Imagination First
Unlocking the Power of Possibility
by Eric Liu and Scott Noppe-Brandon

The Power of Imaginative Thinking
Finding the True Source of Innovation

QUICK OVERVIEW
In Imagination First, Eric Liu and Scott Noppe-Brandon paint a portrait of a world ruled by imagination, arguing that if you want to create change in your life or in the world, you have to start by imagining what you want. They note that a lot of what is wrong in education today, as well as in business, is too much attention on being right, not enough opportunity for positive failure, and overcommitment to the status quo.

In this provocative work based on years of classroom observation, interviews, and study of companies that are innovating because they imagine first, the authors contend that sometimes it is entirely appropriate to reinvent the wheel, that there may indeed be a better wheel out there.

APPLY AND ACHIEVE
Liu and Noppe-Brandon concede that fostering imagination isn’t easy, particularly in a world driven by deadlines and bottom lines, but they argue that it’s critical to growing minds as well as companies. In Imagination First, they offer 30 “practices” for how to spark and build your own imagination or the imagination of your employees and students, offering concrete case studies for how these practices work.

For example, the authors recount the story of astrophysicist Luke Keller, who studies light waves and what they may tell us about the age of the universe. When he’s in need of inspiration, Keller often steps outside his lab and outside the jargon of high-level science and walks into his daughter’s preschool class to talk about physics in layman’s terms. When he drops a ball and asks the children what has happened, they respond in very intuitive ways, such as “Why doesn’t the ball fall up?” Their seemingly elementary questions twist Keller’s thinking and send him back to the lab with new ways of looking at astrophysics.

Keller’s story demonstrates a key practice for promoting imagination—talking to someone outside your field and filtering your universe through that person’s unique and uncolored lens. When Keller talks about his work “so that a child could
understand it, he reminds himself that there are many more ways to interpret data than he has let himself see. By loosening the tongue, he opens the mind.”

Everywhere we turn, the scene is littered with evidence of the killing of imagination.

The general assumption is that a will to act must precede imagination—that you decide to do something before you imagine what it is. The reality is that imagination comes first. It must. Until and unless we have the emotional and intellectual capacity to conceive of what does not yet exist, there is nothing toward which we are to direct our will and our resources.

Every one of us lives in a world shaped by what social scientists call “path dependence,” which is what happens when an institutional arrangement gets locked in and becomes self-reinforcing.

At each scale, the challenge is the same: How do we unlearn a habit of helplessness and acceptance? How do we see each moment as a potentially critical juncture for new possibilities, rather than part of a foreordained flow? How do we see ourselves as agents rather than victims of change, or even its passive beneficiaries? How do we learn to see with new eyes what is, what could be, and what must be? The gating factor here is not willpower; it is nonblindness. The obstacle is not just path-dependence but also path-acceptance.

WHAT, WHY, AND HOW: WHAT IMAGINATION IS

We define imagination simply as the capacity to conceive of what is not—something that, as far as we know, does not exist; or something that may exist but we simply cannot perceive. It is the ability to conjure new realities and possibilities: in John Dewey’s words, “to look at things as if they could be otherwise.”

Often, the words imagination and creativity and innovation are used interchangeably. We see things quite differently. We see these three concepts as related but very distinct phases of a continuum.

If imagination is the capacity to conceive of what is not, then creativity, in turn, is imagination applied: doing something, or making something, with that initial conception. But not all acts of creativity are inherently innovative. In our view, innovation comes when an act of creativity has somehow advanced the form.

For example, if a child thinks of a ten-foot flower, she is exercising her imagination. If she sits down and actually draws that flower, she’s exercising creativity. But only if that drawing is an advancement of the form of drawings of flowers can she be said to have innovated.

Today’s culture of testing and data collection in education was born of a good intention: to close the persistent achievement gaps of race and poverty. But over time, ends and means have sometimes gotten muddled. Too many public schools focus on the measurable to the exclusion of the possible. As a result, too many students end up better prepared for taking tests than for being skillful learners in the world beyond school.

The more our schools focus on imagination—in curriculum, in teaching practice, in school design—the more they will achieve the results for which they’re being held accountable. Why? Because imagination isn’t a nice-to-have luxury in education. It is, rather, what makes education relevant—to everyone. Giving

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Routinizing imagination is not the work only of heroes—the geniuses, the luminaries, the elect. The work belongs to every one of us. Nor can this work come merely in response to crisis. It must come every day. What’s most revelatory about the study of imagination is, indeed, the everydayness of it. Imagination can be embodied in its most developed forms by a great figure or in great history-bending acts. But we believe that enduring, systemic change comes when every one of us develops, in an abundant bloom of acts and choices, at work and home and play, our own mindfulness about being imaginative. We can all use imagination across every part of our lives—and we can all learn to do it better.

We start by deciding to take note of our blindness. We proceed by inquiring about its origins. We grow by developing new ways to see and reroute our perceptual apparatus.

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teachers and students and principals a chance to apply their imaginative capacities makes all of them much more motivated to be in school.

When all we do is focus on the content and not the skills to manipulate content, we are not producing scientists or artists or investigators for the twenty-first century. If we merely cram kids full of a lot of what, we leave them utterly unready for What If.

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What makes What if seriously adult is that these two words turn out to be the key to successfully performing the experiment called being human. For what separates us from the beasts—and from the best artificial intelligence programs—is that we humans have a capacity to bootstrap from What is to What if. In fact, it is this capacity, and our ability to express it in word and image, that makes human consciousness the miracle it is.

And yet, most of the time most of us squander this absolutely miraculous pile of genetic lottery winnings. We are born with imaginations that, if developed, could run like Porsches, but we move through the world like Model Ts. In spite of our wondrous capacity to take our perceptions of the world and convert them through analogy, induction, and recombination into something imagined, not yet extant, counterfactual—in spite of our capacity to see a pile of horse manure and to imagine a pony in there somewhere—it turns out that most people prefer a known situation that is bad (standing beside that stinky pile) to an unknown situation that could be dramatically worse (diving deep into it), even if the situation could also be dramatically better (finding a pony!).

This illuminates the problem. What if is scary. What if encompasses not only the possibility that the world is round and circumnavigable but also the possibility that it is flat and drops off abruptly to Hell. As children we will tolerate the latter possibility.

Indeed, as children we revel in it. And then, as we become adults and as we become socialized to certain norms of mutual justification (I won’t challenge the flimsy facade that is your social identity if you won’t challenge mine), too much threat gets bound up in any consideration of the scary possibility. As adults, we accumulate reputation and status and power more quickly than knowledge or awareness. As adults, we have too much to defend.

And so we live with what we have.

The Practices

We like to think that life is action—that living is moving, that animation is what generates anima. But in fact stillness is a most fertile breeding ground for ideas. The problem is, modern life is almost completely free of stillness.

Sometimes, to be sure, imagination is sparked by frenzy. But frenzy is generally not a sustainable life strategy. Far more fruitful is the practice of simple stillness. Quiet the mind. Unplug. (A BlackBerry has no icon for imagination.) Do one thing at a time.

Then do no thing at a time.

Fear kills imagination. And fear is always with us. Pretending it doesn’t exist might work in a pinch, but eventually it returns. Learning to name, face, grapple with our fears: this is the start of the art of everything.

But imagination is equally about emotion. It is about the animal instincts of fight or flight. It originates in the gut, in the chemical explosions that precede conscious thought. When you can overcome fear, you earn a chance to exercise your imagination. When you can’t, you don’t.

Most people prefer the certainty of the mean to the risk of the extremes. Most people have no idea where their power actually originates. One of the hallmarks of the entrepreneur is a willingness to go one way when 99 percent of people go the other. As the technology investor and serial entrepreneur Nick Hanauer puts it, “If everyone thinks something is a good idea, it’s either not a good idea or it used to be one.” But it’s harder than it looks to be that solitary contrary person. Mere independence of mind is not enough. Fundamentally, it demands a habit of knowing what you are scared of. Taking stock of those fears. And then, being purpose driven enough to push through.

What’s Your Story?

There is nothing like knowing it all to kill the imagination. When we become experts, or think we have, we get the
benefits of intellectual shortcuts and far greater processing efficiency—but we suffer the cost of closed-mindedness. Having seen it all, we stop looking. Having been there, we stop going. Having done that, we stop doing. To rekindle the imagination we would do well to rediscover the sense of awe—of wonder—that every child comes equipped with and that seems to seep out along the trip to adulthood.

What is identity but a nested set of narratives? There is the narrative of who you are as an individual, the narrative of who you are in family, of your tribe or group, of what you are capable of doing—or not. We are predisposed—hardwired, according to neuroscientists—to make sense by making narratives. We wish to conceive of ourselves, as Joseph Campbell has written, not as a spectator in the game of life or even a protagonist but as a kind of hero. Narrative is the frame upon which we hang selected swaths of experience in order to construct a shelter of meaning. With story, we have a sense of place. Without story, life feels like chaos.

Whether based on reality or not, our narratives make our reality. But sometimes—indeed, sometimes simultaneously—our need for narrative can imprison us. When the narrative we have made is along the lines of *I am a self-made man (and you should be one too)*, or *Our team always chokes at the critical moment*, or *I'm worthy because I can endure punishment*, then it can become dangerously confining. Sometimes, out of duty or peer pressure, we adopt a myth at odds with our nature or aptitudes.

To conjure up the motivations and internalize the perspective of another is one of the best ways to cultivate imagination. It may seem tautological to assert that you need imagination to have imagination, but just as it helps to have money to make money, so it is in this case. Like money, imagination compounds. Unlike money, imagination is endlessly renewable. Consider, for contrast, that although autistic children sometimes have savant-like artistic skills, they often struggle with pretend play, an imaginative endeavor that requires what psychologists call a theory of mind—an ability to attribute mental states to another person or to infer them from that person’s behavior.

The quaint conceit of imagining what would have happened if some important or unimportant event had settled itself differently has become so fashionable that I am encouraged to enter upon an absurd speculation. What would have happened if Lee had not won the Battle of Gettysburg? These are the opening lines of a wickedly imaginative essay Winston Churchill published in 1930. In it, Churchill writes *as if Lee had won* and he proceeds, in earnest, to unfurl a chain of suppositions about how the world would have evolved had Lee lost.

Churchill’s first point in the Lee essay was historical: at any moment, things could have gone differently. His second point...
Imagination First

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Will we always accomplish what we imagine? Of course not. But we will certainly never accomplish what we refuse to imagine. Read the headlines today. Now read them again, as if they were from last year. You realize in that moment of detachment that there was nothing foreordained about these particular headlines. Why did it have to be that violence broke out again in the Middle East? Why did it have to be that so many children around the globe succumbed to easily preventable diseases? Why did it have to be that our political leaders spent so much time raising money for campaigns?

In that moment of detachment, it becomes evident that “because it’s always been that way” is the answer that comes from too much knowledge, from path dependence and path acceptance. If we want to contemplate—or even generate—a vastly different set of headlines, Why did it have to be that so many children around the globe succumbed to easily preventable diseases? Why did it have to be that our political leaders spent so much time raising money for campaigns?

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ACTION STEPS
Get more out of this SUCCESS Book Summary by applying what you've learned. Here are a few questions, thoughts and activities to get you started.

1. Talk to someone outside your industry about the work that you do. Take note of how they respond, the questions they ask and the unique perspective they offer.

2. Learn to explore seemingly crazy ideas instead of dismissing them. Remember that Columbus once proposed the world was round… and he was right.

3. Reevaluate your personal narrative. Does what you believe and envision for yourself still apply? Do you need to create a new story for yourself?

4. Pretend you’re someone else. Review your life as if you were a journalist, and see how it changes your perspective and your method.

5. Don’t make situations into ones where someone loses and someone wins. Before you cut up the pie, see what kind of piece everyone wants first. You may have complementary goals.

6. Don’t be afraid to rewrite history. Instead of thinking about “what could have been,” consider “what could be.”

7. Create spaces for imagination.

About the Author

Eric Liu is an author, educator, civic entrepreneur and the founder for the Guiding Lights Network, which is dedicated to the practice of mindful and imaginative mentorship. In addition to writing Guiding Lights: How to Mentor and Find Life’s Purpose and The Accidental Asian: Notes of a Native Speaker, he is also co-author of The True Patriot. Liu served as a White House speechwriter for President Bill Clinton and later as the president’s deputy domestic policy adviser.

Scott Noppe-Brandon is the executive director of the Lincoln Center Institute and has led the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts for the past 14 years. In addition to being a practicing educator and performer, Noppe-Brandon is known internationally as a speaker, writer and advocate for education in and through the arts. Throughout his career he has helped revitalize numerous public schools, contributed a column to Education Update, and edited or authored books and articles on the arts and education. He is currently leading a campaign called Imagination Conversations, which gathers leaders from all walks of life who are passionate about fostering imagination throughout the United States.

Recommended Reading

If you enjoyed this summary of Imagination First: Unlocking the Power of Possibility, you may also want to check out:

What’s Stopping You? by Bruce Barringer and R. Duane Ireland

Firms of Endearment by Jagdish N. Sheth, Rajendra S. Sisodia and David B. Wolfe

Fires in the Mind by Kathleen Cushman and What Kids Can Do staff