



Article from
Innovators & Entrepreneurs
November 2019
Issue 69

Book Review: *A Whack on the Side of the Head*

By Eric Sondergeld

I've become something of an armchair innovator, devouring books, podcasts and other materials that speak about innovation and how to be more creative. Until a few months ago, if you'd asked me to recommend a book, I might have said *Disrupt: Think the Unthinkable to Spark Transformation in Your Business* by Luke Williams. In it, the author lays out a process for innovating by combining the opposite characteristics of an existing product, business model, etc. and seeing what you come up with. Or I might have suggested *The Road to Reinvention* by Josh Linkner. Or, if you're pressed for time, *Steal Like an Artist* by Austin Kleon, a fun read.

If you ask me today, I'll give a different answer—and one that may surprise you, since this book was first published in 1983. I borrowed *A Whack on the Side of the Head* from a colleague. Once I started reading it, I couldn't stop. Now I own a copy of the 25th anniversary edition, which was published 11 years ago. With all the interest in innovation these days, it's amazing that possibly one of the best books ever written on the topic wasn't written in the 21st century.

Not only is *A Whack on the Side of the Head* full of great ideas, it's a very fun read—and sprinkled throughout are exercises meant to challenge your brain and boost creativity. I'll start with one here and put some correct answers at the end of this review: *It's easy to turn VII into an 8 by adding a single line to get VIII. Can you add a single line to IX to get a 6?*

The book's introductory chapter focuses on creative thinking and identifies 10 “mental locks,” or attitudes, that can get in the way of thinking creatively. The book consists of chapters that unlock them. Here's a quick rundown of what's inside.

Chapter 1: The Right Answer. We often think there is a single answer to everything. Actuaries have learned to think that way. In fact, it's one aspect that drew me to mathematics in the first place. So, right off the bat, the book challenges us to look for a second right answer. If that's not hard enough for actuaries, he goes further by telling us to forget our assumptions.

Chapter 2: That's Not Logical. Here the author teaches us about soft and hard thinking and how it can help with the creative process. The chapter ends with a discussion of the meaning of life. If intrigued, you'll have to read it for yourself.

Chapter 3: Follow the Rules. There are many ways to break the rules, and this chapter suggests several. One is a play on the fact that humans are really good at recognizing patterns. Some patterns are easily detected, while others emerge after careful observation. You can break out of a pattern to look at a problem in a different way.

Chapter 4: Be Practical. This chapter encourages you to imagine by asking questions such as *What if? How would others do it? or Imagine you're the idea.* (OK, that last one wasn't a question—perhaps because Chapter 3 told me to break the rules.)

Chapter 5: Play Is Frivolous. I certainly hope you disagree. The message of this chapter is simple. It suggests you take a problem and play with it, approach it like a child would, etc.

Breaktime. Breaktime is one of two bonus chapters. The first appears halfway through the book and is my favorite. It takes us away from the formal content and offers lots of interesting and innovative anecdotes and exercises. It even has some fun information and an exercise on the golden ratio, something we math lovers will appreciate.

Chapter 6: That's Not My Area. It must be tough being an idea. People try to shoot you down as soon as you're born. This chapter is about one of those bullets. The author recognizes that we often specialize in order to function in the world, which can limit our focus. Being an actuary can lead to a limited field of vision when approaching problems. This chapter offers some tips to broaden our perspective when doing so.

Chapter 7: Don't Be Foolish. While certainly related to the topic of Chapter 5, this one offers ideas for playing the fool to see what ideas might spark in the process. One is to take the opposite approach or perspective to something.

Chapter 8: Avoid Ambiguity. Of the 10 chapters on “mental locks,” this is my favorite. It provides lots of great ways to think ambiguously in order to uncover ideas. One of my favorites is to cross out six letters in the following line so that the remaining letters spell a word. (The answer is at the end of the article.)

B S A I N X L E A T N T E A R S

Chapter 9: To Err Is Wrong. In this brief chapter, the idea is to celebrate errors and failures, as they're great stepping stones to better ideas and successes.

Chapter 10: I'm Not Creative. While even shorter than Chapter 9, this one answers the sad phrase heard all too often. Most ideas start out as bad ideas, but given exposure to enough unique perspectives, they can grow into great ideas. Everyone's perspective is unique because nobody else has had the same collection of experiences.

A Whack on the Other Side of the Head. The book ends with the second bonus chapter, which contains at least a dozen techniques to bring out our creativity.

So, go ahead and give yourself a whack on the head (the book, that is). I assure you, it won't hurt a bit.

Answers to the "Six" problems:

1. Possible answers to the "IX" problem:

- Add a curved line or "S" to the beginning to get SIX.
- Add a curved line or "6" to the end to get IX6, as in one times six equals six.
- Draw a straight horizontal line through the middle, turn it upside down, cover the bottom half, and you get VI.

Can you think of any other solutions?

2. Answer to the "Remove Six Letters" problem. Remove the letters from the two words "six letters" and what remains is "banana."

Eric Sondergeld, ASA, is corporate vice president and director at LIMRA, leading the Technology Research and Developmental and Strategic Research teams. He can be reached at ESondergeld@limra.com.