrong. We need to reframe, we need a big reframe on this because all you're doing is asking for directions. Have any of you ever given someone directions? Who's ever given anybody directions? Who's done it more than once? Whoa, that's interesting.

So you like it. (quiet laughter) Like three times. Three times? Whoa, you guys are repeat direction-givers. Okay, this is obsessive behavior. Now, if I understand right, the reason we don't like networking is 'cause it's sleazy and you're using people, alright? That's what I hear most often, "You're using people for self-interest." The usual asking for directional help experience kind of goes like this: so I'm walking down the campus, you know, and somebody walks up, "oh, can you help me? I'm trying to find the Huang Center. Oh, do you know where it is?" Now, at that moment in time, I go, well, I can go like, "Hey, who're you? I am a busy person. (laughter) Like, get a map!" (laughter) "Try a phone!" "Come on!" (laughter) We don't usually do that, we kind of go, "Oh, I'd be so glad to help you." And then they ask for the information and what do we do? We just tell them. We take this hard-earned geographical information system and we just dump it on 'em free. And what do they do? They go, "Oh, great." And then they leave! (laughter) They just leave! (laughter) Get a bottle of wine, Christmas list, card, I mean, five bucks? (laughter) Anything? (laughter) Nothing, you got nothing. They turn, they leave.

You got used. (laughter) You got totally used. And you liked it! You did it again and again and again. That's diagnosable. No, it's actually diagnoseably human. The research demonstrates people like being helpful. When you're lost in Nanotechnology-ville and you don't know your way around, the locals will help you. When you've never been in Author-town, you've never been in High-End-PhD-Research-Consulting City, the locals will help you out. They love their town, they think it's interesting. They understand you're lost, that's the way the human community actually works.

So it's really about just asking for directions.