A Practical Taxonomy of Imagination

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Overview

In 2019, NESTA, a British innovation agency, released a report calling to "unleash the disruptive power of imagination in every citizen." [1] A similar call is from UNESCO, another international agency: "The widespread poverty of imagination must be overcome."[2] Liberating and democratizing this latent human power is vital to solving immense global challenges. [3]

Apart from the sheer scope of such a global enterprise, there are two challenges one is institutional and the other individual.

First, scholars in the field think imagination is too impenetrable for a unified theory, taxonomy, and standard educational approach. The following sentiment is near universal.

"The uses, and applications, of the terms 'image,' 'imagine,' 'imagination,' and so forth make up a very diverse and scattered family. Even this image of a family seems too definite. It would be a matter of more than difficulty to identify and list the family's members, let alone their relations of parenthood and cousinhood." [3.b]

To be sure, there several taxonomies of imagination, which are largely academic and complex articulations, understandably. The result is long-standing institutional bias and inertia.[4]

Both agencies, NESTA and UNESCO, are a distinct minority. Corporations like BCGI promoting imagination face significant resistance. "Companies must increasingly compete on imagination, but we don't have a clear idea of how imagination works or how to systematically improve it."[5] Second, as the

research reveals, most people generally lack confidence in their imagination and creativity.

Therefore, how might this call to action be answered practically on a scale? That is, to empower people to reclaim and liberate their imagination. This Guide offers a solution.

The Taxonomy

The following introduces a quick, practical way to picture and strengthen one's imagination. This resource consists of visual taxonomy and related practices. The overall concept, design, and goals are broadly related to "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs" and "Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning." [6] These models share the same conceptual framework of a triangle. Each model illustrates different types and levels of perception (i.e., needs, learning, and imagination, respectively), from the most fundamental at the base to the most subtle at the apex.

Design Rationale

This taxonomy's triangle design and rationale – philosophical and psychological - are informed by cross-disciplinary research, practical development, and three ancient sources. The Vedas, 3000-year-old Sanskrit scriptures, identify five subtle states or powers of imagination.[7] Indeed, these texts aver that the universe is imaginary, the result of divine play.[8]

- o Pythagoras, who lived in Greece 2500 years ago, introduced two symbolic geometric diagrams. The Tetractys is visual shorthand, in the form of a triangle, to understand the nature and workings of the cosmos. Pythagoras also introduced the five-point star as a symbol of quintessence, the best that anything can be, the epitome of aspiration, excellence, and achievement.[9]
- o Abhinavagupta, a highly influential Vedic sage living in Kashmir 1200 years ago, wrote imagination wasn't just powerful but power itself.[10]

UNIMAGINABLE

INSPIRATION

HIGHER PURPOSE

VISUALIZATION
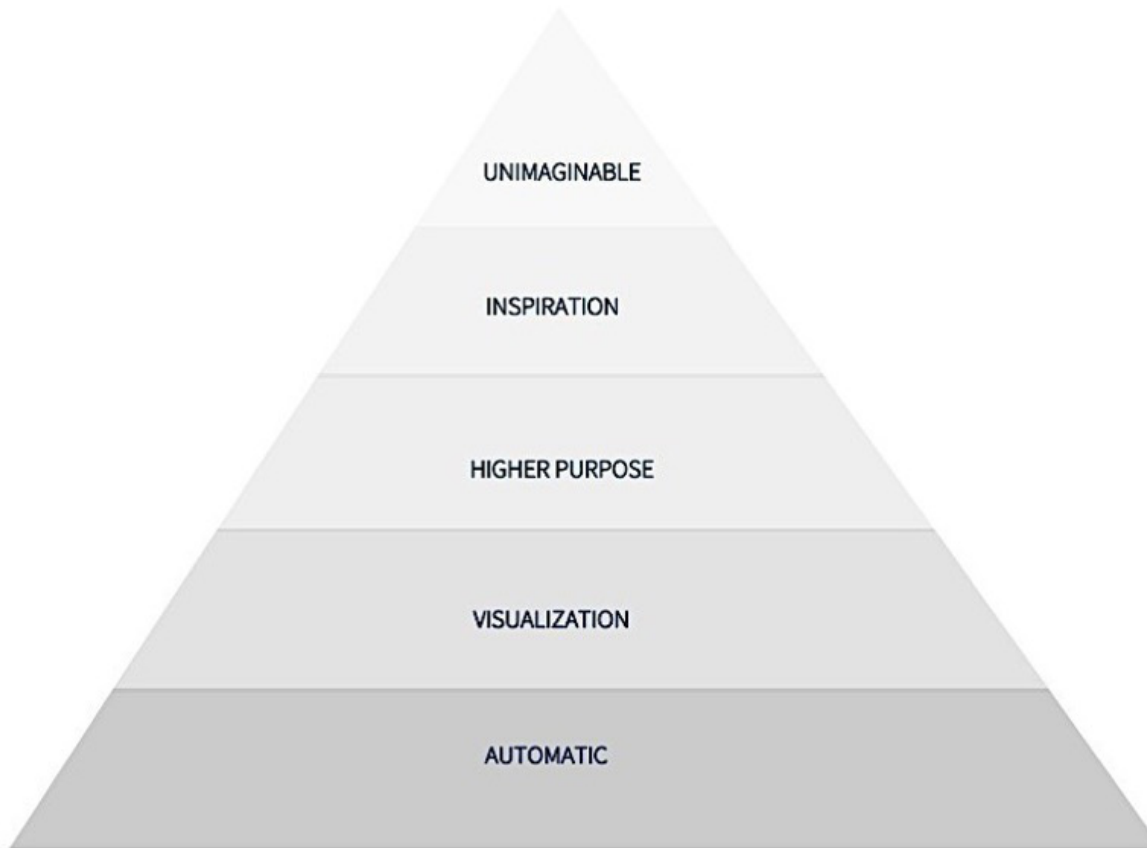
AUTOMATIC

Five Powers and Practices

The following describes each power and practice. Remember that these five principles are operant under whatever power and method is in play.

Principles

1. Automatic and always "on."
2. Instantly accessible.
3. Effortless to apply.
4. Different operating modes.
5. Magnified when people imagine together

Power 1. Automatic

Description: The first power of imagination is automatic. This power is referred to as "Vikalpa" in the ancient Vedas. Automatic imagination is like an inner non-stop film. Our standard mental default mode functions semi-consciously, waking and dreaming. It projects spontaneous imagery of past events, future possibilities, daydreams, and fantasies. Our "mind-wandering" is mainly negative or hedonistic. Research reveals people spend 50% of their waking lives lost in this "mind-wandering" space.[11]

Examples: We imagine coworkers speaking poorly about us; something will go wrong with our presentation or not winning the lottery. Our automatic imagination magnifies "negativity bias," which is the tendency to dwell on unpleasant images, feelings, and thoughts.[12] In the Buddhist Canon, this mental state is one's "natural monkey mind." Meaning "unsettled; restless; capricious; whimsical; fanciful; inconstant; confused; indecisive; uncontrollable".[13]

Practice: Regular mindfulness practice is an instant, effective way to catch one's automatic imagination in action. When seeing oneself imagining negatively, stop, breathe, and reframe the mental picture. Recent neuroscience research confirms the value of positive imagining or "image shifting". What's real and what's imagined activate the same brain regions. "You can use imagination to tap into it, change it and re-consolidate it, updating how you think about and experience something."[14]

Power 2. Visualization

The second power of imagination is visualization. This power is called "Kalpana in the Sanskrit of the ancient Vedas. We employ visualization in two main ways, summarized as follows.

A. Inner Visualization

Description: Visualization involves mentally generating and holding positive images of future anticipated outcomes. Neuroscience explains the process and its direct impact on imagined outcomes. "During visualization, the brain directs the target muscles to work the desired way. This direction creates a neural pattern in the brain, a pattern identical to the network created by the actual physical performance of the movements."[15] Accordingly, intentional imagining of an act, such as playing the violin, fortifies related brain regions and neuronal connectivity, such as with the violinist's hands. Science confirms ancient philosophy. Aristotle noted 2300 years ago: "A vivid imagination compels the whole body to obey it."[16] Simply put, exemplary practice is as much an act of imagination as a feat of actual performance.

Examples: Athletes in professional sports use visualization techniques to support competitive performance.[17] In healthcare, visualization is effective 60% of the time in aiding the healing process post-surgery. This phenomenon is described as the Placebo Effect.[18] Visualization using positive image-shifting also has immense clinical therapeutic value in addressing, for example, crippling memories, anxiety, and fear disorders. In education, teachers' positive image and expectation of students impact more on achievement than Intellectual Quotient (I.Q.). This phenomenon is called the Pygmalion Effect.[19]

Practice: Inner visualization has many purposes. For example, if your goal is to find calmness amid a busy, stressful day, the following method is recommended. The goal is for the practitioner to engage their senses in this fully, or any, mental visualizations.

A Garden Break: 5-Minutes

Find and sit in a quiet spot. Close your eyes. Loosen your body. Let the chair support your weight. Take a few slow deep breaths. Picture walking down a path to a gate. You open the gate and enter a garden that is peaceful and beautiful. Feel all your senses.

"Your garden is filled with your favorite things. Whatever is pleasing to you can be found in this place. Perhaps there are flowers, trees, animals, birds,

water, or even music. Look around and notice what is in your garden. ….. See all the colors and objects that are in this place. Notice how beautiful they are. …. Look at the various shapes and see how varied they are…. Look at the ground, the sky, and where they meet. …. Your garden is calm and tranquil.

… When you are ready to leave, slowly walk back towards your garden gate. You have enjoyed your visit to the garden and feel relaxed and content. This good feeling will remain with you throughout the day. Push the gate open and return to the path leading to the garden. As you make your way back up the path to the here and now, remember that you can use your imagination to return to your private garden whenever you wish. Visit your garden whenever you want to relax, be comforted, or enjoy its beauty. ….. You are now ready to resume your day. Stretch gently and open your eyes, feeling refreshed and alert."[20]

B. Outer Visualization

Description: When we want to communicate our mental images, we use graphic tools to produce illustrations, diagrams, charts, etc. This form of visualization has existed since recorded history.

Examples: One of the earliest diagrams is the Sri Yantra. This visual aid to meditative exercises was developed in India 3500 years ago. In the West, "the Plan of St. Gallis one of the oldest surviving hand-drawn architectural renderings from the 9th Century C.E.

Practice: Visualize something you want or need to accomplish. Use traditional tools like paper and colored pencils or a digital whiteboard. Create a diagram or illustration of what the plan and outcome might look like, share it with others, get their feedback, and refine and iterate your initial visualization and resulting artifact.

Power 3. Higher Purpose

Description: The third power of imagination is to envision a higher purpose. This power, in Sanskrit, is referred to as Bhavana" in the ancient Vedas. That our lives have a higher purpose is an old idea. Philosophers such as Aristotle believed every person is drawn forward by an inherent "Telos" or raison d'etre. "Entelecheia" means "that which turns potential into reality." The Jesuit and Paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin observed: "Entelechy is inside of you like the butterfly is inside the caterpillar."[21] This impetus draws us inward to become more rounded and self-actualized.

We grow together toward the positive images of the future we co-create as individuals, teams, organizations, and communities. [22]

Examples: Many well-known, successful companies are purpose-driven. A good example is Patagonia. This outdoor clothing store chain has about 2000 employees and revenues of $1 billion U.S. Dollars in 2021. Its stated purpose: "We're in business to save our home planet."[23] Another example is KPMG, a global consulting firm. KPMG "invested in a new kind of training, in which the partners learned how to tell compelling stories that conveyed their sense of personal identity and professional purpose … (This) was a real stretch for experts in investment, real estate, tax, risk consulting."[24] Partners then shared their stories with team members. Ultimately, in this firm of 207 500 people, everyone was invited. Using a simple poster design template, employees were "encouraged to share their accounts of how they were making a difference" in their work. "Each participating employee created a purpose-driven headline clarifying statement employee would insert his or her picture … Twenty-seven thousand people produced 42,000 posters."[25]

Practice:

There are three broad dimensions in identifying and working towards the realization of a higher purpose. Picture these dimensions as concentric circles.

Your Inner Life: Visualize a role model and the qualities you admire, such as empathy, calm, etc. Imagine embodying these qualities. See yourself expressing them in your daily life and work.

Your Professional Life: Discover your organization's higher purpose. If there isn't one, boldly imagine what such an initiative might involve. Use your graphic visualization skills to illustrate and engage colleagues.

Creating a Purpose-Driven Organization

The following are several steps towards building a purpose-driven organization outlined by Dr. Robert E. Quinn and Dr. Anjan V. Thakor in the Harvard Business Review based on their research findings.[26]

1. Envision an inspired workforce. Look for excellence, examine the purpose that drives the excellence, and then imagine it imbuing your entire workforce
2. Discover the purpose. You do not invent a higher purpose; it already exists. Discover it through empathy.
3. Recognize the need for authenticity. An organization often discovers its purpose when things are going badly.
4. Turn the authentic message into a constant message. Signaled from the top unfolds from the bottom. 5. Stimulate individual learning.
5. Turn midlevel managers into purpose-driven leaders.
6. Connect the people to the purpose.
7. Unleash the positive energizers.

Your Community Life: Support a cause that captures your imagination and speaks to your heart

Higher purpose becomes a powerful transformative societal force when directed outwards into the world. Martin Luther King's speech "I Have a Dream!" is an example.

Model: The Common Good as Common Value

The following Table and Diagram illustrate how a universal value can be imagined and practiced from an individual to a planetary level. [27]
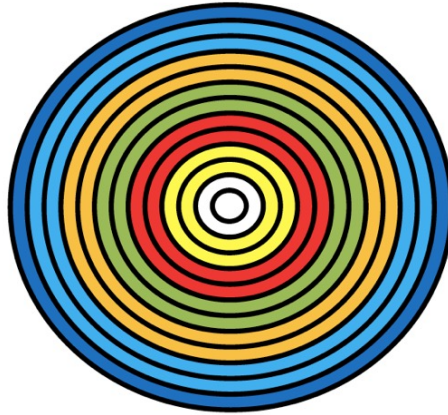
	COLOUR	GLOBAL SCOPE
1.	White	Myself
2.	Yellow	Inner Family: partner, children
3.	Red	Broader Family. Clan
4.	Red	Professional Community: team
5.	Green	Neighborhood: village, quarter
6.	Green	Religious Community: parish/temple
7.	Brown	Peers: sport, ethnic, interest groups
8.	Brown	Professional Community Company
9.	Blue	Nation: state, peoples
10.	Blue	All Regions
11.	Dark Blue	All Religions: world spirituality
12.	Dark Blue	Humankind: all human beings
13.	Dark Blue	Biosphere: all living beings

Power 4. Inspiration

Description: The fourth power of imagination is "inspiration." The ancient Vedas refer to this power as "Pratibha" in Sanskrit. Inspiration is experienced as a sudden positive feeling and thought that strongly impels one to create and act. The Latin root is "inspirare," meaning "to blow into, breathe upon,"

and "to excite, inflame."[28] In the West, the mythic Muse is believed to confer inspiration on artists, scientists, and other visionaries but not always. In the East, "Pratibha" isn't easily defined. At best, it is called "an ineffable presence."[29] In other words, "a vaguely luminous something, but even that is too specific. It can only be described in negative terms: incomprehensible, indescribable, unimaginable, and so on." The following verse is evocative. "May your eye of pratibhii shine with sagely unimpeded light."[30]

Examples: Leonardo da Vinci took inspiration from even mundane things. His journal states: "Do not despise my opinion, when I remind you that it should not be hard for you to stop sometimes and look into the stains of walls, or the ashes of a fire, or clouds, or mud or like places, in which, if you consider them well, you may find really marvelous ideas."[31] Equally pragmatic, Picasso said, "Inspiration exists, but it has to find you working."[32]

Practice: Inspiration is not a given. As both da Vinci and Picasso recommend, one can cultivate a receptive attitude and seek conducive experiences.

Invitations to Inspiration

1. Walk in nature, the wilder, the better.
2. Take photos of anything beautiful or exciting.
3. Journal about related feelings and thoughts.
4. Create artwork and experiment with different media.
5. Create a vision board.
6. Watch children and animals play.
7. Learn something new out of your comfort zone.
8. Read biographies of heroes and role models.
9. Listen to uplifting music and watch motivational films.

Power 5. The Unimaginable

Description: The fifth power of imagination is the ability to imagine the unimaginable. This power is referred to as "Maya" in ancient Vedic philosophy. Maya is "neither real nor unreal but undefinable."[33] The Vedas state the entire universe is imaginary. A divine projection of "Lila," meaning "play" in Sanskrit. In the 12th Century C.E., Bhaskara, an Indian mathematician, formulated the concept of the "fifth power." His classic

treatise, "Lilavati," is a tribute to the play of imagination needed to create numbers that do not exist.

The BCGI Henderson institute explains how "imagination gives us the ability to explore the realm of 'what is not but could be." The very essence of imagining the unimaginable. Indeed, this activity is the summation and outcome of understanding and exercising fully one's powers of imagination. The goal is to fuel innovation and fulfill a higher purpose. In the words of Patagonia, "We can imagine a healthy planet."

Examples: Lewis Carol, a master of imagination, wrote the following exchange between two of his immortal characters in "Through the Looking Glass." Alice states: "There's no use trying 'one can't believe impossible things." The Red Queen responds: "I daresay you haven't had much practice. When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

For author Cynthia Shoshana Ozick, "to imagine the unimaginable is the highest use of imagination."[34] Any enterprise creating technology, goods, or services must learn to practice this Imaginal power. The act of asking "what if?" is the most incredible prompt for discovery, innovation, and invention. Not understanding and exercising this fifth power leads to "failures of imagination," which may have catastrophic results. Imagining the unimaginable is, therefore, also a moral imperative.

Practice:

Unconventional techniques and experiences challenge habitual thought patterns and exercise divergent thinking.

Alternative Sensory Exercises

There are a variety of alternative sensory experiences, such as dark dining, flotation tanks, and sweat lodges.

Surrealist Games

Exquisite Cadaver is a surrealist game from Europe in the 1920s. Each participant takes turns writing or drawing an agreed theme on a sheet of paper, folding it to conceal their work, and then passing it to the next player for a further contribution. The result is a montage of words or images that form a whole new creation that would have previously been unimaginable.[35]

Organizational Exercises

The following recommended exercises are followed on a sustained regular basis and designed to harness the collective power of individual imaginations throughout an organization. [36]

1. Contact with the unknown: Learn to identify and value what is unfamiliar and strange.
2. Focus on anomalies: Share unexpected outcomes, unusual observations, whatever is intriguing, thought-provoking, or befuddling.
3. Explicit mental models: Understand the mutability of mental models generally and one's core elements.
4. Playfulness: Understand and cultivate playfulness and pursue improvised exploration.

Growth Benchmarks

Strengthening one's imagination also contributes to individual growth and development along several dimensions.

Empathic Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is knowledge of one's character, traits, and strengths. Such awareness starts with self-image, how we picture ourselves within our mind's eye. Problematically, 78% of American females, by age 17, are unhappy with

their self-image due to comparisons with impossible standards of beauty promoted by global media.[37] More broadly, about 85% of the world's population is affected by low self-esteem.[38] Self-awareness, self-image, and self-esteem all depend on active ongoing imagination.

Research shows a direct correlation between self-awareness and empathy toward others. Building empathy requires first strengthening one's self-awareness.[39] Indeed, "augmenting the strength of the self-concept may be key to unlocking the prosocial behavior that is so vital to human social relationships."[40]

Empathy is "the ability to understand and share the feelings of another."[41] When we see someone hurt themselves, we react as if it's happened to us. Research reveals this is due to the cognitive processing of mirror neurons. These neurons register observation and facilitate instantaneous comprehension—acts of empathy light up the same neurocognitive pathways as acts of imagination and memory.[42] Hence the adage to picture being in someone else's shoes.[43]

Einstein observed that imagination encircles the world. "Imagination (also) enlarges the circle of our seeing and enables empathy."[44] Similarly, McLuhan wrote. "The aspiration of our time for wholeness, empathy and depth of awareness is a natural adjunct of electric technology."[45] The premise is the greater one's imagination, the greater one's empathy.

Engagement and Well-being

A basic definition of wellbeing is "judging life positively and feeling good."[46] The sense is that of flourishing. Research reveals that an active, "goal-directed imagination" contributes to the following:

- o   Better mental health
- o   Greater positivity
- o   Enhanced resourcefulness, resilience

o   Reduced negativity, depressiveness [47],[48],[49]

The dynamic state of flourishing is a central goal of heliotropic psychology. Moreover, our shared sense of purpose and engagement grows when we imagine positive futures. Since 80% of employees across 142 countries are disengaged, fostering Imaginal literacy focused on a higher purpose can have significant value with minimal cost. [50]

Self-Actualization

Self-actualization is an ancient philosophical ideal. In Greek, "entelecheia" means "that which turns potential into reality." Teilhard de Chardin describes it well: "Entelechy is inside of you, like the butterfly is inside of the caterpillar… it is the entelechy of an acorn to be an oak tree, of a baby to be a grown-up." Every person is drawn forward by an inherent "telos" or purpose in life. They must discover their telos. How they chose to be in the world, i.e., "character." And also, what they decide to do in the world, i.e., "vocation."

Moreover, the goal is to aim for "excellence" in character and calling. The ancient philosophers called this "quintessence. "Meaning the absolute best anyone or anything can be. They choose the symbol of a star to signify quintessence. The star today universally represents excellence, aspiration, and achievement.

In 1939, Kurt Goldstein, a psychiatrist, introduced the phrase "self-actualization" into modern discourse. For him, self-actualization meant discovering "one's "essence, one's identity, one's felt sense of oneself." The courage to be oneself fully is non-negotiable. Which means "a willingness to risk being vulnerable and to uncover more "painful" aspects to learn about/grow through and integrate these parts of themselves (this has parallels with Jung's slightly similar concept of individuation)."[51]

Abraham Maslow's taxonomy of human needs features a five-step pyramidal framework. Basic needs must be met before higher ones. Maslow situated self-actualization at the apex. He believed all humans have an inherent drive towards this apex goal, the highest need. In 1943, Maslow wrote: "this

tendency might be phrased as the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming."[52] He called it a "Metaneed ."It is growth-oriented—a journey rather than a destination.

In a parallel development during the 1940s onwards, two psychoanalysts, Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg, developed an evidence-based therapy focused on individuals imagining their future positively. For example, one practice involves a "miracle question." The therapist will ask the client to imagine sleeping at night and dream their challenge was solved. What follows is a dialogue about the outcome of this miracle the next day. This exercise ultimately leads to discovering their own "telos." And using their strengths to self-actualize their vision.[53] Berg's and de Shazer's pioneering work anticipate several transformative models, such as Appreciative Inquire, that also calls for Imaginal Literacy.

"Self-actualization is available to every individual, rich or poor alike. In contrast and quite ironic, some people have all their basic needs, power, prestige achieved, but never attained their full potential and remain a primeval being governed by greed and self-centeredness."[54]

Maslow was wrong on one crucial count. By its very nature, self-actualization transcends and elevates the human condition regardless of its material condition. One poignant example is that prisoners in Nazi concertation camps suffering extreme deprivation created art of every kind, on penalty of death if discovered. Courageous acts of moral imagination by self-actualized human beings.

Higher Purpose

The global pandemic has revealed the immense resiliency of humans around the world to reach beyond themselves for the greater good. Maslow also theorized about "Metamotivation," which describes self-actualized people driven to pursue some form of calling, mission, or higher purpose. Something above and beyond themselves. "Self-actualization is available to every individual."[55] Self-actualized individuals evince and embrace kinship, a feeling of oneness with all people. In 2016, Peter Diamandis, chairman of the

X Prize Foundation for technical innovation and founder of the Silicon Valley think-tank Singularity University used the term "self-actualization at scale" to describe transformational models such as a universal basic income. [56]

The 2016 publication "Global Ethics for Leadership: Values and Virtues for Life" discusses self-actualization at scale.   "One core value which exists in most cultures and religions around the world is the notion of the "Common Good." As human beings live in communities and depend on communities, values can never be only individual. The Common Good is a communitarian approach to values."[57]

Conclusion

There are growing institutional calls for enfranchising individual and collective imagination as a primary agency of self-determination and social wellbeing. The question is how?

This practical taxonomy of imagination and associated practices is no cost solution. The following summarizes the principles, powers, benefits, and barriers related to understanding and strengthening one's imagination.

Principles

1. Automatic and always "on."
2. Instantly accessible.
3. Effortless to apply.
4. Different operating modes.
5. Magnified when people imagine together

Powers

1. Automatic
2. Visualization
3. Higher Purpose
4. Inspiration
5. The Unimaginable

Benefits

1. Mindfulness
2. Empathy
3. Sense of higher purpose
4. Greater skill in answering, "what if?"
5. Strengthened visualization

Barriers

1. Willful Ignorance
2. Logic Bias
3. Disengagement
4. Lack of Confidence
5. Fear

Heliotrope Imaginal

Heliotrope Imaginal (HI) is the social enterprise behind AllStarTeams, a strengths-based people empowerment system. AllStarTeams characterizes Imagination as a core strength essential to self-awareness, growth and development, individually and as teams.

Cover: the blue rose

The more we plumb this cognitive faculty, the more mysterious imagination becomes. In the original sense, from the ancient Greek, "mysterious" for what is sacred and veiled.

In the twelfth century, Attar wrote, "The secret is hidden in the rose." Dante described it as the "divine word made flesh." If the rose is the queen of flowers, the blue rose is its quintessence, living only in the imagination.

The reason that blue roses don't exist in the natural world is molecular. Roses don't have the gene pigment needed to produce blue petals. Over the centuries, there's been a sustained effort to grow one without success.

This perennial quest is comparable to the Holy Grail. We've always longed to materialize our dreams and deepest desires, noble and ignoble.

Indeed, creating a true blue rose would have enormous financial rewards for the owners of the genetic code. Suntory is one company that invested heavily in the attempt. Its sales of alcoholic beverages run in the billions. Management, therefore, understands how to cater profitably to the universal thirst for intoxication.

Einstein famously stated 1929: "I'm enough of an artist to draw freely on my imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited; imagination encircles the world."

In this vein, Generative Artificial Intelligence offers the artist another brush, palette, and canvas. The author visualized the cover image in his mind's eye and then described that in writing to DALLE-2.

Our image-making capacity is automatic and ongoing. When we imagine anything that is good, beautiful, beneficial, compassionate, and life-affirming, we actively, albeit subtly, contribute to that outcome.

For More Information

Free Your Imagination - LinkedIn

https://bit.ly/3OnEmF

AllStarTeams

https://allstarteams.com/

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