

THE FIRE STARTER

IGNITING INNOVATION
WITH EMPATHY

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CHAPTER 1:

THE INNOVATOR'S JOURNEY

It was a beautiful fall day in North Texas, with a high of seventy-six and clear skies. I was struck by the peace unnoticed by my friend. He was complaining about his ex and her new fiancé. The birds chirped in my peaceful backyard, dogs playfully gnawed on a bone, horses grazed in the pasture. A fire danced in the fire pit. I was in my zone, connected deeply in conversation in a peaceful setting. I saw the inner turmoil on the deep creases lining his normally smooth face. So, I began to “dig” into what was really going on below the surface of his complaints.

I reflected on how we were here. We met one night over dinner and drinks through friends. I immediately saw his power, his strength. He was tall, broad shoulders, and he had just turned fifty-nine.

I was curious, thinking, *what makes a man with this much presence tick?* And that began our friendship; my curiosity of who he was behind his warrior-like stature led us to a game of pool. I discovered that night there was more

beneath his mask of power. He was in pain—his wife had left him six years before for one of his best friends.

He was set to retire. Millions in his bank account. But half of that awarded to her during the divorce. He had risen to the top of his global healthcare company in his over twenty-five-year career. He learned the corporate system. He produced wealth by providing for the system he worked for and in turn had provided for his family.

INNOVATING IS INEVITABLE

Imagine that C-Suite Robert had everything he planned to accomplish: three incredible kids. His family was set. His life was set until his wife left him.

It struck me that sometimes we innovate because we want to disrupt what is not working. And sometimes, disruption causes the need for innovation. Either way, he needed to innovate his life.

WE CAN GET STUCK IN THE UNKNOWN

I could tell he had been stuck for the last six years, and asked, *“What would you do exactly the same if you could do it all over again?”*

He looked at me, puzzled. And after a bit, he answered, *“I wouldn’t change anything. I did what I had committed to do.”*

“Ok, makes sense,” I answered. I decided on a multiple-choice approach. *“What do you want to create? What*

do you want to provide? What is important for you to protect?”

I hit the nail on the head because he answered all three questions with simplicity and clarity. *“I want to create a life that is meaningful—to myself and others. I want to provide value they appreciate. I want to protect my health so that I can create longevity.”*

SYSTEMIC RULES DON'T APPLY IN THE UNKNOWN

I exhaled and thought, *Okay, he knows what he wants. Then why is he struggling?*

To him, I asked: *“What is the biggest challenge you face?”*

And then he said something so powerful, in a whisper, *“I don't know how to do it. Everything I try puts me back in the same loop. I did everything I knew to do. I followed the rules and did it ‘right’ according to what I had been taught. There are no rules to follow in this unknown land I'm in. I don't know how to win anymore.”*

INNOVATION REQUIRES BOTH HEAD & HEART

Suddenly, in this powerful man's vulnerability, I had an epiphany. Those in control can lose their power in the unknown. When unpredictably hits, the new rules of engagement are unclear. And without clarity, a mix of fear, sadness and quite often, anger, can seep in. If those emotions stay below the surface, they create a sense of

“stuck-ness” and “disempowerment,” preventing change or transformation.

He was stuck because he was trying to figure out how to innovate his life from his head, not his heart.

INNOVATION IS A HERO'S JOURNEY

Often, when we think of innovation, we see the final product or result, and believe that is the innovation. But innovation is not the final product, it is the process to develop it. Innovating is a hero's journey. Like journeying into the air in a hot air balloon, innovating is a flight filled with risk, hardship, unexpected challenges, powerful presence, and immense learning. Navigating an open sky full of possibilities and many unknowns is only for the bravest of heroes.

To soar to new heights, the hero must know when to stay grounded, when to ignite the fire, and when to empty the sandbags so that they can launch, fly, and land while navigating the changing weather patterns. As Joseph Campbell puts it in his book, *The Hero's Journey*, “The journey of the hero is about the courage to seek the depths; the image of creative rebirth; the eternal cycle of change within us.”

This was the case for Robert. He was about to traverse the journey through innovation like a hero.

Fast forward two years after our discussion in my backyard. Robert is re-married to a woman with three kids.

He has two grandbabies he spends time with regularly. He reconnected to his oldest daughter after a rough patch in their relationship. He is on the board of directors of one non-profit, and self-funding a new effort to feed the hungry in five cities across the United States. He helps his wife run her business with his leadership expertise. This is all in addition to serving as a leader in the corporation he “grew up” in.

His life is full, his mind active, along with his heart. It is because he innovated his life using empathy as the cornerstone. Empathy allowed him to walk through the journey to spark the fire and keep it lit.

Here’s the Five-Step process he used.

THE HERO’S INNOVATION JOURNEY— EMPATHY CO-CREATION™

1. Desire—create based on heart-led clarity.

That night, before we departed, I asked him: *“Can you help me understand more about what you want for your future?”*

He always says yes when I ask this way. I was glad he had said yes.

“You mentioned ‘creating a life that is meaningful, providing value, and protecting your health.’ Will you find some imagery or pictures that characterizes the experience you envision with each of those?”

He chuckled endearingly toward me and said, “*Yes April. I’ll do this for you.*”

“*Thank you,*” I said. “*I really appreciate you helping me see what you see.*”

A few weeks later, we got together again, and his excitement was evident. It was much different than the deeply-lined wrinkles. He smiled and we embraced. Then he began talking about how a picture of a soccer player scoring a goal gave him a sudden realization. He saw a metaphor about his life being a game. “*I realized my life isn’t over. I just missed scoring a goal.*” As he showed me each of the images, telling me the story of each and why, I could see how he had moved from confusion to clarity in what he desired.

Because now, he had connected to more than a rational goal—he knew emotionally why it mattered.

2. Discover—listen to learn from the heart to expand knowledge

He continued to talk about how his dreams would come to life—how he would approach work differently, do volunteer work to help the hungry, and find a healthy romantic relationship.

But then something shifted. I saw his excitement fade. A sense of anxiety took its place.

I noticed statements transition to questions. And the questions had a pattern—they all began with “how.” I gently mirrored questions back to him.

“Robert,” I stopped him. *“What is one area where you are passionate but need to learn more?”*

He said, *“Volunteering. But I don’t know how it’s possible to manage volunteering with everything else I have on my plate.”*

He paused, then continued, *“I have no idea how to find an organization that fits what I am passionate about. When I did the vision exercise you gave me, I realized seeing poverty when I was young is what fueled my own success. I swore I would never deal with poverty.”* He hesitated, drew in his breath, then said, *“And now I want to help those who are in need.”*

“Great! That’s a perfect place to start. May I make a suggestion?”

Half interested, half annoyed, he responded: *“Okay, go ahead.”*

“Can you think of three to five people successful in their career and doing something to give back to others?”

He looked off, pondering. Then said, *“Yes, Don an ER doctor. He serves on a ministry board for doctors who provide medical care in South America. He goes twice a year and always comes back talking about it. Oh, and Rick—he helps boys’ basketball teams in inner cities.”*

I stopped him. *“Okay perfect, you can think of more later. Find a time to meet with them—either over coffee or a call. Ask a few questions about their story on how they began their journey helping non-profits.”*

“But I don’t know what to ask. and I already think I know why they do it. Not sure that would help.”

“For now, please leave all beliefs about who they are or how they got involved. Instead, just pretend you don’t know anything. Try to understand their ‘why’... from their perspective.”

I waited for him to respond. Puzzled, he said: *“I’m not sure how this is going to help. It seems like a distraction. Wouldn’t it be better to learn about the different organizations I’m most interested in?”*

I responded, *“Trust me. You will learn more of what you need to know in twenty-five minutes of a conversation with these men listening to learn than ten hours of research and analysis on your computer.”*

This convinced him that it would be worth his time to do the exercise. But I added, *“This only works if you’re willing to stay curious and ask questions to follow your curiosity as you’re talking to them.”*

3. Discern—connect dots to see emotional patterns for design inspiration

We met two weeks later. This time, he brought his computer. *“April, I learned so much. And I have pages of typed*

notes. It was extremely insightful, but after a few days sitting with it, I'm not sure what to do with the information."

I responded: *"Oh, good, so now you have the emotional data you need."*

He looked confused. *"Say what? Did you just say emotions and data as if they go together?"*

"Yes, I'll show you how to use it—but you're not going to analyze it the way you normally analyze data. You're going to play with it."

He looked at me incredulously with his eyes and said, *"You've got to be kidding—play with it?"*

"Work with me." I maintained my position. And I proceeded to ask him about what he learned. He described how he was able to see something new—for example, he had never considered playing basketball with inner city boys to get involved in an organization as his friend had done.

He also saw a common theme emerge throughout the men—each one believed they would be the one "giving" to the non-profit, but as they became involved, they described *"receiving more than I gave."*

"Great—so I would recommend pulling the data off your computer and instead, use Post-its so you can play with the information a bit more. This will help you further break apart disparate data to see additional themes."

And through the questioning, his recall and notes, along with markers and a dry-erase wall, we created a visual map of his learnings. Soon, the wall was filled with the analysis—and definitive learnings to act on. We parted with him deep in thought. I smiled as we hugged goodbye. I could sense a difference in him, and it was amazing to see.

4. **Design—ideate and create passion-led possibilities**

This time I didn't have to wait for an in-person meeting. He was stuck. I accepted his invitation to a Zoom meeting, curious where he was stuck. I assumed it was migrating what he had learned to actual designs or “prototyping” ideas. But I was incorrect—instead, he had several scenarios of his “Future Life” on separate Power Point slides. And they were all very different from each other:

- a. Volunteer one day a week for one non-profit organization
- b. Join an online dating app
- c. Meet with a group of “supporters” every other week for coffee
- d. Call each of my children once a week

After reading, I said, *“This is great. As you think about these, what comes up for you?”*

He responded, *“Excited and terrified.”*

I chuckled because I'd never heard him use two emotions in one sentence. *“Yes, this is so common. Part of designing is*

to generate as many ideas as possible. It can be both rewarding and overwhelming. So, let's break it down and chew it, one bite at a time."

As he broke down his designs further and "tested" the ideas against his own line of questioning, he was able to create a quick hit list for small next steps:

- Have my assistant find contact information for each organization
- Ask two people who were successful with online dating about the apps
- Set two mornings in my schedule when I can break free
- Ask each of my children what time works best for a weekly call

5. Decide—determine wise direction from holistic understanding

I noticed more time than normal had lapsed since our last meeting. I was curious if he was stuck. It turns out he was the opposite of stuck. He was moving forward purposefully with great momentum. When I finally heard from him, he seemed different. Clear. Grounded. In control. Confidence exuded from him.

"April", he said reflectively. "This process has changed my life. I am passionate again and grateful. But my life is so full that something has to give. And I don't know what to let go of. I am not stuck, but I am a little overwhelmed."

"Ah, yes, you are ready to discern—let's see what you know to decide with wisdom. You have all the answers at this point."

I led him through some questioning to help him reduce the clutter. He was on the verge of creating a life he wanted to live. He just needed some refinement.

Decisions are easier when we have guardrails – they make decision-making easier to see what does and does not work.

Guardrails allow us to not walk off the same cliff each time. They are the criteria for which we move our ideas into reality. Eventually, Robert began to see the patterns he had created with women. He created a set of guardrails and weighed each possible woman against them:

- Does she display confidence?
- Is she authentic?
- Does she have a passion for things in her life?

He also developed guardrails for the non-profit he would be a part of:

- Did they function with a history of success?
- Were they frugal in their administration?
- Could they show evidence of the impact they made?

EMPATHY PROVIDES A PEACEFUL PATH THROUGH THE INNOVATION JOURNEY

Robert created a life he desired by using the power of empathy to navigate the unknown. Through internal and external inquiry into the heart of the matter, he not only used the pain of his previous marriage to help a non-profit in need, but he also connected more deeply with a trusted

circle of advisors. And he met and married a woman who shared his passion for helping the underprivileged. She was mentoring one of the inner-city kids' moms!

While this is one individual's journey of using the power of empathy to ignite innovation into his life, it is something anyone can do regardless of what is being innovated.

Like Robert's experience, the emotional challenges are often the biggest enemies of innovation. They are less predictable. Emotions are easy to mask. But empathy allows emotions to surface so they can enlighten and empower purposeful momentum for any innovation.

FIRESTARTER SPARKS – EMPATHY HELPS THE INNOVATOR BECOME THE HERO

1. Innovating is Inevitable
2. We Can Get Stuck in the Unknown
3. Systemic Rules Do Not Apply in the Unknown
4. Innovation Requires both Head and Heart
5. Innovation is a Hero's Journey
6. The Hero's Innovation Journey—Empathy Co-Creation™
 - a. **Desire**—create based on heart-led clarity
 - b. **Discover**—listen to learn from the heart to expand knowledge
 - c. **Discern**—connect dots to see emotional patterns for design inspiration
 - d. **Design**—ideate and create passion-led possibilities
 - e. **Decide**—determine wise direction from holistic understanding

7. Empathy Provides a Peaceful Path through the Innovation Journey

FIRESTARTER FUEL—IGNITING ME

1. What changes in your life feel out of your control?
2. What “step” in the innovation journey would help you feel more empowered?
3. What choice do you have now that is totally in your power?
4. What small step forward would give you a sense of momentum?

FIRESTARTER FUEL—IGNITING WE

1. What “step” in the innovation journey is your team on right now? What is keeping the team there?
2. What is the biggest challenge your team faces with innovating?
3. If everything else remained the same and you could only change one thing on your team, what would it be? What could you do to impact that?
4. If you had it your way, what would the team do to create momentum?

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