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The Anatomy of the Mindset of Discovery

Demi

Hey, I saw you in the cafeteria, you seem distracted or bummed? Everything okay?

Margi

Sorry, the marketing expo in Vegas is next week and I am just dreading it!

Demi

I thought you had retired from that thing?

Margi

So did I, but then Hopkins said she needed me to do it since I was the only one left from the team that did it last year.

Demi

Sorry to hear.

Margi

I just hate trade shows!!! The whole concept makes my skin crawl.

Demi

Me too, the carnival barking!

Margi

The cheesy giveaways!

Demi

The awkward booth-walking tote-bag fillers!

Margi

The forced networking!

Demi

Yuck.

Margi

And I have done *everything* I can to try and make it less than horrible. I spent extra for a large table, I have a flat screen for our brand video, I am giving away candy, and we hired an improv actor to engage the attendees when they walk by. Any other suggestions?

Demi

Do you have pens to give away? People love pens.

Margi

Yep, I Googled 10 things to make a trade show booth stand out, I even bought a new fishbowl for business cards.

Demi

Sounds like you have thought of it all, I am not sure what else you could change?

Margi

That's exactly what has got me down, I just hate it when there is nothing you can do to make a situation better. You know, when you are trapped and you just have to convince your mind to accept that this is going to be horrible but it will be over in a week.

Demi

Maybe if you book yourself a spa day to recover?

Margi

I wish I had the time!

One of the great blessings in my life is that the person who most often and most clearly demonstrates the mindset of discovery to me also happens to be my best friend and wife. Jenni seems to migrate to, sustain, and most naturally exist in this mindset. There are many days when I am sincerely jealous of what seems to be her effortless ability to approach life this way. Although Jenni works very hard at practicing and staying innovatively fit, being in the mindset of discovery seems to be almost her natural state.

The same isn't true for me. I remember a specific example of how her mindset choice blew me away.

In a relatively short amount of time, we had gotten the following news as a couple and as business owners:

- The two gentlemen who had co-directed and run our school of improvisation for five years were both leaving to take corporate jobs—at the same time.
- The building that had originally housed our theater (which we relocated in 2011) for almost 50 years and, after that, our school, was going to be sold, and we would need to move out within months.

This news came right on the heels of Jenni completing a miraculous journey of amazing hard work, innovation, and passion as she co-founded, chaired the board of directors, raised \$5 million, bought and refurbished a building, hired an executive director and staff, and

opened the doors of Gilda's Club Twin Cities, a free-of-charge drop-in clubhouse for anyone who has cancer or is connected to someone on the cancer journey.

It had been an exhausting period in her life and she truly was ready for a break—or at least a sabbatical from working and being a full-time mother to our two boys. But instead of getting to celebrate and enjoy all the successes she had had, she immediately had to get back into entrepreneur mode and:

1. Come out of retirement to be the school director (a position she had held from 1997 to 2003).
2. Find and hire replacements for our two co-directors.
3. Help me determine what kind of facility would best suit our school's needs for future growth.
4. Work with me to find and purchase such a facility.
5. Design the new space in a way that would make it accessible to our students and technically available to the rest of the world (through webcasts and distance learning).
6. Create a new train-the-trainer program to bring our improvisational curriculum well beyond our physical school.
7. Revamp the curriculum of our improv program.
8. Hire new teachers.
9. Create a new marketing plan for the school and its new approach and demographics.
10. Help me manage the construction process and equipment purchases.

Jenni accomplished all of that—and she did it within a year. The only thing that is more amazing than the actual accomplishment (which I completely attribute to her mindset) was the grace that she demonstrated and the positive culture she created for everyone involved in the project.

Jenni would be the first to tell you that the mindset of discovery is what allows her to take on these types of life challenges with a smile—and accomplish the seemingly impossible under circumstances that would prompt most people to quit.

I remember having a conversation with her when we realized what lay in front of us and all that we needed to do in the next year. I was

overwhelmed, but Jenni said things like, “The undeniable drop-dead dates and urgencies will really help us to reduce any hesitation or over-analysis,” “I’m sure when we look back on this year, we will be grateful for it to have been such a pivotal and explosive period in our company’s history,” and “I learned so much from the process of building Gilda’s Club; it will be great to use that experience and knowledge right away on this other project, before I forget.”

A mindset like this compels Jenni to behave consistently through highs and lows, to recognize possibilities, to listen for all available lessons, and to move forward into the unknown with a rational sense of risk and a miraculous sense of hope.

Most of us—including me—are far removed from spending as much time in the mindset of discovery as Jenni does. Think about how many minutes of your day you spend worrying about making a mistake at work, stressing out about workplace politics, checking out of superficial meetings, or overplanning and analyzing without taking action. Chances are various stressful thoughts, fears, and unhealthy judgments pop up in your head multiple times a day and take away from your energy and productivity.

We have found in our 15 years of working with businesses that in order to keep these stressors at bay, we have to be intentional about where we *focus our attention* and *what lens* we use to process information. We like to think of that filter as our mindset.

As psychologist and researcher Carol Dweck brilliantly points out in her book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*: “Mindsets are just beliefs. They are powerful beliefs, but they’re just something in your mind, and you can change your mind” (Dweck 2008).

We embrace a few powerful assumptions when we’re in the mindset of discovery; specifically, we believe that:

- Mistakes are a great source of inspiration and learning.
- Change is fuel—not an obstacle.
- Ideas and honest opinions have value that we should celebrate, not judge.
- We all have the power to create change and impact those around us.
- We don’t need *all* the information just to begin.

These assumptions fuel a very productive and happier state of being. We tend to be much more confident, agile, curious, accountable, and authentic when we're operating in the mindset of discovery.

The *confidence* stems from a healthy relationship with risk and alleged failure. It's easy to succumb to the fear of failure and attempt to spend disproportionate time on preventing mistakes and ensuring everything is perfect. No one likes to be wrong—and we aren't advocating a careless or fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants approach. But mistakes will inevitably take place—and the people who are able to focus on learning and moving on are in a better place to keep trying to achieve their goals instead of giving up (Dweck 2008). They're more likely to take risks with confidence, because they know that they will learn something from the experience, regardless of the outcome.

The *agility* is rooted in the belief that irrelevance and stagnation follow if we don't change and grow. It replaces the belief that we won't be capable or competent on the other side of change with the assumption that change is fuel that *propels* the next stage, full of opportunity. People in the mindset of discovery don't seem to be set back or even surprised by change. They see the next circumstance in their life as simply a piece of information, and defer judgment on it in order to process it and find how it can help them move forward. This agility certainly has assisted the Brave New Workshop in its growth from a single entity of a theater to its current diverse set of product offerings and revenue streams, which include the theater, school, event center, and corporate training division. In each of those growth instances we responded to the opportunity that change can bring, instead of considering the changes obstacles or dead ends.

The *curiosity* is based upon a sense of openness—a desire to gather a wide breadth of information, perspectives, and experiences. It's not a passive level of curiosity; rather, it's an aggressive, investigative, almost inexhaustible need to learn, find out, and experiment. That curiosity shows itself in how people with it communicate with others, as well as in their ability to jump in and engage with a situation—or, in the context of innovation, begin to try things out. We'll talk more about how curiosity fuels our ability to listen, an important tenet in the mindset of discovery, later in the book.

The *accountability* is a manifestation of the desire to co-create and a belief that one has the power and ability to make an impact. Moreover,

it's rooted in the capacity to see conflict as a productive process, which can lead to a better outcome. People in the mindset of discovery are not afraid to engage and mix it up if need be. They know that the friction of ideas, opinions, and points of view doesn't have to be full of contempt and negativity, and prefer to be active. They prefer to be doers and contributors rather than passive observers—or worse yet, self-appointed victims of circumstance.

Finally, the *authenticity* is a refusal to conform—and a celebration of diversity and a bold declaration of one's point of view, values, and opinions. Authenticity rests on the assumption that diversity of thought is the key to finding better solutions as well as creating a rich, interesting society and that pretending to be someone else does not serve anyone.

Mindset of Discovery = Foundation for Innovation

Many definitions of innovation exist, and for the purposes of this book we have embraced the definition cited in the *Oslo Manual* prepared by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and Eurostat, which has been adopted by the National Science Foundation Business R&D and Innovation Survey (BRDIS) (Borouh 2010): “Innovation is the implementation of a new or significantly improved product (good or service) or process, a new marketing method, or a new organisational method in business practices, workplace organization, or external relations” (Eurostat 2005).

This definition works for us because it includes the notion of creating *and implementing* something new and useful. Indeed, innovation is about thinking in new and different ways (creativity) as well as about making those ideas a reality (collaborating, socializing a concept, influencing, being a change agent).

A mindset of discovery is critical in the work of innovation because of its foundational importance.

We're all familiar with the learning pyramid model of tool sets, skill sets, and mindsets—with the last element being what everything else rests on top of. The proper mindset allows us to use the skills that we have developed and the tools that we are afforded in the specific ways we need them to accomplish tasks.

Salespeople, for example, need great product marketing collateral and the specific skills of value proposition articulation and closing.

However, what they need most of all is a foundational mindset of confidence, resilience, curiosity, and diligence. Even if salespeople have great tools and great skills, they won't achieve the results they're seeking if those tools and skills are set on top of a weak mindset—let alone one based on fear. The same goes for leadership, customer service, and especially innovation.

The great innovators I have encountered in my long career have had access to great tools and are certainly very skilled at ideation techniques, prototyping, finding disparate connections among ideas, or embracing odd, currently misunderstood concepts or premises. But mostly, they've embraced a discovery-based life approach and an innovative mindset.

Conversely, I know and have collaborated with thousands of people who might indeed have great tools and perhaps even great skills. However, when their foundation—their behavioral bedrock—is grounded in fear and not in discovery it's impossible for them to be great innovators. I've witnessed their frustrations with this phenomenon; some have asked me straight out, "Why is it that I work so hard at this formulaic approach to innovation or at this specific set of innovator tools and skills and yet my results don't seem to be as nearly innovative as I'd hoped?" As kindly as possible, I try to let them know that the answer is not more tools or skills, and that the way they see things must shift. It's their core approach that needs to be changed. They're never happy to hear that. It's personal, it's not a quick fix, and it's really, really hard.

The tool sets and skill sets are only part of the puzzle. It's that third leg of the stool—mindset—that's essential.

Kevin Wilde agrees. After more than 17 years he retired recently from his post as chief learning officer at General Mills, where he was responsible for the not exactly small area of personnel and organizational growth, including talent management and executive development. Kevin continues to share what he's learned through teaching, writing, and coaching. He serves as an executive leadership fellow at the Carlson School of Management, University of Minnesota, writes for *Talent Management* magazine, and contributes to a variety of books and publications.

Kevin is a lifelong friend and would certainly be considered one of the first significant executives to embrace what we were doing. Although perhaps risky at the time, Kevin took a chance in exploring

this premise of improvisational behaviors in the workplace. He has helped shape and mold our application of improvisation to the workplace, and his early adoption was a significant boost to our approach and gave us validity in the eyes of many other organizations.

Kevin and I sat down to talk about the importance of all three elements—and fat suits.

John: Tool sets, skill sets, and mindsets, I'd love to hear your take on how those three important elements all work together.

Kevin: This notion about all three gives you a leveraged advantage versus just going after one of them. It's a popular topic in HR right now. Everyone's trying to transform their performance management systems. Typically, they're really after tools and techniques and skills. But I urge them not to forget about how important mindset is. And anytime you're trying to change something, think of a contribution you're making to mindset. I am a big fan of continued investments into being intentional and doing all the right cultural things that support where you're headed.

John: I believe that mindset can serve as kind of the bedrock upon which you build the skills and with which you use the tools. It has to come from the culture. You can have great tools and even specific skills, but if the mindset isn't there it's not as effective.

Kevin: Here's an example: A few years ago one of our innovation teams was trying to get our marketing managers to think about consumers who are trying to improve their health by losing weight. Every week or two they would assemble these business leaders, and they'd try diets out. So this week, they'd be on the Atkins diet, next week they'd be on the South Beach diet—all the diets consumers were trying. Most people got a real mindset shift of, "Oh, this is hard." But there was one guy—a thin, skinny guy who clearly never had to diet—who didn't understand how difficult it could be for people. Every diet he tried, he thought, "Yeah, fine, no problem." So finally they decided for the sake of consumer empathy that they would put him in one of these—I don't know if there's a delicate word for it—but a fat suit, with makeup and everything. His job was to live that life for a day, and so they assigned him to go shopping, go to McDonald's, go grocery shopping, and just experience what it's like being at a weight that you don't want to be.

That, finally, gave him the mindset. He became a great champion of empathy for that consumer based on that experience for that day. And because of that, he came up with and championed some very innovative products.

It wasn't just about attending a workshop and picking up tools and skills. He wasn't getting the mindset he needed to be in. Things clicked for him when he got into the mind of that consumer. In the consumer-foods business, you may be creating products that aren't your lifestyle but are someone else's. And you have to really understand that and really have empathy for that.

John: Empathy is a huge part of getting in the mindset of discovery. All the data in the world isn't worth a thing if you don't embrace the human element. You wouldn't be able to ever convince me that if I sit down and have coffee with someone and I get a feeling that he's sad or something, that that isn't a real, identifiable piece of energy. I'm actually pretty in tune with how emotions affect my body. Maybe it's because of improv, but I can be with someone for 30 seconds and tell you what my gut says about how he is.

Do you think that people can get better at that? Obviously, I'm biased toward that approach; but if it's essential for us to be able to gather that human information, can we practice it? And I guess, go out to coffee more, right?

Kevin: I'm biased, too, because I was a chief learning officer, so I inherently believe that you can get people to learn. I'm optimistic there. I would say the two conditions are (1) some people are wired for this more than others, and (2) some people have had more experiences than others. Given that, I think everybody can improve. Know that some cases are going to be easier, some cases are going to be harder, and there are some better ways of doing it; but yes, I do think that these areas are ones that you can grow.

Another reason why the mindset of discovery is so important in the work of innovation is its implications for creativity.

Creativity—or the *production of something novel and useful* (Jung, Mead, Carrasco, and Flores 2013)—provides the ideas and insights used to develop new or significantly improved products, processes, and methods. It's a vast area of study that has been of interest to humans since ancient times. New technology has most recently allowed

researchers to begin to identify the brain processes and structures that are involved in it and to shed more light on how it emerges. While there are still many unknowns, evidence points to creativity as a combination of several cognitive processes instead of just one. Additionally, these processes don't rely on a specific region of the brain but rather brain networks and hubs, which are engaged at different times and for different purposes (Jung, Mead, Carrasco, and Flores 2013).

The brain networks necessary for creativity are different from those needed for intelligence. As neuropsychologist Rex Jung points out in an interview, intelligence requires strong and direct neural connections between networks, which provide fast information processing. Creativity, on the other hand, requires looser neural connections, which allow the brain to meander, helping us link unexpected ideas and concepts (Jung 2013).

The old myth of right-brain versus left-brain predominance is in fact incorrect. Cognitive processes, both analytical and creative, depend on the neural networks of the brain and use the whole brain, not just one part of it (Anderson, Nielsen, Zielinski, Ferguson, and Lainhart 2013).

The fact is, most of us don't exercise our creative brain networks on a daily basis—sometimes hiding behind the excuse that “I am not a creative or right-brained person.” We rely on our intelligence and ability to recall or file information quickly, break down problems, and solve them as quickly as possible based on prior experience.

So it's no surprise that when we're in the innovation trenches, our biggest foe can be a mindset that focuses us on what is known and comfortable. It seems that when the process or task at hand demands that we be innovative we have to be willing and able to step away from the quick solutions and predictable ways of so-called normal. With effort and practice, if we can enter the innovation activity already in the mindset of discovery, preexisting fears, the status quo, and past failures can't affect our game. Mindset seems to be the most effective and all-encompassing way that I've seen to position ourselves for innovation success.

In the last few years, our company has done a significant amount of research and exploration into the science behind the innovative mindset. It revealed a huge bias on my part, perhaps because of

my background or perhaps because of the fact that I *do* practice the mindset of discovery or because of the very nature of being an improviser. I always contended that people who weren't comfortable with risk—those who use *no* as their default answer or those who aren't willing to explore a point of view different from their own—were simply lazy. I was not aware of the many reasons why some people naturally migrate to the mindset of fear.

This research has proven to me that if we're not aggressively practicing and working on staying in the mindset of discovery, there's a more-than-likely chance that we'll passively and gradually—but just as consistently—migrate to the mindset of fear. My point of view has transformed from “it can certainly help you be more innovative” to “it's hard to ever be innovative without it.”

So if consistently staying in the mindset of discovery is truly essential and an amazing accelerator to personal and cultural innovation, why don't people simply *choose* that mindset? After observing humans move in and out of this mindset for 15 years in my training sessions and talking to our clients about the difference between highly innovative groups and business as usual, we have uncovered one very potent reason why people don't remain in a mindset of discovery:

Because it's uncomfortable.

When we know something will make us uncomfortable—even if it's something we also know will help improve us—we typically avoid it. A frequent example is the process of coaching or giving or receiving feedback. We all know it is a wonderful tool to help ourselves grow, or to help strengthen the skill sets of those we lead, and yet sometimes the personal nature of feedback and discomfort associated with it has us procrastinate or sometimes even avoid it. So it makes sense to me that innovation would be uncomfortable to us. Innovation asks us to jump into the unknown, to embrace risk as a friend, to somehow convince ourselves that failure is a positive step toward an innovative solution. Some of its core elements ask us to do the very opposite of what has kept our species alive and evolving since the beginning of time. What are we, crazy? Why would that type of behavior and any of those processes feel good or comfortable?

Getting Comfortable Being Uncomfortable

I've witnessed thousands of individuals and hundreds of organizations try to create systems and processes that not only streamline the innovation process but are designed to somehow make the individuals who are innovating feel more comfortable with being more innovative. I've always scratched my head with that one—because I see it a bit differently.

Isn't innovation—or acting innovatively—always going to be a bit messy? Aren't the essential behaviors and actions of innovation always going to make most people feel a bit squeamish or uncomfortable?

What if we spend the same amount of time and effort and money on simply helping people be more comfortable with being uncomfortable? I've often thought that trying to make innovation more comfortable through processes and systems is kind of like trying to get Lake Superior a bit warmer or more comfortable so more people will swim. The water is cold: get used to it and jump in!

What I can attest to, having witnessed the process thousands of times, is that we can all actually increase our comfort with being uncomfortable through practice.

It's not as complicated as one might think. What we do in our exercises and what I prescribe for myself and others is to simply engage in safe, controlled activities that make us feel mildly uncomfortable. For us at the Brave New Workshop, that's simple improvisational exercises that put us in situations of ambiguity, or possible vulnerability, or that require us to be a different version of ourselves than we usually are.

Outside of improvisation, these kinds of activities can include something as simple as having a conversation with someone you don't know, listening to music that you currently don't appreciate, trying a new type of food, actually dancing at a wedding, getting up and singing during karaoke, or giving a public presentation to your peers or friends. Whatever is accessible, whatever works for you—just find some things that slowly, gradually, but consistently put you in situations in which you are uncomfortable. Faster than any physical fitness program you have ever been involved in, and with instant rewards of “Hey, that wasn't so bad” or “Wow, I was much better at that than I thought I would be,” you will become more comfortable being uncomfortable.

I once took a series of tests that were meant to rank my tendency and comfort level with risk. The results of the test said that I had a very, very high—and I'm sure in some people's opinion unhealthy, perhaps even dangerous—level of comfort with risk. When I asked the test facilitators if they could possibly chart my score against other groups or types of people they said yes, although they were hesitant to tell me the results out of a concern for upsetting me. I told them not to worry; I came from a family of risk-takers and had been associated with lots of types of people in my life. They very calmly and in a data-reinforced way explained to me that the only community of people who shared the same scores in their comfort with risk-taking with me was the habitually incarcerated. How comforting.

My strong tendency to take risks can therefore make it hard for me to understand why everyone doesn't want to grab every opportunity to get uncomfortable. Thankfully, Kevin Wilde adds some weighty, solid context to my approach and pushes back at my inherent need to seek the uncomfortable at any cost:

John: We often talk about how important it is to be comfortable being uncomfortable. In my experience, I think you can get better at it. I spent a lot of time in college volunteering at a camp for kids with special needs. I was really awkward that first week of freshman year. I felt uncomfortable. I hadn't been around a lot of kids with special needs before. But by the end of the fourth summer, I wasn't the least bit uncomfortable anymore. And it simply came out of practice and repetition.

Kevin: What caused you to put yourself in that environment to begin with, and then how did you stick with it?

John: It's because there was a need to serve someone else. There was an opportunity to serve and help, and if that can be stronger than the awkwardness or discomfort, then you can follow that. Let that pull you. Let that drive you. That's certainly what drove me to volunteer at that camp. And the reward was instant. The first day I met this great kid on the softball field, and the first thing he said to me is, "John, I'm slow, but you're fat." And I said, "We're going to get along really well." I instantly felt less uncomfortable. I couldn't stop coming back. The rewards were so wonderful.

Kevin: To put it in a business context—companies are wired to reduce risk while achieving objectives. If I had to boil down my 34 years of corporate life, it would be like this: Leaders say, “I need to get this done. How do I reduce the risk while I get it done?” I think there’s a lot to that.

What *you’re* saying is counterintuitive: “You’ve got to put yourself into risk to achieve your objective.” I think there’s a paradox, if not a balance, there. “I need to get uncomfortable, but within reason.” But on the edge, right? Because you can go *too* far or you can get *too* comfortable. And so how you build that muscle and that skill, and part of it is a skill, and part of it is giving you the tools, but part of it is, “How do I generate that right mindset?”

John: Setting the boundaries of how much risk you’re going to take actually is a good way to help people manage their fear of risk. Then they know the boundaries. “We’re going to go swimming in Lake Superior in August, and the water’s 61 degrees, so it’s going to be pretty cold. You’re going to shiver and it’ll be a little painful for a while, but you’re not going to get hypothermia. We’re going to come out in five minutes and it’s going to be okay.”

In the work that I do I am still amazed that people will just say, “I’m sorry, I can’t stand up and sing and dance in front of my peers. It’s simply too much risk.” Before we do exercises, I say: “Can we please identify the spectrum of consequences for what we’re about to take risks on? No one will get a disease, no one will get shot, and no one will get fired.”

I think we magnify how risk-tolerant we are or aren’t. If you really feel uncomfortable doing something, that’s the single biggest reason you should do it.

Kevin: While that’s definitely true—it could be equally aimless to seek discomfort without aiming to achieve a purpose. I think what caused you to hang in there wasn’t just, “Well, I’m comfortable being uncomfortable.” You were also saying, “I’m trying to get a greater good done. I’m going to hang in there because I’m convinced this is going to help me get there.”

John: Right—it’s not just the carrot. It’s the actual reward and things that you were able to get done. It’s worth it. The journey’s worth it, because we know the result.

Kevin: Every September, I take about 20 people on a day hike of the Grand Canyon. We start at one rim of the canyon and we take 12 hours, drop a mile into the canyon, cross the Colorado River, and then go up the other side. The whole thing is 24 miles. There are lots of signs from the National Park Service that say, “Don’t do this in a day.” We do it in a day.

John: Wow.

Kevin: I’m in one of the most stunningly beautiful places on Earth. You go through the ages and layers of the planet. For the most part, it’s a four-foot-wide trail that just continues forever. But here’s the interesting part: I have to remind myself to look at it. Because for the 12 hours that I’m doing this, I’m looking at my feet. I think back to why I’m taking the risk or why I’m being uncomfortable. I have to remind myself where I’m headed and why I’m doing this darn thing.

We get to the base of the canyon and it’s 100 degrees. There are no taxis or buses; the only way out, other than emergency helicopter, is on your own two feet. And you get kind of grumpy about it. So you’ve got to remember to look up at why you’re here in the first place—in the middle of that stress and frustration.

That experience reminds me of what you talked about regarding your summer camp. It wasn’t just that you got uncomfortable; it’s that you had a purpose.

John: In the business context—especially as a leader—that means being able to communicate to those people you’re asking to hike with you into the canyon. You want them to continue to look up and then give them some great examples of what they’re looking up for. This is how it’s going to help profitability, help our customers, help our culture. It’s not just for the sake of innovation or being uncomfortable.

I get pretty adamant about telling people, “You should push yourself and be uncomfortable just so you can be an uncomfortable athlete.” But it has to be bigger than that, especially for people who don’t necessarily like risk.

Kevin: Yeah. You can’t get by on just being comfortable. I’m reminded of a quote that I think Napoleon was credited with saying: “A leader reminds people what’s important.” If it’s important enough,

you're willing to get uncomfortable. And I can't do it any other way.

I'm not only comfortable with being uncomfortable, I often pursue it. While this attitude isn't for everyone, I know that it's just how I am wired. I have also learned over the years that trying to be comfortable being uncomfortable is a very difficult thing for many wonderful and innovative people. So I have spent some time trying to develop ways to help them increase *their* ability to be comfortable being uncomfortable. I'll discuss some of those methods in this book; you can find others in other books and methodologies. One of the single most effective ways to get people to begin—though it's not glamorous and perhaps seems so obvious that it's embarrassing even to mention—is *to be in the service of others*.

I talked a little about service to others as it related to my summer camp experience in my conversation with Kevin. If we try to help, first and foremost—to improve the lives of another, come to the aid of someone in need—we tend not to notice or perhaps simply just ignore many of the “I'm about to be uncomfortable so I should stop what I'm doing” signals and alarms. It works like a distraction. I've never been able to—or met anyone who's been able to—simultaneously be completely engaged in serving another human being while at the same time worrying, fretting, or being preoccupied with personal discomfort.

As you heard earlier, my friend Sr. Laureen Virnig has lived most of her remarkable life in service to others. And as you might expect, she's got an amazing perspective on just how transformative that can be, particularly when the service takes the form of something that is practiced again and again.

John: Being in the service of others is as deep of a thread as anything in your life. Everything you do is for others in some ways.

Sr. Virnig: You know that saying, “If you throw mud on somebody else, part of it lands on you”? If you throw affirmations on others, part of it lands on you, too.

I remember when I had moved to a new city, I was probably in my early 20s. There was an expectation that we wouldn't go to our families at Christmastime. But I was lonely, so I said, “Oh heck, I'm going to go to the nursing home across the street.” It was just

a beautiful Christmas because I met those lonely people and they were so happy to see this little peanut coming over there.

John: And you got something out of it, also.

Sr. Virnig: If I give, something is coming back. It's like my mom used to say, "If you point fingers at somebody else, most of them are pointing back at you." And what I see in others often is what I see in myself. It's like when someone asks, "What are the people like in California?" And you answer, "Oh, they're just wonderful people." Well, *you* must be a wonderful person.

John: You clearly haven't met any of the Sweeneys of California. That's exactly it. If we reduce our judgment of others' ideas, our residual benefit may perhaps be that we're a little less judgmental of *our own* ideas. Because one of the biggest inhibitors of new ideas is that they never see the light of day as a result of our own judgment. A lot of our work is based on helping build corporate cultures, but we also teach people how to build their own personal innovation programs. That way when the idea comes they can at least be neutral. It is just an idea. And we don't have to beat it up.

Sr. Virnig: You don't have to judge it. Just get it all out.

John: And then it might combine with another idea, or, more beautifully, another person might *react to it*. That's why I'm so opposed to these process-driven innovation programs; they have algorithms judge the ideas and don't give another human the chance to say, "What that means to me is ..."

Sr. Virnig: I think one of the images we have here, spoken or unspoken, is of everybody bringing a candlelight of wisdom to the decision: That my little light might be pretty dim—but if I get yours, our combined light is that much stronger. So we have all this feed in. That's when we get light—in the next step.

John: It seems to me that when you incorporate a habitual practice in your life—in this case, being of service to others—that you can find consistency in that practice. And when you do it for years and decades, it also surprises you with wondrous gifts of, wow, I didn't know this would happen. Have you had examples of there being these wonderful blessings and surprises that really are just a function of the small things that you do every day that show themselves?

Sr. Virnig: This is very minor, but I lost my keys. Do you ever do that?

John: Every day. I don't know where mine are right now. They're probably in the car.

Sr. Virnig: And I could just spend time looking for the keys and worrying about the keys, but there was something else that I was asked to do. Somebody needed something and so I decided to just go do it. The keys have to find me. I went to help this person and then that led to me helping someone else with another project. She needed help and I did that.

And I came back and my keys were where I had looked earlier. I'm so sure I'd looked there. How was that possible? Everyone said, "Oh, you just were looking over them." Well, that's just a small thing, but sometimes just letting go of focusing on me, and instead focusing on someone else's needs, is what makes all the difference.

John: So to your point—if I'm uncomfortable with this change in my job or accepting a new idea, it's a nice distraction away from my own issues if I can put myself in the service of others.

Sr. Virnig: With oblates, there are three key components: prayer, community, and service. How am I part of the community? In other words, who am I looking at? Well, service is in there, too. Who am I looking at outside of myself? What can I give today? What can I bring today? What is that saying? "Practice random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty."

John: Sometimes it acts as such a wonderful angle or distraction. And then we find the keys.

It's almost as if we put on special I'm-serving-others glasses that block out the things that make us uncomfortable. There are countless drastic examples, such as the Herculean efforts in life-or-death situations of average citizens who run into a dangerous situation to save another person.

But the ones I tend to learn the most from are a bit simpler. When we are silly and we pretend during playtime with a child, we're never embarrassed—because we know our interaction is helping the all-important brain development of that child *and* making her smile. When grandma makes a horrible meal, we swallow and smile because her sense of independence and dignity means much more to us than the completely inappropriate overuse of garlic. When we volunteer with communities who are much less fortunate than ours, we're so

overcome by their need and the need to serve, that many of the typical inconveniences or uncomfortable aspects of our lives go completely unnoticed (such as temperature, bugs, hygiene, and smells). If you or anyone you know has ever gone on a third-world medical mission, this phenomenon of the service distraction is everywhere in those wonderful endeavors.

The next time innovation needs you to be uncomfortable, remind yourself that your innovation is for the sake of others; it is to serve the solution and the solution may serve your customers and this world.