

"The Creative Habit went down a storm with a group of people I know are not easy to please!"
Sarah Lawrence, Communications Lead, CEIS Planning & Performance Team, Centrica

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We're not Spielberg. We don't pretend to have anything like his intuitive talent... And we don't believe many others do either! But what we do believe is that Mr. Spielberg's naturally fertile mind uses a whole bag of tricks that others can approximate to become more creative. Here are some of them...

Examine Mistakes & Drawbacks: At around 77 minutes into 'Jaws', we get our first really clear look at the shark. Up 'til then, the monstrous beast has only been partly seen in quick, chaotic shots. This scarcity is often celebrated as the genius of the movie: we become fearful of the sea; we become suspenseful at the music... We respond to a head bobbing here and a fin diving there; to false alarms and orchestrated shocks left, right and centre... And all because we viscerally infer a great deal more peril than the director actually shows.

But that wasn't the original intention! In fact, Spielberg wanted us to see the shark rather a lot – but the technology of the time wasn't up to the job! The various model sharks repeatedly failed to function and, consequently, Spielberg ended up with very little usable fish footage! What Spielberg did to work around his shark issues is a great example of a much overlooked thinking technique: he effectively asked, 'How can these setbacks help me?'

Great mistakes: That's because most habitually creative people know that many brilliant creations result from mistakes and setbacks: Post-it notes, chocolate chip cookies, Scotchguard, the teabag, the ice-cream cone, penicillin – the example list goes on and on! There's no question that the genius of these things is not in their design, then, as much as it is in how somebody noticed their value...

There are no problems... Only opportunities! Yeah, right! So on those occasions when mistakes have been made – or you're facing what could be described as insurmountable opportunities – you might want to ask yourself these two questions:

What about this situation is helpful?

What needs to happen to make the situation helpful?

What would you do? To finish the fake shark story: having nicknamed one particularly recalcitrant model "The Great White Turd", Spielberg – over budget, over schedule and in fear of his career – began asking himself: "What would Hitchcock do?"

Walk in someone else's shoes: Now, this is a surprisingly effective technique... But not really because you have to genuinely understand what someone else would do in your place! Rather, it simply allows you to shift your perspective. In Spielberg's case, asking "What would Hitchcock do?" led him to conclude that he should use the fake sharks less and combine more controllable elements to build suspense. These elements included John Williams's music, the truly nifty editing, and a clever marketing campaign based around the necessarily delayed release date... So the film Jaws became a suspenseful blockbuster not in spite of the problems Spielberg faced whilst making it, but because of them.



Seek inspiration: Before he embarks on any project, Spielberg says he always looks at four films. These tend to be *The Seven Samurai*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, *It's a Wonderful Life* and *The Searchers*. Quite why it tends to be those films he doesn't say, but it can't be a coincidence that *The Seven Samurai* is considered a technical and creative masterpiece; that *Lawrence of Arabia* remains one of the greatest epics of all time; that *It's a Wonderful Life* is quite simply one of the finest acts of cinematic theme juggling ever seen; and that *The Searchers* is arguably the most rip-roaring, character driven action film ever made!

So what is creative inspiration? First off, despite all those doodles, it's almost never an isolated 'light bulb over the head' moment! These do happen of course, and they give credence to the unhelpful myth that inspiration is the will-o'-the-wisp moment when tortured minds are visited by a muse...

One step, two step... In reality, the light bulb moment is just one step in a continuous creative process. That process usually includes writing down shed loads of ideas, thoughts and questions; it includes a great deal of observation & rumination and a massive amount of learning and curiosity – day in, day out... The ongoing quest to routinely see things from different perspectives is not unlike installing the power supply, wiring and fixtures that eventually allow a bulb to light up! Spielberg constantly feeds his imagination to ensure it remains fertile and productive.

You were always on my mind: Another source of Spielbergian inspiration seems to be the skewing of his experiences using what we call 'The Critical Difference Technique'. Spielberg takes a vivid memory, or common situation, and asks what would happen if it mostly went like that - but differed in one critical way.

This offers the chance to intuitively convey the familiarity or emotion of experiences while adding in a creative element... For example, Spielberg tells how - in the middle of the night - his father once dragged him from his bed, aged around five or so, to visit a field! They then sat up, with several dozen other people, watching a spectacular meteorite shower...

Today, Spielberg says that this event may have inspired his general fascination with what lies beyond our planet. But in 1977, it specifically inspired a scene in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*: instead of the Spielberg family being woken to watch meteors, we see the Neary family being woken to watch UFOs!

"This isn't fantasy. This is reality..." It's all well and good our gassing on about that... But does this Critical Difference Technique have practical applications as well as artistic? It certainly does! So much so that we intend to write a whole Info Sheet on it... But fear it'll be too long!

In a nutshell, though, you can be inspired to new ideas when you look at just about anything and ask yourself "What if I made it XXX"? Don't actually say X, X, X; that doesn't help... Rather, insert words that will change the concept critically! What if I made it bigger? Smaller? Transparent? In wood? What if I made it mechanical? Powered by air?



“What do you think of it so far?” If you’re in any doubt as to the efficacy of this, ask DMI’s Deej to bend your ear... It’s a favourite approach of his. You might also ask the magician Paul Daniels, or the inventor Trevor Baylis, OBE: Baylis didn’t invent clockwork. He didn’t invent the radio. But he did invent the clockwork radio! While “What if a radio was powered by clockwork?” is a thought well within the grasp of most people, Baylis is the man that asked it: the invention went on to sell millions of units.

Plan it: If there’s one surefire sign that you’re working with a creative professional, it’s the degree to which they plan after they’ve been inspired. Spielberg is masterful in this respect. Take his storyboarding... Despite his admission that he cannot draw, he nevertheless personally sketches out hundreds of crude stick man figures for every film. He labels them with arrows to help communicate his thoughts, and then gives these dreadful drawings to a storyboard artist who converts the scrawls into something much more recognisable! Spielberg has stated that if he’s working on a film for two years, then up to six months of that time will be spent producing and refining as many as 1,500 drawings. By the time he comes to film, the entire cast and crew can understand precisely what the vision is.

C’mere, there’s more: That’s not to say that Spielberg’s planning and communication process ends when shooting starts! Having done so much preparation, Spielberg is perfectly positioned to fold in new ideas during the shoot. Indeed, he continues the painstaking process and creates new storyboards whilst filming. In other words, Spielberg’s inspired creativity becomes a solid plan; the solid plan allows him greater flexibility - and the flexibility becomes a solid plan again! It’s also said that Spielberg rarely makes fewer than five cuts of his films during the editing process – such is his determination to make it absolutely right.

There are more questions than answers: Whenever you wonder what kind of creative process a talent like Steven Spielberg uses, you tend to be left with more questions than answers. If you’d like to find out more, though, you might be able to extrapolate quite a bit after you type “Indiana Jones Story Conference” into a search engine. It should lead you to an online transcript of meetings between Spielberg, George Lucas and writer Lawrence Kasdan; you can see how the three men refine and flesh out their ideas for Raiders of the Lost Ark. And as regards the Critical Difference Info Sheet... We have top men working on it. Top... Men.