



Café Insights with...
Fredrik Härén

More Creative than You Imagine

As part of the *Café Insights* series of interviews with inspiring speakers, The Insight Bureau recently caught up with Fredrik Härén, author and expert in the area of creativity and idea generation.

How did you become the expert on creativity and how was this seed planted in your career?

I wrote my first two books about The Internet in 1995 and 1998. I was also making speeches around that time but soon felt I had to switch focus because I realized that I wasn't really talking about the Internet, I was talking about how to use this new thing called the Internet. That's when I understood that I should be talking about 'new ways of doing things.' I love the Internet Revolution because when it came it forced companies to think about how they were doing things and more importantly how they could do things differently.

You have dedicated your life to talking about innovation and creativity -- companies all say they want to be this, people say they would like to be more creative -- but what's the truth, are we really as creative as we'd like to think we are?

"You're less creative than you think but more creative than you can imagine!" I think that more or less sums it up! Everyone has creative potential but we are not all using it. As an optimist you could say that there's huge potential; imagine if everyone was using even a portion of their creative capacity, think how many problems we could solve. That's why I'm interested in creativity. For me, creativity is a problem-solving mechanism. It's very much like nature. Nature does something in a specific way and then, once in a while, it tries it a different way -- and that is called a mutation. And if that mutation is not better than what it was doing before, that dies. But if it is better, the other one dies. Whatever nature tries (and works best) survives. For me, that's creativity; doing something in another way that is better than what you were doing before. That's how you get constant improvement.

Would you say technology is fueling or starving creativity?

I absolutely think that technology is helping creativity. For example, my next book is a novel and I need a spider with a cross on it, and I couldn't find the name of the spider I was looking for so I went on Google and within thirty seconds I found what I was looking for and I could carry on writing. Before the Internet, what would I have done? I would have stopped, gone to the library, asked for a book, they might not have had it, I would have had to order it, etc... It could have taken me eight hours to find the name of that spider. Now with technology, I have eight hours more to be creative and do other things so in that sense I absolutely believe that technology has the power to fuel creativity. The problem arises when we start to use technology as productivity tools, yet fail to take the time we've saved by using these tools to sit down and think! We may just do more 'stuff', without thinking. It's like running faster without knowing where you're going. For me creativity is stopping, looking at the map and asking, where should I go? For example, we invented the motorcycle so we could drive faster but we don't stop and use the time we have saved to think about where we are going; we just end up driving faster, perhaps in the wrong direction. You need to find the right balance, when you need information it's very simple to find, but you also need the time to reflect, otherwise you're not going to be creative. Used correctly, technology is a wonderful creativity tool, but unfortunately, most people don't use it in the right way.

Is creativity something you are born with or can it be learned? Can you really take an uncreative person and get them to start being creative?

I think it can be learned. Let's take music; can you teach someone to become a Jazz player? Some people would say no. I would say yes. You can teach someone to play music, i.e. you can tell them this is how you blow into the flute and these are the notes, and so on. Then people would argue that you are only teaching them the *skill* and that you're not teaching them how to *create*.

I would argue that you are, because once you learn something and once you become better at it, you start looking at other people and you start taking bits and pieces from them and that's when you start to create. A good teacher will inspire you to do things in a creative way. The best way to teach creativity is by inspiring creativity, otherwise you get a "dragon Mom" who will tell her daughter she cannot go to the toilet unless she can play the piano perfectly. That would not be a creative teacher.

Some people are born with a skill and others can learn it. The biggest problem we have is not that the uncreative people are not practicing their creativity but that the creative people are not practicing their creativity. The architect, the designers, the artists -- these people take their creativity for granted. The most difficult people I find to talk to about creativity are advertisers because they think, "oh this is easy, I can do this with my eyes closed" and they don't try. Imagine if you had a really creative person who applied himself, that's like having a tall person who applies himself to basketball -- you get a Michael Jordan.

Do you see yourself more as artistic or as entrepreneurial?

Andy Warhol said "business is the finest of art forms", and he was a terrific business man. I say that I'm a thinker. That's how I would describe myself. I spend a lot of time traveling around the world -- that's the great thing about being a professional speaker. Yesterday I learnt about the latest trends in healthcare, the next day I might be learning about what's happening in the banking industry for a Swiss bank. I get a lot of insights from experts across many different fields. That's why I take these weeks off to reflect. Whatever interests me most, I start speaking about and whatever gets the best response from the audience, I write a book about. That's how I do it.

You have some very inspiring stories of your own, especially the brilliant concept being The Idea Book which has been nominated as one of the best business books of all time. How did you come up with the concept for The Idea Book?

There's an official version and an unofficial version, which one do you want? The official version is that I'm a genius! Ha! The unofficial version is that I once did a creativity talk and the client asked me if I had any documentation? I said no, but that I had a book. She said she'd buy 200 copies. The only problem was that I didn't have a book! So I cancelled my vacation plans and spent the whole summer writing like crazy! I put all my best examples into one document and when I was finished I thought, "this is too thin, what should I do?" So I stuck some blank pages in between, printed it, gave it to the client and she was very happy. She had a book of insights and space for people to make notes. I printed 400

copies, 200 for the client and 200 extra which I managed to sell, and I thought, yes, this is going to work! I then went back and redesigned it to hard cover and suddenly The Idea Book was born.

Creativity can also be understanding what you have just stumbled upon. That "Eureka!" moment comes from paying attention, about being curious and about questioning things.

Sometimes people become successful by first making a series of mistakes. Is that an example of creativity?

Most entrepreneurs don't talk that much about their mistakes. That's actually my dream, to have a Mistakes Conference, where everyone is only allowed to talk about their mistakes. And I want to do it in Iceland. The founder of IKEA, one of the richest men in the world, admits he has failed countless times but his attitude is not to focus on this but to just keep trying things until they work. We don't call nature a failure when 99.9% of the things nature tries fail. It's about whatever survives! Of course, we shouldn't encourage people to fail; we should encourage them to try, which is an absolutely different approach. Encouraging people to fail is dangerous because it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The biggest mistake is to fail and not learn from it. If you fail but don't learn, then you are making a mistake.

It's quite common to hear that Asia lacks innovation and creativity and that many of the great technological innovations have come from the West. Is this true? Are western companies more creative?

I don't agree with this on many levels. I had an interesting discussion here last week in Singapore; people were saying, "we're not creative here in Singapore" and I asked them to define "here in Singapore". If you talk about New York or Silicon Valley, it's not the people that were born in these cities that we're actually talking about, it's the people that live here and a lot of people that live in these cities are not originally from there. There are creative people from around the world, including Asia, who live in New York and San Francisco. Creative people are drawn to a creative hub. But Americans draw the wrong conclusion from this and claim that Americans are more creative -- the correct conclusion is that creative people are drawn to America. Before, if you were interested in fashion you would go to Paris or Milan. Nowadays, a young fashion designer might be drawn to Mumbai or Shanghai.

You have a much greater potential to be a truly creative person if you think globally. That's what I write about in my second book "The Developing World", how people in developing countries may have a creative advantage over those in the developed world. However, you cannot be creative unless you have confidence in your creativity. If you don't think you can do it, you're not even going to try. You need confidence,

however not too much! With too much confidence you don't question enough. People in Asia have not had the confidence until now. Now they do. They know that Asia is making an impact and that Asia is the next big thing. For me creativity is about combining things. I would say if you live in the developing world you actually know more because you probably also know about the developed world too. The classic example I like to use is cooking; if you're a Frenchman, you may only know French cooking so you can only cook French food. If you're Singaporean you may cook Hokkien, Malay, Indian, etc. but then you might start combining things and you get fusion -- which is where I think cooking gets very interesting!

Do you think emerging economies should be leading the way in terms of innovation and creativity of new products?

I'm absolutely convinced that they will. The buyers in developing countries are saying "let's build a carbon neutral city in Abu Dhabi". They may be using technology from the West to do it, but they are the actual *drivers* behind this innovation, they are the *buyers* of creativity. What I am saying is wait for the next wave, the next generation. Right now the young generation they are not CEOs, they are not Marketing Directors, they are marketing assistants and research assistants. But just wait five to ten years.

It sounds like the world would be a richer more dynamic place if more people embraced creativity. What is the spark that ignites change, that gets someone to move towards being more creative? Can you do it yourself or is it something that someone else needs to do for you?

The spark is inspiration. If you want to be creative, you first have to be inspired in some way. Like an engine, the sparks starts the combustion, but after that it continues. It's the same thing with creativity; when you get inspired by the idea you just had it becomes like perpetual motion where one idea triggers another one, which triggers another. People in Singapore often say that their school system is too rigid and that they cannot be creative. I tell them, don't worry so much about your school system – it has given you a lot of knowledge, now they just need that spark. Go out

into the world, travel, meet interesting people, find what your passion in life is and that will be your spark, apply all the knowledge that your school has taught you and apply it to your passion. It's not that school *killed* your creativity, it just *hid* your creativity-- it's still there!

My equation for this is C=K+I: Creativity equals Knowledge plus Information, or Inspiration or Input. I strongly feel that you cannot be creative unless you also have knowledge. A very young person with all this energy and inspiration but with no knowledge doesn't have the potential to be creative. Of course, kids can overcompensate that by having so much inspiration and so much curiosity, but the most creative people may not be children but older people who are still curious. These by far are the most creative people in the world because they have so much knowledge that they can tap into allowing them to be that much more creative.

A common concern for the future is that the world as we know it is not sustainable and that the world must be in decline because we don't have the answers to the problems we are facing. Do you believe in man's ingenuity?

Yes, I believe in man's ingenuity, but I don't believe in man's ability to change quickly enough! I'm pessimistic actually because what people don't understand is how quickly the world is changing. The negative side-effect of the developing world "catching-up" is that the speed of growth is much faster than the speed of innovation to make things more environmentally friendly. Even with really good technologies to provide cheap, abundant solar energy, for example, will we be able to implement it all quickly enough? If you look at it that way I feel we have to put much more emphasis on creativity now than ever before and if you ask me, we should ask governments to put more people onto projects to solve these types of problems. Promoting entrepreneurship is great, they never did that before, but now they need to start promoting sustainable and moral entrepreneurship.

About Fredrik Härén and The Insight Bureau

Fredrik Härén has quickly become one of the most talked-about names in the field of creativity. Based in Singapore, he is an accomplished author and speaker who has delivered over 1,000 presentations, lectures and workshops across 25 countries, focused on creativity, idea generation and entrepreneurship. www.insightbureau.com/FredrikHaren.html

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www.insightbureau.com

Tel: +65-6300-2495

engage_us@insightbureau.com

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