

THE IMAGINATION GAP

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

About the Author

Brian Reich is a strategist and writer for executive leaders at global brands, media companies, startups, nonprofits, and political organizations. He is also an award-winning author, prominent writer, and keynote speaker. Brian's research and views regarding the impact of media and technology on society have been published in the *New York Times*, *Fast Company*, *Fortune*, *TechCrunch*, *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, *Vice*, *Wired*, *AdAge*, the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, and more. He has delivered analysis of digital, media, political, and other trends on NPR and Fox News and been an expert contributor for *Fast Company* as well. He is the author of two other books: *Shift & Reset: Strategies for Addressing Serious Issues in a Connected Society* and *Media Rules! Mastering Today's Technology to Connect with and Keep Your Audience*.

Introduction

The most powerful forces in shaping and motivating people's behaviors and the shape of our society are all products of our imagination. However, even as the challenges and opportunities are greater than ever, we find ourselves using and applying our imagination less and less.

In my previous book, “Media Rules!,” I discussed the growing obsession with technology as a marketing and communications tool. The central argument was that three things — information, experiences, and stuff — have always driven people’s decision-making, and that would always be true no matter what advances unfold in media or technology. Information is what fuels how we learn and make sense of our world; experiences are how we interact and form personal connections; and stuff is stuff. Products. The things we keep and wear and drive and more. Regardless of platform, regardless of channel or tool, one or all of these three things will play a critical role when you try to motivate someone to understand an idea or take an action.

When you are working to influence someone, to compel a certain action, the desired outcome falls under the umbrella of impact. The word “impact” is often applied to social good — but it applies much more broadly. Impact happens when you create something new. You have an impact when you change something. One time. Consistently. Sustainably. The impact can be big or small, and can take on all different forms. Some impacts will be obvious while others may be difficult to measure — and in most cases the significance of what happens in the world cannot be

easily quantified. You can have an impact in a single moment, or see it play out over time.

One thing is clear about impact: it doesn't happen in isolation. We are all connected, so anything that happens has implications for everyone. Everything good that happens has the possibility of benefiting everyone, while everything bad affects us all in some ways as well.

In everything we do, personally or professionally, individually or collectively, we should consider the impact. In addition, we should strive to make a big impact in everything we do — to ensure that our ideas spread far and wide, our actions benefit as many people as possible. Unfortunately, that does not happen enough. There is plenty of talk about big goals and changing the world. However, we measure results quarter to quarter and project to projects, and rarely take the time to consider the larger impact. Words like transformation and disruption are used a lot, but the massive impact that seems possible is rarely achieved.

The problem is with our imagination. We aren't using or applying our imagination to the full extent possible. We talk about technology as having the potential to save the world and evolve everything about how we communicate and function as humans. Then we celebrate the efforts that prioritize short-term thinking and increased awareness — refusing to accept that the actual, meaningful, measurable impact on our lives is minimal at best. The problems that we face as a society will not be solved with short-term thinking. The idea of achieving world peace, ending the global refugee crisis, eradicating hunger or curing disease — these are massive challenges that have significant negative consequences, and society is not currently capable of stopping them. But, they aren't beyond the reach of our imagination. Amazing potential advancements in how to solve complex problems are not beyond the reach of our imagination.

Unfortunately, we aren't using or applying our imagination to its fullest. Instead, we are doing what we know. What we have always done — maybe with greater efficiency or scale. We are doing the things we have proven will work to varying degrees,

that are easy to replicate. It is really easy to regurgitate things that we have become comfortable doing. Doing new things is much more difficult. That is where the potential for incredible impact exists — in doing new ambitious, imaginative things.

The promise of imagination is achieving something that has never been done. Our imagination can help us explore new ways of thinking and operating that can move us well beyond what we are presently doing.

We Aren't Shooting for the Big Stuff

We live in a time of unprecedented possibility. Nevertheless, even though we have greater power to explore and experiment, and a chance to create an entirely different future, too much of our individual and collective focus is on what is happening right now. There are changes and improvements occurring every day, advances in health care that are extending life and media that is pushing people to think critically. However, we aren't creating entirely new ways of doing business. We aren't eradicating diseases. We have become comfortable with the idea that constant movement and incremental change is a sign of impact and progress and that that is enough. We have all but given up on the idea of solving the most complex problems.

We aren't using our imagination. There is a gap between what we think about, the kind of impact we try to have, and what we could conceivably achieve. We have an imagination gap. We are not going to get to have the kind of impact that is possible until we close that gap.

Everybody has an imagination. Everybody is born with an extraordinarily powerful tool to dream up things that nobody else can fully understand or appreciate. Our brain is far and away the most powerful tool that exists with unlimited capacity to generate new and transformative ideas only when it's activated and applied. Not only aren't we using our imagination as we could, we are actively shutting down others' imagination. We have revoked the privilege we have to be imaginative.

Think about what it was like when you were a kid. Take a few minutes to watch how a young child plays, learns, and explores the world around them. You will be in awe of the stories they create, the scenarios they dream up, the adventures their imagination takes them on. They are not trying to impress anyone or worrying about how they fit in. They don't just mimic what they see on television, quote someone who spoke to them, or follow instructions they were given — they also invent entirely original languages, people, and places. Most importantly, they are not being told that what they are doing is wrong. That comes later. Thanks to the power of their imagination, kids operate in a world of their own creation where anything is possible.

Now, think about your own experience. How often do you let your brain go in whatever direction it wants? How many times have you raised your hand in a meeting, or at a brainstorming session, and shared a truly novel idea? How many times have you thought of something wildly different, but kept quiet about it? Have you been told that your question is stupid or off topic, or your idea impossible to achieve? Our imagination is always working, always active — but we have become accustomed to suppressing our imagination, because what it produces doesn't align with others, or seems too big, too complicated, or not “on budget.” Every time we are told that our ideas don't have merit, a little part of our imagination goes dark. Our willingness to use and apply imagination diminishes.

The good news is this: you can't kill imagination. The parts of your brain that generate new ideas will always be active. However, the more we suppress our imagination, or shut down others who try to share theirs, the larger the imagination gap becomes.

Permission to Use Your Imagination

You now have permission to use your imagination. You have permission to dream up new things. You have permission to propose ideas that do more than just improve a little on what we already know. You have permission to ask questions that don't

have easily or available answers. In addition, you have permission to use and pursue things that have never been conceived of before, and probably don't seem like they're possible. When you do that, you are using your imagination. When you do that, you will put yourself, and all of us, on a very different track.

Some important things to keep in mind as you move ahead:

- *Imagination is not the same thing as creativity.* Creativity is a wonderfully powerful tool that we can activate to come up with messages and drawings and all sorts of stuff. That is a way to employ or express our imagination. That is not imagination.
- *Imagination is not the same as intelligence or experience.* You cannot be more or less imaginative than someone else (and you shouldn't believe someone who tells you as much). Every single one of us has exactly the same power to use our imagination and the same unlimited potential to put it to work.
- *Imagination = a new idea.* There are big ideas and small ideas, good ideas and bad ideas. The ways that we define and judge ideas is almost entirely subjective. What distinguishes imagination and differentiates it from everything else is the newness of the idea.
- *Imagination isn't a special talent or skill.* There is no certificate program you can complete to master using and applying your imagination. There aren't nine steps, or five principles or a certain color LEGO that, when used by everyone, will make them more imaginative. The more you fill your brain with — and the more diverse your experiences and inputs — the more you feed your imagination. If you try to engineer your thinking or force your brain to produce a specific solution, you will end up curbing your imagination more than anything.
- *Imagination is not the same as innovation.* Innovation is about solving problems and finding ways to change, improve,

maximize, and optimize everything we do. Imagination is about creating things and ideas that are new — and may lead to innovation. Imagination is not about risk tolerance, or problem solving. Imagination is about going beyond what we know and can conceive is possible.

We can do more to use and apply our imagination, individually and collectively. Start by acknowledging that you have an imagination. Believe that it is amazing. Stop suppressing your imagination, or letting others impact your ability to explore and dream.

Imagination is a natural resource. It is not a thing, a process, or a system. It is not a plan, or a strategy, or a process that you can follow or implement. Imagination is a raw material that we can use for whatever we want. Every single germ of an idea starts with our imagination.

Starting Blocks

- 1) *Imagination happens. Let it.* I have to stop myself from suggesting ideas or “improvements” to my daughter that might influence the elaborate, interstellar war that is happening throughout our apartment with strategically placed stuffed animals and [MagnaTiles]. She doesn’t need my help. Nobody should try to force others to use imagination in the same way that they would. Just let it happen. Let it play out. There is so much to learn if you aren’t interrupting yourself or others, while they are using their imagination.
- 2) *Don’t listen to anyone else.* Your boss gets to say how many hours you work, decide how much you earn, dictate that you’re working on a certain client, and direct you to be in Des Moines tomorrow for a meeting. He or she does not get to tell you that your imagination is good or not good, practical or not practical. Moreover, it is exactly that process — our teacher saying that’s not how we measure success, our parents saying that’s not appropriate behavior — it’s those things

that slowly have stripped away our permission to use our imagination. In addition, if you think about the people who we revere for being the most imaginative, they're seeing the world in a way that nobody else sees it. They're using their imaginations to create solutions to complex challenges, and in many cases developing new ideas to make life better where the rest of us couldn't even conceive of the possibilities.

- 3) *Write it down.* Or draw it. Or pull out a recorder and start talking. Take the stupid, crazy ideas that are popping into your head and capture them. Each of those is an ingredient that needs to be kept somewhere besides your brain. Your memory is not there to spin off the good story, your memory is there to take facts and experiences and recall them. So if something new comes out, grab it. You may not know what to do with it now, but it's not going to come out in that exact same way again. So stop and write it down.
- 4) *Share it.* Don't share your imaginative idea(s) for validation purposes. Don't share them because you want to get hired or impress someone, or so you can show that your imagination is better than someone else's imagination. Share because the little piece of information that comes out of your head has power. That little piece of imagination goes into my head and changes the way my imagination is going to work. Ideas build on each other. That ingredient is going to mix with some other ingredients. If you keep it all to yourself, you may have an incredibly vibrant imagination but you're not going to inspire anyone else. The mornings when my son gets up, and we have a conversation, or play a game with imaginary characters or outcomes, my energy, focus, and my ability to generate new thoughts for the day are greater because I'm part of a shared imagination experience.

Imagination is infectious, and deserves to be shared. You don't need a group to have an imagination. You can't pull a task force together; fill a room with different people who can collectively generate an imaginative idea. But you can share your imagination. Moreover, you should.

- 5) *Embrace your imagination as it is.* Don't worry about the practicality of what pops into your head. Don't worry about all the crazy steps that you're going to have to take the idea that your imagination has generated from start to finish. Imagination is not triggered when you force it. Your imagination fires when you're in the shower, because it's the only quiet time that your brain gets during the day. Your imagination flourishes when you spend time in the great outdoors, away from the noise and chaos of everyday life, because you've broken your normal daily routine. It's not because you're in the forest, or you're closer to God, or the weather is nice — it's because you have broken your pattern. And that's the moment at which your imagination has an opportunity to come out again.

Don't go camping to go camping, but if you go camping, listen a little bit closer to your brain, and bring a piece of paper so that you don't forget what you thought of when you saw that animal, or tree, or whatever you do when you camp. I don't camp.

How to Read This Book

The book you are about to read begins with an introduction to imagination and the important role it plays in all aspects of our lives — personally, professionally, and more broadly as a community. Each successive chapter takes on the specific challenges that need to be addressed, from acknowledging and understanding that an imagination gap exists to the steps that need to be considered in order to close the gap.

If we can use and apply our imagination more, our ability to think and act differently and develop new and better ideas will improve. Every one of us has an imagination, and we all can do more to use and apply our imagination. Closing the imagination gap will benefit everyone — government and political organizations, news and media, entertainment, sports, marketers and

advertisers, educational institutions, thought leaders, brands and corporations, nonprofits, foundations, and charities, as well as each of us individuals.

In researching and writing this book, I conducted interviews with more than two-dozen scientists, entrepreneurs, organizational leaders, subject matter experts and practitioners, as well as actors, filmmakers, comedians, inventors, and others whose experiences and insights provide powerful evidence to support the need to close the imagination gap. I have also weaved together media coverage, research, and personal experiences. Moreover, to whatever extent possible, my analysis includes recent events whose outcomes were uncertain as we went to print.

The goal of *The Imagination Gap* is to spark real changes in our behavior. I want you to expand the use of your imagination, and help the people you know, work with, and serve to do the same. More broadly, I believe we can change how individuals and organizations think, operate and communicate, by helping them to close *The Imagination Gap* and unlock the potential that exists (but is not currently being fully realized). To help balance the big thinking with practical insights and actions that anyone can take, each chapter also includes:

- A summary of the critical ideas included in each chapter to help organize and prompt you to think about different ways to use and apply your imagination.
- An “imagination challenge” that encourages you to use and apply your imagination. The challenges include questions, prompts, and directives that will help to take the discussion beyond the pages of the book and into your life and work.

I will also continue to share relevant, timely, compelling, interesting, fun, or other information about using and applying your imagination at www.theimaginationgap.com

I wrote this book to be a resource that you can have on your desk, on your phone, keep next to your bed, or carry around with you in your bag. I hope the book is not only informative and interesting, but also useful and applicable. You can read the book from cover to cover, dog-ear, and highlight different pages and passages. You can also pick out different sections that you find valuable now, and come back later to read (or reread) passages in the future when they seem more applicable. Each person who reads this book will bring his or her own experiences and perspectives to this discussion.

This Book Is Like My Brain

I spend a lot of my time exploring how people get and share information and the role that technology plays in how we spend our time. My work focuses on how to get people to think a certain way, vote, donate, buy something, tell someone, volunteer, read, watch, or listen to anything. My passion is behavior change — getting people to think and act differently than they currently do. I also have a sense of personal responsibility to doing something with a positive and meaningful impact on the world that motivates much of this work and my beliefs.

The stories, interviews, examples, facts, quotes, numbers, personal observations, and more that you find in the pages that follow reflect my curiosity, my work, my relationships, and my perspective on the world. I have written a book that reflects how my brain works, and what my imagination dreams up.

I want you to feel excited about the prospect of having and sharing ideas that other people might not fully understand or appreciate. I want you to feel confident that the ideas that you have, whatever your imagination offers up, has value. With the help of this book, you will be able to take the steps so that the rest of us benefit from your imagination as well.

I also want you to squirm a bit when reading this book because you consider how your individual behaviors could change; you might alter your approach. That's when things will start to look

different. That's when the real fun begins. That's when your imagination will be most engaged.

When this happens, when we make imagination something that is expressed, shared, and valued by everyone the way it can and should be, amazing things are going to happen.

You don't have to believe me. Read the book to see for yourself.

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