



Unlock Your Creative Genius: 4 Steps To Being Provocative With A Purpose

It's time to abandon your fear of provocation. You can take risks, be bold, and be creative without sinking the ship--or your career. In fact, it's what employers value most.

By: [Ekaterina Walter](#)

"Why?" is the question I never take for granted.

So when my 4-year-old daughter bombards me with the never-ending barrage of "but why?"s, I try to always rise to the challenge and find a somewhat intelligent answer to every question that comes my way. My philosophy is simple: The day we stop asking "why?", as children and as adults, is the day our sense of wonder ceases to exist.

And with the sense of wonder and exploration disappears one of the most precious qualities one could possess--creativity. But the deeper my child digs, the more surely I come to the point of realization that I don't have all the answers. And the moment my daughter sees confusion on my face, she starts chiming in with some of the most fascinating answers she can come up with. That's when it hits you. As adults, when did we lose our imagination? When did we let go of the insatiable curiosity that shaped our journey? When did we stop trusting our intuition and allow just knowledge and statistics to rule our lives? When did we stop asking "why?" followed by the persistent "but why?" and "why not?"?

Last night I finished the book by Erik Wahl. The title is simple, but powerful--*Unthink: Rediscover Your Creative Genius*. It isn't the second part that drew my attention. After all, there is a plethora of books that promised ways to discover and rediscover your inner genius. It is a simple call-to-action: unthink!

A former corporate employee, and now internationally recognized as a thought-provoking graffiti artist, Wahl radically changed his life when he lost his job in the dotcom bubble and a safety blanket of steady income with it. He was lost... for a while. And then he picked up the blank canvas and a set of the paintbrushes, knowing nothing about painting, mind you, and he never looked back. Ever since, he works with artists and corporations to help them rekindle their creative fire.

To revive passion in our working lives and open ourselves up to new opportunities, one of the things Wahl invites us to do is be provocative. The prevailing systems in which we live and work, he says, are largely unquestioned. We are given a job, a list of responsibilities, and a playbook on how to do them, and we go around executing on what is essentially a "we've always done it this way" approach. We embrace the

system, get bored, and after a while we learn to accept the unsatisfactory existence as a necessary evil. It is part of “growing up” and “facing the reality,” we tell ourselves.

“By becoming provocative--by constantly looking for obstacles to growth and opportunities for progress regardless of your daily duties--you can provide your company with a measure of critical preparation it doesn’t currently have,” Wahl preaches. “In doing so, not only will you bolster your value to the organization, but you will open your job up to new frontiers.”

The truth is, Wahl explains, most companies need creativity more than they need clarity or stability. In 2010, IBM published the findings of a survey that asked 1,500 CEOs from 60 countries and 33 industries to name the most critical factor for future success of their companies. The answer? More than rigor, management discipline, integrity, and vision, CEOs named creativity as one of the key attributes their companies require to be successful. In his book, Wahl invites us to rock the boat, to become true artists in our craft.

“Some people wait until they are provoked by [external] forces to change, until their cages are rattled for them and their hand is forced,” says Wahl. “Artists don’t wait to be rattled only from the outside. They provoke themselves first, and then the people around them, in order to constantly imagine new possibilities. They instigate change even when it doesn’t seem necessary.”

Wahl says that “purposeful provocation” should be a part of our personal and professional lives, every single day. Here are the four steps he suggests we need to take to inject a healthy disorder to remain progressive:

1. Step outside your bubble.

When we don’t prod or question the way things are, our existence ends up being based on outdated assumptions and erroneous conclusions. Look at the everyday issues from a different perspective, gently invite others to step outside their comfort zone by asking the questions no one wants to ask, challenge status quo in little ways. It will all spark a bigger change in the long run.

2. Live with some discomfort.

We all want comfort and safety. It’s in our nature. But progress comes from doing what is right and best and necessary. The choices to move forward, innovate, and confront the issues we may not be comfortable with confronting are not always easy, but they are necessary for innovation.

3. Ask forgiveness instead of permission.

Often the only time a boss or a company will see the need for change is when the change has been made without permission.

4. Start small.

Sometimes all that is needed is a small adjustment to make a major, much-needed impact. Often our fear of being provocative is based on the notion that if we speak of or make a change in a process it will be like pulling the office fire alarm, says Wahl. That's almost never the case, especially when you start small.

The big secret about being provocative, recaps Wahl, is that "not only do you become a change artist in a sea of sameness, you amplify the element of adventure in your own journey."

I cannot agree more. Looking back at my career and the amazing innovation I've seen at the companies such as Accenture and Intel, I can absolutely attest to the insight Wahl provides. The fact that sometimes true change comes in a series of small innovations is absolutely true. If you ask yourself every single day "what can I do to improve what we are currently executing on?", if you provide consistent initiative by finding gaps and bridging them (instead of waiting for someone else to notice and act on them), you will establish your reputation as an innovator and trendsetter.

After a while you will notice that it gets addictive, too. Once you start innovating, open your eyes to the profound wisdom of letting yourself be naïve, asking non-conventional questions, and, eventually, impacting the bottom line, it is hard to stop. Nothing is more fulfilling than painting the blank canvas! Sure, you will hit some bumps along the way and encounter a lot of naysayers. And you will have to take some risks. But that is why, to borrow the words of Walt Disney, it is so much fun to do the impossible.

So I encourage you to follow Wahl's advice: "Surrender your cozy indifference and jump-start the change that needs to happen. Then do it again and again. There are always things worth fighting for." In other words, let go of the fear and doubt and become a provocateur extraordinaire.