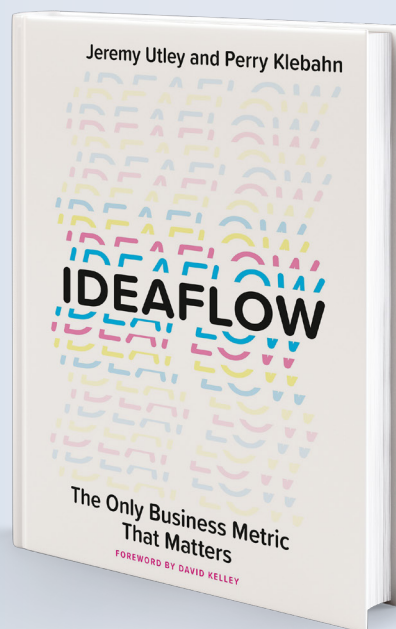


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Zooming In On Your Next Read



Ideaflow

The Only Business Metric That Matters

By Jeremy Utley and Perry Klebahn

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The Only Business Metric That Matters

In their book *Ideaflow: The Only Business Metric that Matters*, authors Jeremy Utley and Perry Klebahn make the claim that there are two types of problems: one a person does not know how to solve and one they do know how to solve. They claim that true problems are always idea problems, and they only respond to ideas. These problems occur in all different realms, but the tactics the authors give to help generate ideas to solve these problems can be generalized and used by professionals in all areas. The authors encourage their readers to think beyond the traditionally creative fields and realize that all professionals are called to be creative. The very basis of ideaflow is that in order to come up with truly high quality and innovative solutions, people need to generate a large number of ideas. For them, the world of creativity is a place where quantity should be placed above quality because it is not until a large number of ideas are generated that the true gems can be found, refined, and implemented.

At the beginning of the book, Utley and Klebahn quote a seventh grade student who said to them, "Creativity is doing more than the first thing that comes to your mind." They believe that when a person or team stops generating ideas when they come up with something that is good enough, they will never find anything that is great, and they possibly might not even find anything that works at all.

They explain that the human brain does not come up with new information from scratch. Rather, creativity and idea generation happen when the brain combines what it already knows in new and innovative ways. They believe that creativity is a skill that can be mastered, and they use this book to teach the reader the steps needed to master it. In the end, however, they advise the reader that reading the book will only get the reader so far. In order to make creative progress, the reader then needs to put the book aside and implement the suggestions and steps they give throughout.

The authors describe ideaflow as the number of ideas a group can generate in a certain amount of time. To them, this is the most useful way to measure creativity. To test a person's ideaflow, they recommend a person give themselves a set amount of time to try to come up with as many possible subject lines for an email as possible. The goal is not to have the highest number

in a group but to grow one's own number of ideas over time. They maintain throughout the book that the best ideas come after the most obvious ideas have already been given, thus they insist that people continue to generate ideas after they believe they have thought of every possibility.

One way to improve creativity that the authors advocate is by enacting the idea quota. They say that idea quotas help people switch their thinking from focusing on quality to focusing on quantity. They give three steps for performing the idea quota:

1. Seed. Select the problem and study it.
2. Sleep. Let the unconscious mind process the problem.
3. Solve. Flood the problem with ideas."

Utley and Klebahn claim that the biggest obstacle to ideafLOW is internal censorship. This self-censorship helps people function in their daily lives, and it is reinforced quite frequently. Unfortunately, it limits creative thinking. The idea quota is one way to work against this internal censorship.

Also key to creativity is documentation. Utley and Klebahn insist on the importance of writing ideas down because otherwise good ideas will be forgotten. As an example, they explain a time when one of the authors came up with a great idea before bed and was tempted not to write it down. He wrote it down anyway. Awaking the next morning, he believed he remembered the idea, but when he looked at what he had written, it was completely different. Had he not written it down, the idea would have been gone forever. Utley and Klebahn recommend not just writing down ideas but also "interesting quotes, facts, stories, statistics, and other inputs." People should make it a habit to frequently review their notes.

In the next chapter, Utley and Klebahn tackle the ineffectiveness of traditional brainstorming techniques. Again extol the benefits of quantity of ideas, they believe that to come up with a successful idea, people need to generate 2,000 ideas. With this, they are not referring to 2,000 totally unique ideas as this number also includes all the different iterations and variations that are created. The key to getting so many ideas is to develop successful processes for doing so.

While idea generation is critical, winnowing and validation are also important. Through these processes, ideas can be used to create more ideas and insights. While brainstorming, it is important to give people a large number of ideas to come up with so that they do not stagnate and stop generating new ideas. There are numerous barriers people come across when they try to brainstorm in groups.

One of these is that people falsely believe that a need to generate many ideas is a waste of time. Another barrier is that people believe their creativity is being used up during brainstorming sessions, so they do not persist as long as they need to. Anchoring bias is another barrier by which people cling on to the first good idea they hear. Finally an additional barrier is the Einstellung effect which is the phenomenon whereby one possible solution prevents people from seeing other solutions. To overcome these

barriers, it is important to have a good mix of people without too few or too many. Another suggestion is to give the participants time to come up with ideas before they are expected to share them. In addition, it can be helpful to give people warm up exercises or to split them into groups. At the end of a session, it is important for small groups to share their ideas and then for all to have a clear idea of what the next steps are.

Utley and Klebahn insist throughout the book on the absolute necessity of testing. They do not, however, seek elaborate and expensive tests. These are prohibitive for any number of reasons. Rather, they urge people to continually test their ideas in the simplest and cheapest ways possible. These tests may not offer official results, but they can help innovators decide whether a certain idea is the way forward. The authors urge people to stop trying to predict winners and they instead urge people to test all the ideas and then compare the outcomes. Further, they recommend creating a portfolio of tests whereby you are testing multiple different prototypes or ideas simultaneously.

To exemplify what they mean by performing simple tests, they tell the story of the time they tested whether people would go to a beer garden on the fourth floor of a mall. To test this, the team directed people in the mall to the fourth floor beer garden where they offered them free beverages. They found that people did not come, and because of this, they were able to scrap the idea completely. This was a simple and cheap test that produced results that guided their decision-making. Many executives balk at the idea of testing because they believe tests are too risky in regards to time and money. That is why it is important to use cheap and quick tests. The authors claim that "The key to effective innovation is velocity or more tests in a given amount of time." This speed allows people to improve their ideas and move on with the good ones more quickly.

A well-designed test has multiple elements. First, a hypothesis needs to be developed. Then data needs to be gathered. It is important to develop a baseline first. For example, experimenters should get the data for how something is performing now before the variable to be tested is tweaked. Then they need to close the loop or compare the results to the baseline. Finally, it is important to "revise, repeat, and, when necessary, pivot." The authors give numerous real world examples of the way testing has proven successful in business.

The second section of the book moves on to what the authors call elevation. Here they write about the importance of generating a variety of perspectives. Just like a company should desire a diverse portfolio of experiments, it should also cultivate a diverse portfolio of contributors. People in the same role and same business are likely to have the same blind spots. Sometimes it works best to have people with totally different viewpoints offer ideas. The authors give seven suggestions for cultivating a variety of viewpoints: create learning circles or a group of people who meet to discuss ideas, utilize pen pals whereby each person critiques the ideas of the other, create a customer council to consult about ideas, cross-pollinate by "seeking out serendipitous encounters with people outside your normal circuit," find inexperienced experience or people who



The more specific the question, the more ideas can be generated. . .”

are experts in other fields, incorporate novices who have fresh perspectives, find complementary collaborators as they can help people see their blind spots, and allow space for candor because people need to feel safe to both give and receive feedback.

As part of keeping an open mind, the authors suggest interviewing people with empathy in order to gain understanding. This tool requires the interviewer to understand the person they are questioning on an emotional level. The authors encourage the interviewer to insist on specificity, making sure to understand exactly what the interviewee is talking about and making sure to be absolutely clear on the exact meanings of the words the interviewee is using. For example, if they use the word, “challenging,” the interviewer should ask the person what they mean by that. It is also important that the interviewer resists the urge to express understanding. Utley and Klebahn do not believe that the interviewer does understand, and “the gap between your assumptions and their reality is where you’ll find your insights.”

In addition to interviewing, the authors recommend observing. As with other concepts in the book, they insist on the importance of quantity - in this instance, quantity of time. They urge people to give a longer than expected length of time with which they are expected to look at something because this will bypass the brain’s ability to filter out what is expected. An additional way to improve observational skills is through drawing.

Utley and Klebahn then move on to discuss question generation. They say that “even if you start with a provocative question, there’s only so much you can do by looking at a problem from one angle.” The more specific the question, the more ideas can be generated, and when one idea dries up, the frame can be used and different questions can be approached. “Steady ideafLOW means crafting lots of good questions and cycling through them as you generate ideas.” The authors recommend devising How Might We questions. When developing How Might We questions, the authors advocate playing with scale, focusing on quality, examining emotions, changing the stakes, and/or creating an analogy between the current situation and others.

There are other tools besides asking How Might questions that people can use when ideas start to wane. One thing people can do is look to see what could be solved by subtracting something from the equation. Another suggestion is to run a retroactive or look at the situation from the future and predict ways it might have failed. Utley and Klebahn also suggest generating un-ideas. By this they mean taking the worst ideas generated and finding ways to make them better.

Towards the end of the book, the authors reiterate the fact that the brain cannot create something new. It can only combine

things it already knows in new ways. Therefore, the more varied input a brain receives, the more creative output it can generate. There are numerous ways a person can increase the input their brain receives. One is through a wonder wander where a person walks around, preferably outside, and asks themselves questions about what it is they observe. Wondering can also occur through reading books and browsing websites.

The authors remind the reader that a wide variety of reading materials unrelated to the task at hand can prove quite beneficial. They also recommend looking for analogous situations. This refers to looking at very different companies that might be dealing with analogous problems.

There are multiple steps a person can take to untangle their own creative knots. One of these is simply taking a break. It can help if a person pads their schedule so as to actually allow themselves time simply to be creative as creativity takes time. This can be challenging because people in our culture are so focused on productivity, and while breaks can lead to great advancements, they do not outwardly appear to be productive. It can be helpful for people to read, move, and talk to people during these breaks.

To Utley and Klebahn, creativity is not simply the domain of people who work in what are traditionally considered creative fields. Creativity is also not limited to just those who have a special knack for it. Rather, Utley and Klebahn believe that innovation is a key to success and that innovation requires creativity. Utley and Klebahn give the reader a blueprint for increasing creativity within the workplace. By following the suggestions and guidelines posed in *IdeafLOW: The Only Business Metric that Matters*, professionals should be able to increase their own ideafLOW and that of their colleagues and businesses. This, Utley and Klebahn believe can lead to true innovation.

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