

creative genius

peter fisk

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AN INNOVATION GUIDE
FOR BUSINESS LEADERS,
BORDER CROSSERS AND
GAME CHANGERS

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This edition first published in 2011 by Capstone Publishing Ltd. (a Wiley Company)

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Registered office

Capstone Publishing Ltd. (A Wiley Company), The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available

ISBN 9781841127897 (hardback), ISBN 9781906465186 (ebk),

ISBN 9780857080233 (eSony), ISBN 9780857080165 (emobi)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Set in Agfa Rotis Sans Serif 10/13.5pt by Sparks – www.sparkspublishing.com

Printed in Great Britain by TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

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Future back

The wind in my hair and Nike Air on my feet
Past the roaring deer and exotic parakeets
Historic palaces and ancient oak trees
Imagining what they have seen, and what they will see
This is my time to think, to dream and reflect
We are all inspired by the world around us, by nature and people
Creative people, such as artists, musicians and architects
Inventors and designers, innovators and entrepreneurs
Stimulated by their vision and ideas, enabled by business and technology
Thinking bigger about new spaces and opportunities
Searching for the impossible then finding ways to make them possible
Listening to what people would love, not just what is marginally better
Designing the perfect solution and finding a way to make it profitable
Not just competing, but out-thinking the competition
Not just creating, but shaping the world in your own vision
Creativity is the most exciting thing that we do
Design is the most engaging
Innovation the most exhilarating
Thinking what you never thought was possible
Inspiring you to do the extraordinary
In your work and in your life

Leonardo da Vinci

It is easy to say that a person is 'ahead of his time', but rarely has anyone been so far ahead. He could see the future – his insights suggested new possibilities, his imagination was uncluttered by today, and his inventions really did emerge from the 'future back'.

Leonardo da Vinci anticipated many of the great scientific discoveries ahead of his time, including those by Copernicus, Galileo, Newton and Darwin. He even went further than them, turning their principles into practical applications, from calculators to helicopters, hydro-dynamics to solar power.

- ➔ Forty years before Nicolaus Copernicus, he proclaimed '*il sole no si muove*' – 'the sun does not move', dismissing the belief that the earth sits at the centre of the universe.
- ➔ Two hundred years before Isaac Newton, he proposed the theory of gravity – that 'every weight tends to fall towards the centre by the shortest possible way', and that the Earth must be spherical.
- ➔ Four hundred years before Charles Darwin, he argued that man and monkey had the same origins, and how evolution has shaped the natural world around us.

How did he do this? The answers lie not in science or technology, but in the way in which he saw the world around him and how that made him 'rethink'. From the *Mona Lisa* to *The Last Supper*, it is the same approaches that made his paintings so remarkable, that enabled him to create, design and invent many of the aspects of life today.

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What was it that inspired, shaped and sustained his creative genius? What were his talents and traits that we could seek to recreate in our own quest for creativity and innovation? Psychologist, and professional juggler Michael Gelb proposed seven components to da Vinci's distinctive approach. He labelled them *curiosità*, *sensazione*, *arte e scienza*, *connessione*, *sfumato*, *dimostrazione* and *corporalità*. Whilst there is nothing futuristic in these attributes themselves, they did enable him to see things differently and, as a result, think different things.

So how can we apply these ideas to business today, and specifically to the challenge of more effective innovation, innovation from the 'future back'?

- 1 **Relentless curiosity** ... an insatiable hunger to learn, to search for better answers and to articulate his ideas in pictures, and propose new possibilities.
- 2 **Seeing more** ... he observed things differently, using all his senses to appreciate richer detail, to align perspective and perception, and thereby to understand his subject better.
- 3 **Thinking bigger** ... appreciating art and science, logic and imagination, he was able to think more broadly, embracing rigorous analysis whilst also trusting his intuition.
- 4 **Making connections** ... to connect the unconnected, to embrace the fusion and intersection between the natural and physical world, the tiniest seeds to the stars above.
- 5 **Embracing paradox** ... thriving on ambiguity and uncertainty, creating mystery and depth, be it the contrast in his sketches or asking questions without obvious answers.
- 6 **Courageous action** ... always seeking to prove his hypotheses, to experiment and test, to make his ideas tangible, and to do what nobody had done before.
- 7 **Enlightened mind** ... constantly renewing mental and physical fitness, exploring new worlds to spark new ideas, not being a slave to work but living a full life.

Leonardo had an insatiable curiosity and an imagination unconditioned by his surroundings. This combination of catalyst and creativity enabled him to make some of the greatest technological advances of the modern world.

Beyond his art, Leonardo is admired for his technological ingenuity. As a scientist, he contributed much to the evolution of knowledge – particularly in the fields of anatomy, optics, mechanical engineering and hydrodynamics. He developed highly original concepts, captured in immaculately detailed designs, for everything from a helicopter, a tank, a calculator and a double-hulled catamaran, to a basic theory of plate tectonics.

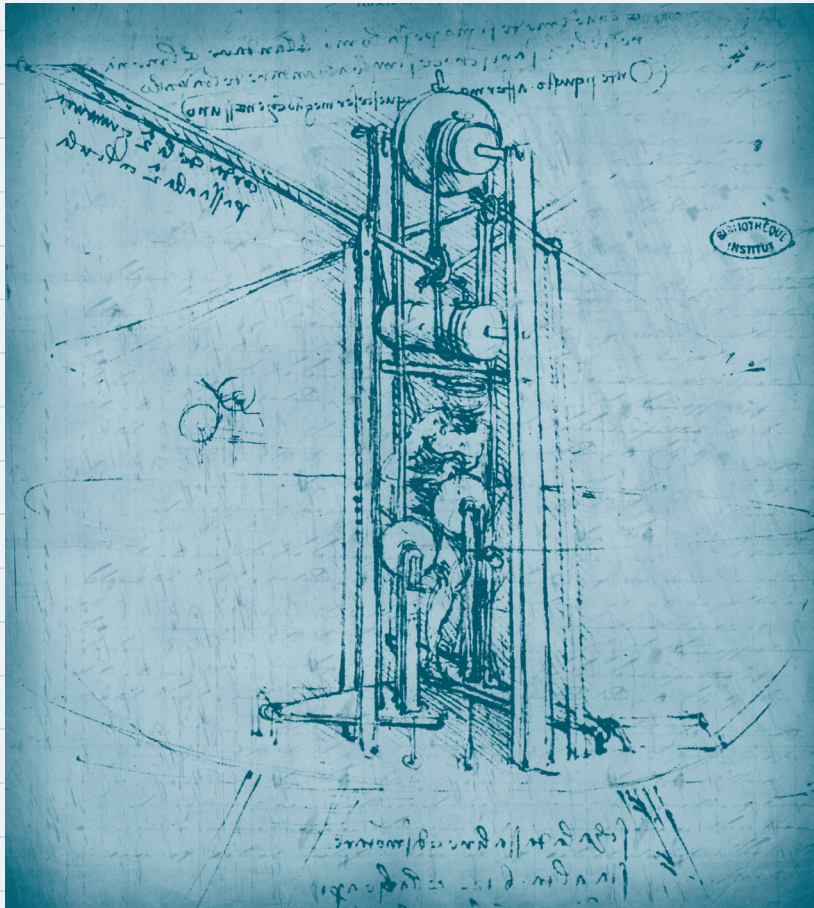
Da Vinci is still thought of by most people as primarily an artist, but his world-changing approach to realistic painting was only possible due to his fascination with science.

He took this fascination with understanding and recording the world around him to extreme lengths, dissecting many bodies and drawing them in great detail. He saw the body as a machine, a complex mechanism that could eventually be understood. He was one of the first, for example, to identify the pumping action of the heart.

He even replaced muscles with strings to experiment and see how they worked with the levers of the bones. His understanding of anatomy and his experimental approach opened the way for others to follow in later centuries.

The Renaissance, and in particular Florence, is famed for its unusual concentration of great men at the time, although they rarely worked together. Leonardo was 23 when Michelangelo was born and 31 when Raphael was born.

Unique to the period was the encouragement by patrons and thinkers of a 'cross-over' between the arts and sciences (or social philosophies as they were regarded at the time), which challenged many of the conventions around, and found newness in their intersection rather than isolated extremes. This became known as the 'Medici Effect', enabled by the gathering of diverse talents encouraged by rich benefactors, such as the Medici family.



Da Vinci's mechanics were inspired by the natural world

Leonardo was a master of cross-over. He combined ideas from animal and plant studies with psychology, fashion, anatomy and architecture. From this he formed his understanding of mechanics, and everything from hydraulic pumps to new musical instruments emerged. He used analogy – for example, he wrote short fables like Aesop, stories that seemed to be to entertain children but were in fact to communicate to adults the danger of greed and so on.

Few of his design concepts were ever constructed. Not because they weren't practical; more often because the technologies and resources to create them were not available at the time. However, some of his smaller inventions, such as an automated bobbin winder and a machine for testing the strength of wire, became reality.

In 1502, for example, Leonardo produced a drawing of a single-span 240-metre bridge as part of a civil engineering project for Ottoman Sultan Beyazid II of Istanbul. The bridge was intended to span an inlet at the mouth of the Bosphorus. Beyazid did not pursue the project because he believed that such a construction was impossible; however, Leonardo's vision was resurrected in 2006 when the Turkish government decided to construct Leonardo's bridge to span the Golden Horn.

So what can we learn from Leonardo da Vinci? How can his life and work inspire us to be more creative, enlightened, inspired by our surroundings, and able to innovate from the future back?

Steve Jobs has many great attributes, but he too is not perfect. Maybe surprisingly, much of advanced technology is Greek to him. His skill is to rise above this, to understand people, the simplicity of user-centric design in all its facets, and the power of communication. Maybe we can learn something from this in today's world – where words and numbers dominate our communication and restrict our imagination. Maybe P&G have the right idea when they stipulate that any new proposal, innovation or investment should be communicated in a one-page poster rather than in lengthy reports or slideshows.

Certainly the ideas of looking further into the future and deeper into the consumer's world are only beginning to matter in business today. Techniques such as scenario planning on consumer immersion are still rare. Going beyond the assumptions and research statistics to live with consumers, to understand how products and services are used, enable people to do more, enrich their lives – by seeing the challenge and opportunity from their perspective.

We now examine Leonardo's seven talents in a little more detail, looking at what they mean for creativity and innovation today, and how you can embrace them in pursuit of your own creative genius.

Talent 1: Relentless curiosity

'*Curiosità*' is translated from Italian as an insatiably curious approach to life and unrelenting quest for continuous learning. It is the ability to constantly question yourself and others; the relentless pursuit of knowledge and truth, learning to ask better questions; the ability to solve the most challenging problems by keeping an open mind.

Leonardo believed that man is not divorced from nature, or any object from its surroundings. And that observation should be accompanied by reason and application. He saw this as a creative challenge. As Vasari put it, 'he taught us that men of genius sometimes accomplish most when they work least, for they are thinking out inventions and forming in their minds the perfect ideas which they subsequently express and reproduce with their hands'.

Leonardo was intensely curious about everything he encountered. His incomplete notebooks are full of spontaneous, random drawings but few words, demonstrating an agile mind: observing, thinking, imagining – capturing new insights or fragments of invention, recognizing that future possibilities are unlocked by a better understanding of current phenomena, and then searching for more.

How does relentless curiosity drive creativity?

Our world is more uncertain than ever. Change is relentless, technologies emerge at break-neck speed, and markets and behaviours are incredibly complex. Neuro-imaging can give us new insights into the mind and space travel is unearthing life beyond this planet. Seeking to understand this world – at least partly – offers you the best clues to making a bigger difference in it.

Thinking from the future back helps you to challenge the conventions of today. Asking why is always a better starting point than asking how; understanding the context is a more useful place to understand a problem than the symptoms themselves; and developing a better product starts by understanding what people seek to do with it, rather than what it actually is.

Steve Jobs, a little like Leonardo da Vinci, has many talents. But like Leonardo's linguistic weaknesses, Jobs readily admits that there are many who understand technology better than him. Yet he also sees this as a virtue, as it means he is not inhibited like others. Instead he takes a human perspective, challenging every aspect of design, usability and communication.

Meet any other entrepreneur – such as Richard Branson, for example – and they are intensely curious about you and your thoughts, about why things are as they are, and how they could be different. In Branson's pocket there is always a small notebook full of scribbled notes, untidy pictures, questions and new ideas. Every situation, every person, every hour, he adds more to his thinking.

How can you be relentlessly curious?

It is easy to be so focused, that there feels like no time or space in which to think. Yet thinking is perhaps your most valuable use of time. The motivation to think does not come from others, but inside. It comes from being curious.

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Take a notebook everywhere you go – small and without lines, so that it is more portable and less restrained. Capture ideas and insights, and spend a few minutes every day reflecting on discussions and experiences. Then you can occasionally sit back and review what you have created. Look for patterns both obvious and not, and seek symmetry where there is currently none.

Sometimes it is easier to focus on one theme at a time, or to even force yourself to generate as many ideas as possible around that theme. This is sometimes referred to as 'brainwriting' – a personal brainstorm, unlocking your stream of consciousness. A few minutes of thinking time is the best possible starting point to being a creative person.

- ⇒ Time and space (Chapter 2) explores the places where no business has gone before.
- ⇒ Shigeru Miyamoto (Chapter 3) applies his curiosity to transform Nintendo's games.
- ⇒ World changing (Chapter 4) responds to the shifting power in the world and the implications for innovation.
- ⇒ Future back (Chapter 6) explains how to stretch your people to be more curious.
- ⇒ James Dyson (Chapter 9) describes how running up sand dunes led to vacuum cleaners.
- ⇒ Philippe Starck (Chapter 11) inspires us to stay crazy through creativity and design.

Talent 2: Seeing more

'*Sensazione*' is the continual refinement of the senses, especially sight, as the means to enliven experience. Of all these, da Vinci was most focused on sight, making '*saper vedere*' – knowing how to see – the foundation of all his work.



Seeing more ... understanding how objects relate to their context

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Leonardo was not satisfied with his ability to depict physicality, and sought out the anatomist Marc Antonio della Torre to help him understand people and their motion even more closely. Torre was passionate about using the eyes in new ways.

Sight and perception

Da Vinci believed that the five senses were connected to a single point: the 'senses communis', located just behind the eye. 'Who would believe that so small a space could contain the images of all the universe?' he pondered in his notebooks, translated and reproduced as *The Da Vinci Notebooks*.

He considered sight to be the superior sense because it gives more context, adds perspective and enables scientific reasoning, and is therefore the foundation of creative talents.

Leonardo also believed in the *idolum*, the power that all things possess to give off both their physical shape and inner energy, and that only by looking more closely can you see the real intersection between an object and its surroundings.

Light and perspective

Perspective became a defining principle of Leonardo's work, showing how objects relate to each other, and to the distance and angle at which they are observed. Geometry and mathematics became increasingly important to his art.

However, he did not believe art was a 'desk job'. He believed in mingling with the bigger world, thinking big before small, believing that otherwise his detail could be in the wrong place. He recommended that artists walk alone in the countryside to more keenly appreciate the beauty of nature.

He became fascinated with all aspects of nature. Trees in particular mattered to him: he admired their structures and changing colours, and the way they interacted with light. The

shadow of trees, he said, is as much about the light patches as the darker patches, and their vibrancy and transparency.

How does seeing more drive creativity?

We dive into problems and opportunities with little thought for either their context or indeed whether we are focused on the right areas. We are all too keen to understand people today, and maybe in the past, but less interested in things that they do not yet say they need, or for which words have not been created. We are comfortable seeking to make sense of our own world, but we lose confidence as soon as we enter a new space.

Opening up before closing down is key to innovation: exploring possible markets, existing or emerged; understanding possible future scenarios, rather than assuming one; considering non-customers as well as customers, because there must be reasons why they are not customers; and considering more ideas, options and potential solutions before making choices.

By considering different viewpoints, we can see an opportunity from different perspectives – as a customer, competitor, technologist, futurist, artist and more. By spending more time with customers, we can learn far more about their motivations and aspirations rather than just their needs and wants. By giving ourselves time to think big, we are more likely to find the best opportunities, rather than just better ones – to do the right thing rather than just do things right.

Thinking from the future back is perhaps the most useful of all perspectives, because it is without restraint, without prejudice, but with infinite possibility.

How can you see more?

Learn how to draw. Drawing unlocks your creative spirit like no other: it allows you to express ideas without the necessity of established words and meanings, to develop the ideas as you

draw, to connect ideas that are usually addressed individually, to reflect this in a unique and personal manner, and to engage people more emotionally.

Above all, learn to draw with a stream of consciousness – with your 'right brain' rather than your 'left brain'. Whilst the brain is more complex, in simple terms, the right side is more intuitive, spontaneous and holistic, allowing us to make connections and see the bigger picture. However, many of us are slaves to the left side (numbers, logic, structure and focus), which is important but can often limit creative thinking in the initial stages. 'Creativity' emerges from the connection of both.

As you draw, use all your senses. Listen to sounds around you, articulate the most important ideas prominently and then connect supporting ideas around them. Think about the touch and smell, as well as sound and vision, describe them and how they make you feel. Remember sometimes that less is more, simplicity as well as detail. And above all, don't feel embarrassed by your drawing skills!

- ⇒ Seeing things differently (Chapter 12) encourages us to explore different worldviews.
- ⇒ Deep diving (Chapter 15) immerses you in the intuitive world of customer aspirations.
- ⇒ Paul Smith (Chapter 17) reflects on quirkiness and how to embrace parallels and extremes.
- ⇒ Co-creation (Chapter 23) adds new ideas to business that you might never have thought of.
- ⇒ John Maeda (Chapter 27) uses graphic design to find simplicity in our complex world.
- ⇒ Cai Guo-Qiang (Chapter 45) encourages artistic experimentation to find genuine newness.