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# The Discipline of Theatre-Making: What Innovators and Entrepreneurs can learn from Actors and Theatre-Makers

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## **The Discipline of Theatre-Making: What Innovators and Entrepreneurs can learn from Actors and Theatre-Makers**

A year ago, I attended a 3-week intensive drama program in Mumbai. During the first two weeks, we were exposed to different techniques and frameworks of acting, which would become part of our toolkit for creation. In the last 3 days of the program—the creation lab—we were expected to co-create a 15-minute piece with an ensemble of 8 actors. At the time, as stimulating as I found this exercise to be, I thought it would simply be an experience I could refer back to whenever I performed next. Little did I know that one year later I would be borrowing lessons from my experience in theatre-making to the business and marketing challenge ahead for my team: to communicate a US \$16 billion Indian multinational's rebranding to its stakeholders.

This essay is an attempt to share 3 key lessons that innovators and entrepreneurs can learn from theatre-makers. In the following paragraphs, I will argue that the process of innovation as described by Peter Drucker in "The Discipline of Innovation" is much like the process of creation for an actor and theatre-maker. Just like innovators have at their disposal seven potential sources of innovation, which they can methodically analyze to develop breakthrough ideas and businesses, actors and theatre-makers have at their disposal frameworks, techniques, and schools of thought, which they can rigorously follow to create and discover characters and untold stories. Thus, innovators and entrepreneurs stand to learn from the rigours and rollercoasters of the creative process in the performing arts world. While the following lessons are not comprehensive in the way that Drucker's sources of innovation are, they are nonetheless as timely and relevant for an entrepreneur and business innovator as they are for an actor and theatre-maker.

### **Innovation as Creation**

We often think of actors as "being naturals"; we see a stellar performance and attribute it to their innate talent or to the inspiration they were able to draw from. We tend to forget that good acting, much like dancing, and performing an instrument, requires discipline and rigor. We see this misperception with business innovation as well; the temptation to attribute it to a moment of genius or inspiration, or to a person's traits is just too alluring. As Drucker noted, while innovation may sometimes be sparked by inspiration, most of it comes about through the systematic analysis of areas of opportunity. The creative process for an actor, like the innovation process for an entrepreneur, requires focus, rigour, diligence, and work. This is not surprising once we realize that

creating a character or a story is in itself an innovation and, by the same token, innovating a business idea or model is as much a creative endeavor as developing a character or writing a play. The elements required for each final piece may not be the same, but they both require focused attention, systematic analysis, and yes, at some level, a spark of inspiration.

## Three lessons from a theatre-maker

### 1. Start with a provocation.

“Searching for a moment of calm,  
A sound triggers a moment of recall instead.  
The moment builds to other moments,  
Transforming,  
Until something is lost or found”.

Enclosed in an envelope, this was the provocation that was given to the 8 of us: create an ensemble piece of up to 15 minutes. No further instructions. Do you create a story or just moments? Classical or contemporary? Drama or comedy? We were not told. The task at hand seemed daunting. How do you create a piece worth showing, how do you even begin to craft a story? We saw two distinct approaches at hand. One: think of a story, beginning with the end in mind and figure out a way to tell it; and two: just start creating—moments, interactions, energy—so we could build on each others’ energy and then make sense of those moments to tell a story. We tried both approaches, and ultimately what proved most helpful in the creative process was the latter approach, since it enabled us to exploit our creativity without the burden of it making sense, or being a good story.

The possibilities of creation are endless, but what allowed us to move forward and filter all the ideas that were coming in was the provocation itself: the provocation was the script, which was the story. “Follow the text like a map”, our instructors would keep telling us. One group came up with a beautiful ensemble work forming a Chinese dragon built by all 8 actors; as beautiful as it was, there was no moment of recall, no transformation, and nothing had been lost or found, so they had to start from scratch.

In business, like with this creation exercise, when trying to innovate new products, new marketing strategies, new markets to tackle, there needs to be a provocation driving these actions. Oftentimes, these take the form of the vision of the company or the business’ goals in the next 5-10 years. For Mahindra & Mahindra, an Indian MNC and my current employer, the provocation given to the branding team was not just to create a marketing campaign to communicate the company’s

rebranding into “Mahindra Rise”. That provocation could have led to a number of different possibilities, most of which would have been valid (TV commercials, media buying, event sponsorships, etc.). Instead, the provocation given to my team was to “create a movement to drive positive change in India”....much like with the provocation in theatre, we used this vision as our script and developed a platform called “Spark the Rise” ([www.sparktherise.com](http://www.sparktherise.com)), India’s first movement marketing campaign. Through this platform, we support innovators, entrepreneurs and change makers with recognition, funding and mentorship. In the words of B. Karthik Senior General Manager for Mahindra, “we put our budgets into making heroes out of these people instead of extolling Mahindra’s virtues”. Why a platform instead of just a program? So that we could have a designated space in which to engage with people recurrently, at multiple stages, and so they could connect with their followers; all this to build a core of mobilizers—to build a movement. The key determining factor in our team’s thinking that led to the creation of “Spark the Rise”, instead of yet another campaign with x goals, was precisely the provocation—the vision—to **build a movement**.

## **2. Why should anyone care?**

This lesson is central to all forms of theatre and acting, and is strikingly useful in business as well. At the end of each of our “sharing sessions”, the time when we would present what we had created for the day, the number one question all of our instructors would ask us was: why should anyone care about what you just performed? Meaning, what does it tell us about humanity? Does it show us a moment where we can see ourselves in you? Why should anyone care? For one of our performances, we wanted to convey the love and strong connection between a girl and her mother, and we chose to do it by showing a girl who wants to buy a dress at a store, and her mother denying her the dress at first, and then caving in to her daughter’s wishes, to finally be thanked effusively with a tight hug from her daughter. At the end of it, one of our instructors inquired: “Is that really the moment you want to share? Is that really the moment where your audience will connect with you and understand the depth of that mother-daughter relationship?” What this highlights for me is how central the audience’s experience of your work needs to be if you are to create good theatre.

Similarly, just as the act of creating theatre ought to be led by the audience’s experience of your work, the central focus of developing new products should be led by none other than customer insights. For every idea for a new product that arises, the question innovators and managers need to be asking themselves is: why should my customer care? Which of her needs does this product address? New York Times best-selling author Ramit Sethi, who sells online courses, tells a great story of how deep customer research radically changed his product’s positioning and marketing. One of his flagship courses is called “Earn1K” (Earn \$1000 on the side); when he was crafting his marketing

strategy, he assumed that the reason people wanted to earn money on the side was because they wanted to take extravagant trips to Vegas on the weekend. Once he conducted surveys, though, he learned that the number one reason people said they wanted to earn money on the side is so they could have the option of one day quitting their jobs and pursuing their own projects. This one customer insight drastically transformed his marketing message: it was now about freedom, financial security, and pursuing your dreams. In fact, the very name of the course came from customer research which showed that people were intimidated by the notion of “starting a business” and “becoming entrepreneurs”, because they associate it with leaving their jobs and taking on all the risk. However, they seemed comfortable with keeping their jobs and simply trying something “on the side”. Moreover, why would Sethi choose to call the course “Earn1K” when many of his students earn significantly more than that? The answer comes from customer insights and psychology: \$1000 seems aspirational but is still achievable. His product has generated hundreds of thousands of dollars in profit, and a huge part of that success is that its positioning and marketing deeply understand its customers hopes (to eventually quit their jobs), fears (financial insecurity), and dreams (freedom to pursue my own work) and psychological barriers (\$1000 seems achievable). In Peter Drucker’s own words, “careful analysis of the needs—and, above all, the capabilities—of the intended user is...essential” for innovation.

### **3. Respond to small wins.**

We were anxious about our first sharing session. The other two ensembles had been working hard, and we couldn’t help but wonder how our performance would fare vis-à-vis theirs. Our lack of confidence was accentuated by the fact that we really didn’t have a story. All we had was the opening exercise we used to build on each other’s energy: we decided we would walk in a grid so as to represent a chaotic Mumbai train station, since that is a place one would want to escape from and thus search for calm. Eventually, the train would arrive, we would board it, and then we would perform memories from different characters on the train. At the end of it, our instructors and peers showed excitement about the setting of the train station and the theme that seemed to emerge from it: characters looking to leave the race and live in the present. We didn’t have a story, we didn’t have a plot, but we did have a sense of possibility and a small validation that pursuing the train station idea would lead to interesting discoveries.

Author Peter Sims calls these moments “small wins”: “footholds or building blocks amid the inevitable uncertainty of moving forward, or as the case may be, laterally” (141). Innovators and entrepreneurs can apply this framework of using small wins as signs to continue exploring a particular path in order to make meaningful discoveries. Sims beautifully narrates a great example of

how small wins can lead to breakthrough innovation in his book “Little Bets” through the example of the evolution of Pixar as an animated film company. Pixar started out as a computer hardware company, with a very small animation department, which lost money on its hardware years after Steve Jobs bought it. Two employees, Ed Catmull and John Lasseter aspired to create a feature-film and the way they convinced Jobs to support them in their animation pursuits was by demonstrating “the value of computer-generated animation films in a series of small wins” (143). The first animated short film made by Pixar was made in 1986 to help sell Pixar’s hardware products at SIGGRAPH, a large annual computer graphics conference. The film, “Luxo Jr.” was about two lamps—a parent lamp, and a child lamp—interacting with each other (Luxo Jr. would later become Pixar’s logo). When the lights went on, the film received a standing ovation from the nearly six thousand attendees at SIGGRAPH. This was a small win for Pixar’s business, but it was a huge indicator that Pixar was heading into very interesting terrain. This small win convinced Jobs to continue producing short films for the purpose of helping sales, and two years later “Tin Toy” (the predecessor of “Toy Story”) would win the Oscar for Best Animated Short Film. Over the next few years, Pixar would gradually pivot towards digital animation, until in 1991 Pixar and Disney would announce that they would be producing a feature-film called “Toy Story”, and the rest is history.

The important lesson to notice here is that, much like with the train station performance, there was no clear path ahead, but rather attention to success and failures. “[Jobs] showed remarkable flexibility in pivoting from one strategy to the next in search of profits and breakthroughs...There was no road map. Everything they were doing was new” (Sims 142). We must recall that the small win at SIGGRAPH did not reveal a business model, a business plan, or even a vision for the way forward, much like the train station success did not reveal a plot, characters, or a direction forward. Pixar’s short film didn’t even increase sales for its hardware, the reason for which it was created. It did, however, show the Pixar team that they had something valuable they could explore, just as the train station exercise revealed to us that we had an interesting direction to pursue. These small wins were imbued with a sense of possibility that ultimately persuaded Jobs and our ensemble of actors to continue exploring those directions.

Some managers would have looked at Pixar’s performance at SIGGRAPH as a failure, and would have missed on the opportunity of building the leading animated film company in the world. Peter Drucker would refer to moments like these as sources of innovation, where managers need to analyze “unexpected occurrences” to capitalize on the opportunities presented. As he argues in “The Discipline of Innovation”, “effective innovations start small. They are not grandiose” (9). And in the case of businesses as in the case of theatre making, he is right.

## Creation as Innovation

The creative process for theatre-makers and for innovators and entrepreneurs bears some striking similarities. In particular, while some discoveries do happen through a strike of genius or inspiration, most innovations and great performances are created through focused attention. Three key principles that innovators and entrepreneurs can learn from theatre-makers include: 1. Start with a provocation: whether a mission statement, a vision, or a medium to long-term goal, what is the business trying to accomplish? Use the answer to this question as a filter for any and every business idea, communication, marketing plan proposal that arises—this is a powerful tool that can help innovators and managers organize sort through and choose from endless possibilities. 2. Why should anyone care? For any innovation, the number one question an entrepreneur needs to be asking herself is: why would my customer care? Namely, what need does this innovation serve? How does it serve that need? And what is the best way to communicate these benefits to my customer? 3. Respond to small wins: oftentimes the path to innovation is filled with uncertainty and high degrees of ambiguity. In order to sail through those times and be able to move forward or laterally, innovators need flashes of approval to indicate that they are on the right track—small wins serve as such light posts along the way.

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