WHERE GOOD IDEAS COME FROM: A MUST READ BOOK

by Verne Harnish “Growth Guy“

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If you want to get the most ideas out of your business reading, prioritize every book by four essential authors: Jim Collins, Malcolm Gladwell, Pat Lencioni – and Steven Berlin Johnson, who might not be as familiar to you.

One of my best-read mentors, Reade Fahs, president and CEO of fast-growing optical chain National Vision, first turned me on to Johnson’s work. He hammered me for not having read Johnson’s book Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities and Software. In this important work, Johnson explores “emergence theory,” describing precisely how a Google, Facebook, or Wikipedia achieved in a few years what it’s taken other enterprises decades to attain in both scope and scale. And the lessons learned can be applied to any business.

Johnson’s latest book, Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation, builds on Emergence and debunks many of the myths around innovation. He explores in depth why some environments squelch new ideas while others seem to breed them effortlessly. All companies can take a lesson or two from Johnson’s discoveries to increase the number of important ideas they generate, the lifeblood of growth firms.
CONNECT VS. PROTECT

As Johnson eloquently notes: “If there is a single maxim that runs through this book’s arguments, it is that we are often better served by connecting ideas than we are by protecting them… [Ideas] want to complete each other as much as they want to compete.”

Over the years, I’ve encountered numerous inventors and potential entrepreneurs reluctant to share their ideas for fear they would be stolen. In reality, it’s highly likely that someone else is also pursuing the same innovation and that the person who shares their idea with the most people is going to garner greater input and thus create a better idea faster.

Do your promotion and incentive systems encourage information hoarding or sharing? Do the people controlling the most information tend to win in your company and thus remain reluctant to share what they know with others? These “people systems” must be adjusted to support knowledge sharing.

LIQUID NETWORKS

Much of the success of sharing an idea is related to the size, diversity, and quality of one’s network, as Johnson points out. This is why certain cities and environments are better at stimulating important breakthroughs than others.

People who make a conscious effort to have lunch with those in another department or division will dramatically increase the odds of a better idea, as the book illuminates. Those who purposefully surround themselves with friends of diverse backgrounds and interests also do better.

Exclaims Johnson, “It’s not that the network itself is smart, it’s that the individuals get smarter because they’re connected to the network.”
PHYSICAL LOCATION

And if your diverse group has a place to meet, the likelihood of a great idea emerging goes up, Johnson notes. He highlights the research of Kevin Dunbar, a psychologist at McGill University, who watched scientists work to determine how their “greatest hits” were discovered.

“The most striking discovery in Dunbar’s study turned out to be the physical location where most of the important breakthroughs occurred,” explains Johnson. Rather than taking place in the lab while a lone scientist was hunched over a microscope, Dunbar found that the most important ideas emerged during regular lab meetings where a dozen or so researchers would informally discuss their latest work.

“If you looked at the map of idea formation that Dunbar created,” describes Johnson, “the ground zero of innovation was not the microscope. It was the conference table.” Therefore, despite all the advanced technology of a leading laboratory, the most productive tool for generating good ideas remains “a circle of humans at a table, talking shop,” he writes.

3M’s Innovation Center in Austin, Texas, is the finest facility I’ve ever visited that was created specifically to encourage new ideas. A key lesson that all firms can take from its design is to build a single centralized area of break rooms and, yes, restrooms – ideal for bumping into colleagues – encouraging the kind of shop talk Dunbar’s research found drives new ideas. This is particularly important when a growing firm moves to an additional floor in a building. Close off one set of restrooms and break rooms and require people to cross paths on the other floors.
SLOW HUNCH

The biggest revelation about breakthrough innovation is that it’s a lengthy process. It turns out that a “Eureka moment” is less of a momentary event and more of a slow, iterative, and grinding process over time, often consuming a decade or more of effort focused on solving a particular problem.

The good news is that you’re way ahead of anyone else in your industry if you’ve already invested this kind of time and effort. The bad news is if others have beaten you to the punch long ago, you’ll need to be really innovative to outdistance them. Apple’s design brilliance started with a calligraphy class Steve Jobs took in college almost four decades ago, which is one reason that it’s so hard for anyone else to catch up.

To paraphrase Jobs, I’m always amazed how overnight successes take a helluva long time. Surround yourself with a diverse group of people, spend a lot time discussing important ideas with them, and keep pounding away until you discover an innovation that changes the world – or at least your company!