

# SOUNDVIEW Featured Book Review

www.summary.com

## When in Doubt, Look About

Review by Andrew B. Clancy

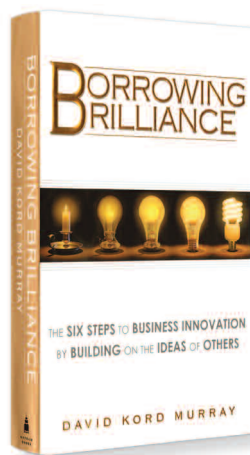
### BORROWING BRILLIANCE

by David Kord Murray

© 2009, Gotham Books, 292 pages, \$26.00,  
ISBN 978-1-592-40478-0

One of the best ways to start a debate amongst intellectuals is to introduce the statement, “There’s no such thing as an original idea.” Within minutes, side-conversations are likely to spark into blazing arguments as people debate the originality of the works of artists, inventors, musicians and business leaders. Entrepreneur and inventor David Kord Murray would wield a heavy hammer of doubt in this debate. He is a firm believer in the notion that no idea is truly born in a vacuum. It’s worth noting that Murray has a familiarity with the largest vacuum in existence, the one that surrounds everything beyond our atmosphere. He previously worked as an aerospace engineer and was involved in the development of the International Space Station.

Murray’s book *Borrowing Brilliance: The Six Steps to Business Innovation by Building on the Ideas of Others* supports the belief that all great ideas can be sourced from other places. This notion is one that creates a bit of discomfort for the majority of businesspeople. In a world where an ill-timed sneeze appears cause for litigation, the suggestion that ideas can be “borrowed” is enough to make any company’s legal department quiver. Copyright infringement lawsuits and allegations of violations of patents clog the lower levels of the court system and result in a great deal of time and money being spent in the process.



The issues with creative license aren’t limited to the workplace. Societal norms indicate that original thought is highly prized, while imitation and inspiration without credit are demonized as academic treason. After all, one of the most severe (non-violent) offenses in any school is lifting a few answers from a neighbor’s paper. Accusations of plagiarism are known to permanently haunt the careers of academics unfortunate enough to have theories that appear too close to those of a colleague.

Executives should know that Murray isn’t giving the world license to engage in intellectual thievery. His book centers on the way in which ideas evolve and change. The roots of any new product, theory or methodology are entrenched in a previous idea or set of ideas. Whether the author’s use of the term “borrowing” is intended partly for contrived shock value is debatable, but he generally concerns himself more with influence and inspiration than literally passing off someone else’s work as one’s own. Murray is a high-level thinker, yet he infuses much of the book with a casual humor.

*Borrowing Brilliance* addresses a serious concern for many companies in the United States and around the globe: the need for continued innovation. As noted in the promotional copy for the book, the creation of new ideas is a responsibility that is evenly distributed throughout an entire organization. In fact, a department given the heading “Innovation” is often merely the filter through which raw ideas from other departments pass.

Murray’s own time serving as an innovation strategist for software company Intuit put him in the position of constantly delivering new ideas and understanding the

---

methods of the creative process. It was a job that was specially created for him after he fused together a combination of borrowed ideas from Intuit's competitors to solve a direct marketing problem the company had at the time. This position also spawned Murray's development of his system for teaching innovative thinking.

Murray divides the innovation process into six steps that executives will find easy to follow. Each step winds its way through a series of examples from both well-known companies and Murray's own career. Readers should be alert to the fact that Murray frequently leans on his own experiences. While he references companies with which every reader will be familiar, it is clear that Murray himself is the star of his own tale. He also has a tendency to jump forward and backward in his personal history while relaying an idea. For someone whose career has gone from the aerospace industry to the software field to marketing, it can sometimes take a moment or two to center oneself when Murray takes off on another autobiographical jaunt.

### The Pirates of Silicon Valley

The references Murray makes to businesses other than his own will help readers to connect with some of the more obtuse psychological and theoretical discussions in *Borrowing Brilliance*. The history and evolution of the personal computer is mined for a lot of the gold that permeates the early chapters of Murray's book. Because of the speed with which technology has evolved since the Altair 8800 personal computer made its first appearance, many of the best innovations are the result of borrowed ideas. Murray uses the historical context of pirates and notes that pirates weren't considered outlaws until they began stealing from ships that sailed from their homelands. In the computer industry, this type of in-house appropriation became standard practice in the industry's early years and has become an accepted part of the process of continuous innovation. With this in mind, Murray examines the individuals he considers to be the captains of the field's two biggest pirate ships: Microsoft founder Bill Gates and Apple CEO Steve Jobs.

Murray takes something of a risk labeling two greatly respected rivals as pirates, but because he considers the designation a badge of honor, much of what he writes is intended to praise Gates and Jobs. One of the most important aspects for executives to take away from this

section is the role observation plays in the birth of an idea. Murray points out that an idea is typically a solution to a problem. If a company has a problem, the most likely candidates to encounter the same problem are its competitors. This is why Murray suggests that it's only natural to focus one's attention on competitors as a way to observe a problem. The competitors who are closest to solving the problem are the ones who are likely to provide the best inspiration for the executive's solution that is specific to his or her own company's need.

Murray is quick to point out that the competition is not the lone source of information that informs an innovator's process. Pirates who plundered other territories, he notes, were referred to as privateers. The solutions that result from drawing inspiration from fields that appear unrelated to one's own are less likely to be scrutinized and therefore less likely to cause any legal furor. Murray appears to suggest a blending of the two, but emphasizes that credibility often comes in greater heaps to the person who best knows how to cover his or her tracks. As with other arguments in the book, this philosophy may lead some executives to question

Murray's wisdom, but the moment he appears to tread too closely to questionable morals, he brings *Borrowing Brilliance* back to steady ground with reminders of the discipline and ingenuity used by the best business minds.

### The Science Behind Human Thought

Much of the material presented in *Borrowing Brilliance* is concerned with the process of thinking. These sections of the book are where some of Murray's strongest writing occurs. He helps executives understand the natural collision between the conscious mind and the subconscious and the role both play in the creation of an idea. Murray appears to sense the limits of his reader's patience and knows the depth to which he should discuss the science behind human thought. When explaining the way in which the mind works off of repetition, he notes that as a thought travels along its pathway, it digs a trench behind it. Repeat the thought and the trench gets deeper. Repeat the thought too many times and the trench becomes too deep to escape. In a few short sentences, Murray reveals the problem and readers will find his solution to be equally brief and effective.

The capturing of a few ideas from a variety of sources (competitors, dissimilar industries, even historical examples) is meaningless until they are put into the forge of

“Pirates who plundered other territories, he notes, were referred to as privateers. The solutions that result from drawing inspiration from fields that appear unrelated to one's own are less likely to be scrutinized ...”

---

the subconscious. Murray reminds readers throughout *Borrowing Brilliance* that even the work of the inactive mind is an active process. Although it may seem puzzling that humans have to work hard at not thinking, Murray explains what is necessary to help leaders clear their minds and allow their best thoughts to come to the surface. After reading these sections of the book, it is very difficult to ever use the phrase “out of left field” again when referring to an idea. The exercises suggested by Murray are an important key to helping executives break through the haze of white noise created by the digital age.

### The Force of Innovation

Murray’s discussion of innovation is not limited to the world of business. He drafts examples from art, literature, even popular culture to make his point. One of the more notable names with which he has a particular fascination is filmmaker George Lucas. Murray’s affinity for Lucas makes sense when one considers the former’s work in the aerospace industry. However, Murray would be the first to point out that his connection with Lucas’ *Star Wars* franchise goes deeper than the author’s own interest in the heavens.

The segments on Lucas are some of the most easily relatable material and will be familiar to anyone who shares Murray’s appreciation for the six *Star Wars* films. The anecdotes reveal that Lucas’s films, particularly the 1977 release now known as *Episode IV: A New Hope* (originally titled *Star Wars*), achieved record-breaking success because they hit a sympathetic nerve in many viewers. The films are packed with a combination of character archetypes (they’re called Jedi *Knights* for a reason) from classic mythology and elements from more recent memory, such as the use of the term “storm trooper” for an evil soldier. When audiences attended *Star Wars* in 1977, they were treated to a very familiar story of a young hero on a quest to save a princess aided by a wizard mentor. All of these elements were borrowed by Lucas and processed through what Murray refers to as incubation (one of the six steps). With Lucas’s addition of lightsabers, hyperspace and the mystical element of The Force, the end result appeared new and audiences responded in droves.

This section holds a few key points for marketers who may be struggling with selling a product with which audiences have long been familiar. The concepts of borrowing that are discussed in *Borrowing Brilliance* come

into play frequently in industries where several players compete to capture the market for a single product.

As an example, if a company is trying to sell a product such as shaving cream, it can borrow elements from the collective past of the intended audience and give it a key twist that applies to today to differentiate the product. The resurgence of barbershops where men receive a straight razor shave using luxury shaving lather seems to recall a by-gone era. Today, a man is lucky to swipe a razor across his face between answering e-mails on his Blackberry. A marketer can borrow the idea of a luxurious shave and incubate it through the modern issue of not having enough time. The end result is a shaving cream that offers the mind (and the face) a momentary escape into luxury.

### The Positive and Negative of an Idea

Murray has a tendency to weave his examples together as the book progresses. This means that *Borrowing Brilliance* does not lend itself well to the casual reader. There is not much opportunity to “skip around” from chapter to chapter because many of the references Murray makes, particularly to his own life, will seem out of context if the book isn’t read from start to finish. A reader isn’t likely to understand the author’s reference to the testing a structural engineer performs on a spacecraft if he or she hasn’t first read Murray’s story about a government oversight nearly destroying an early shuttle launch. Murray treats his subject matter as a

proper story, one that is intended to unfold over the course of the book’s 280-plus pages.

By the time the reader reaches the book’s latter third, he or she will have endured some rather intense discussions. Applying Murray’s own advice about thinking, it may be best to set the book aside for a day before returning to it to fully absorb the key messages contained in the fifth and sixth steps of business innovation, judging and enhancing an idea. While the formation and incubation of ideas are the building blocks of any product, the process of judging and refining those ideas are what separate the items that fill our homes from the ones that remain, at best, on the shelves, or at worst, in the lab.

Skepticism plays one of the most important roles in the process of innovation, according to Murray. The ability to look objectively at one’s work is an essential element in turning a good idea into a great solution. This is not the domain for fragile egos, yet it produces results that tend to outpace those of more tolerant com-

“A marketer can borrow the idea of a luxurious shave and incubate it through the modern issue of not having enough time.”

petitors. Murray gives good instruction on how to develop and channel one's own inner critic, as well as where to look within an organization for the type of input that will have the necessary impact to shape an idea. As much as a critical judgment can prove where an idea is weak, it also has the ability to prove where the idea is at its most strong. The combination of the two is what will help an innovator make corrections and improve the strength of the whole.

What executives will find interesting about this discussion is that it deals with two areas that are frequently viewed as negative aspects of any leadership role: criticism and micromanagement. The workplace is one of the few remaining places in American society where harsh criticism is tolerated. The need to treat one's ideas ruthlessly is essential to the process described in *Borrowing Brilliance*. An idea, as Murray indicates, is an assembly of pieces from various areas of influence. The mass of pieces is assembled for the purpose of solving a problem. The process of scrutiny requires executives to look at the way the pieces of the solution interact, then slice off those that don't fit the end result. Sometimes the piece that can be holding a project back can be miniscule. The skill of the micromanager is the ability to examine the sum of the parts and recognize which part is crucial to the success of the idea but needs reshaping to work to perfection.

It's important for the reader to understand that negative thinking alone does not get the leader to his or her result. Non-stop negativity is one of the great destroyers of creativity. Positive reinforcement is what drives ideas and the people that turn them into reality forward. This is another area of *Borrowing Brilliance* where Murray looks to Jobs as his standard-bearer. Jobs' use of a terse, profane declaration led to the destruction of many an

idea at Apple. This method of quality control allowed only the strongest ideas to land on the company's agenda. When a particular project had promise, Jobs would get behind the idea with a relentless push of enthusiasm, inspiring the individuals working on the idea and getting others excited about the potential end result. Murray points out that this seemingly split personality is frustrating for those working with the innovator, but it is a necessary part of the balanced judgment that creates a great solution.

**“The workplace is one of the few remaining places in American society where harsh criticism is tolerated. The need to treat one's ideas ruthlessly is essential.”**

### A Little Light Reading

For the truly adventurous, Murray concludes *Borrowing Brilliance* with a suggested reading list of titles that further explore the subjects covered in his book. Each book in the list includes a short review provided by Murray. This is an interesting add-on that increases the value of the book to an executive. Depending on which topic most garnered the reader's interest (creativity, psychology, neuro-

logy, etc.), he or she will find one or two additional titles that come highly recommended from a source that has obviously done more than his share of homework.

Murray admits that hundreds of books were consulted during his writing process, and his joy and devotion to enriching his own knowledge about his subject matter is repeated throughout the book. While not all of the titles he read appear in the appendix, some of Murray's personal favorites are highlighted. In some respects, the appendix is the perfect ending to *Borrowing Brilliance*. Murray spent 280-plus pages explaining how the best ideas are constructed from dozens of tiny building blocks from other sources. With the appendix, he shows you exactly which ones formed the biggest sections of his own grand idea. It may not be an original but, as Murray himself would contend, there are no original ideas. ●

**The author:** David Kord Murray began his career as an aerospace engineer working on the conceptual development team for the International Space Station. He has also been an entrepreneur, inventor and Fortune 500 executive. He was the head of innovation for the software company Intuit and held similar positions at other Fortune 500 companies. He lives in Tahoe City, Calif.

For more information, visit [www.borrowingbrilliance.com](http://www.borrowingbrilliance.com).



**1-800-SUMMARY**  
**service@summary.com**

Published by Soundview Executive Book Summaries (ISSN 0747-2196), P.O. Box 1053, Concordville, PA 19331 USA, a division of Concentrated Knowledge Corp. Published monthly. Subscriptions starting at \$99 per year. Copyright © 2010 by Soundview Executive Book Summaries.

**Available formats:** Summaries are available in several digital formats. To subscribe, call us at 1-800-SUMMARY (240-912-7513 outside the United States), or order online at [www.summary.com](http://www.summary.com). Multiple-subscription discounts and corporate site licenses are also available.

Rebecca S. Clement, Publisher; Sarah T. Dayton, Editor in Chief; Andrew Clancy, Senior Editor; Edward O'Neill, Graphic Designer