Carla Johnson The Wheel of Innovation, Brand Transplants & Pitching Ideas That Stick

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SUMMARY

Carla Johnson discusses the importance of innovation as a structured process rather than a gift, introducing a five-step framework: Observe, Distill, Relate, Generate, and Pitch. She aims to teach this process to one million people, emphasizing that anyone can learn to innovate effectively using simple tools like post-it notes.

- *Innovation is a repeatable process involving five steps: Observe, Distill, Relate, Generate, and Pitch.*
- *The definition of innovation should be clear and agreed upon within organizations to foster effective action.*
- *Observing the world around us and collecting diverse experiences is crucial for generating innovative ideas.*
- *Distillation involves identifying patterns from observations to inform idea generation.*
- *Relating external ideas to internal objectives helps bridge the gap between creativity and practical application.*
- *Generating a wide range of ideas is essential; the best ideas often emerge after exploring many initial concepts.*
- *The pitch should tell a story about the idea's journey, engaging the audience emotionally rather than relying solely on data.*
- *Feedback is vital in the innovation process, requiring a supportive approach that encourages iteration and improvement.*

Innovation isn't a gift. It's a process. A simple, repeatable five-step process that anyone at any level can learn with nothing more than a stack of post-it notes. Observe, distill, relate, generate, pitch, and that's it. That's how the world's most prolific innovators consistently come up with ideas that are new, great, and reliable. She's on a mission to teach 1 million people to do exactly that. It's a pleasure to welcome the author of Rethink Innovation, Carla Johnson. Welcome to the show.

>> Thank you. I'm so happy to be here. We've been talking about this for a while. So, I'm happy we get to sit down and chat today. >> It's so great to finally meet you and finally share your work. And you've been on that mission to teach a million. You're nearly there as well, which is absolutely fantastic to hear. But let's start with the title. That wasn't an over pronunciation of Rethink Innovation. It's a very specific reason you picked that title.

>> It is and also I was very thoughtful in how if you want to show the cover how it's presented graphically. So it's re colon think innovation. So I say in the olden days when I was early in my career we would have these paper memos and it would say to colon from colon re e colon like regarding what what is this memo about? And so for me, that's what I wanted it to be. It's yes, let's rethink innovation and who's involved in the purpose and how we all look at it, but it's regarding the way we think about innovation and really looking at it from all different perspectives and re re-evaluating what we think it actually is and who we give permission to be a part

of it or how willing we are as individuals to give ourselves permission to be a part of the process. I actually still use re so I don't know what that says about me is like I'm some old English lord or >> I'll be sending messenger pigeons to people.

>> But yeah, I still I use re in my letters and in my emails even as well. But let's start with the cautionary tale of the thirsty pet story which you open the book with. >> Sure. You know, but for me it it I loved it. I love to find quirky little stories and it was so fun to come across this story about the the pet water company because they had these high hopes and and I think like a lot of companies they looked around and they said here's this amazing opportunity for us to be a billion dollar company in a really short amount of time and they failed to look at the signs that were right in front of them. So the product was, you know, if if you were a dog, it was like a beef flavored water. If you were a cat, it was like a salmon flavored water.

Ideally, it was a health water. And the owner had been walking down the aisle in a grocery store looking at all of the options for your pets, food, care, all of these things. And he's like, "The only thing we don't have is pet water." And as humans, you know, we have the Dani, we have the Fiji, we have all of our, you know, liquid death, we have all of our waters. They said, well, you know, why should we why should we not allow our pets, our beloved family members to have the same quality of water as we do? So, they launched this company and and when it first started out, it looked like it was just incredible. But what they didn't take into consideration is like the the health impact of this water. And so it was, you know, the the cats and dogs were getting fat because of all the additional calories in it. And also they didn't take into consideration like these are pets that will literally drink out of the toilet. So their discerning taste was not at the same level as their pet owner's discerning taste. And as you can imagine, it just fell flat on its face. And but it it showed all the signs of what we typically think of, you know, like a a disruptor, an incredible innovator inside an industry. And and yet it missed the very signs right in front of it that the idea wasn't new, great, reliable, one that could could actually produce money and and sustain for the long term.

>> One of the things that story opens up is the question of a reliable idea. And we'll come back to that because it's a really important aspect that's throughout the book. But one of the only other things is and I experienced this recently. I'll share this with you because you work as a practitioner in innovation as well. I was asked by a well-known brand to come up with a workshop for their senior team, an innovation workshop and it was a person second to the senior leader who was I was dealing with and did the workshop did put the workshop together and then I had a call and I gave the call and it was crickets like not going well. It's the only time it's ever happened. I was so disappointed by it. But the problem was she wanted an innovation workshop but when I talked to her it was about innovation and it turned out she wanted creativity which is something that yes linked to innovation but it's not innovation and it opens up the thing you talk about in the book which is you ask a hundred people maybe even a thousand for their definition of innovation and it's often very different and an organization really needs to agree on what they mean by innovation. Maybe you'll share a bit about that, but also your definition of innovation.

>> Yeah. And it was interesting. I like I like to pull people and see what their ideas are. I mean, I I have my own experiences for my own client engagements and from people I I talked to after I after I give keynotes and things

and I love to hear their perspective. But I did this this question. I put the question out on on LinkedIn a number of years ago of how do you define innovation? And I I think whatever number it was, there was probably twice the definitions of innovation. And as I read through them, none of one, none of them were very clear. And two, none of them were definitions that you could read and then understand what behavior should I take next? What should I do?

And I think that's one of the greatest that's one of the greatest problems that companies have that they don't realize around innovation is the word is thrown around but nobody really knows what it means. Like if you and I are talking and I say you know I'm I'm going to go for a run you have a pretty clear picture of what that behavior looks like. Now the speed might be very different that you do this or if I say I'm going to bake a sule you have a general I think we all have a general accepted expectation of what that behavior looks like but we don't with innovation and I see it in organizations values I see it in their mission and vision and all of these things but without clarity of definition employees don't understand what actions to take and when employees don't understand a clear action to take then they don't want to perform that behavior because there may be consequences and I think that's that's one of the most powerful things that we have to understand and even if there is even if there may be a definition it's usually convoluted and complicated and you know only certain people are going to be able to figure it out but I I believe innovation is everybody's business so I define innovation as consistently being able to come up with new great and reliable ideas. And when I think of a new idea, it doesn't have to be something that's never ever been done before because we've seen a lot of amazing ideas over the centuries, but it could be something that's new to that industry. So, I tell a story about the great Orman Street Hospital in London, and it's a children's hospital, and they had an error rate of 30% from the time a surgery was done until that pediatric patient was moved down the hallway to the ICU. And what they ended up doing is they pulled in the Ferrari's Formula 1 pit stop crew to learn from them about precision, speed, and process and things. Now, were the things that they had done absolutely new and never been done? Well, of course not, because Ferrari and Formula 1 pit stop crews had been had been doing them for years. But it was a new approach inside of the pediatric surgery suite. And those standards, they dropped the error rate by 20% and they're continuing to slowly chip away at that. But that process and the standards are now incorporated into pediatric surgery suites around the world. And so that's that's an amazing new idea. Now the second word is, you know, a new great idea. And I think of David Ogulvie. He says, you know, a great idea is one that kind of makes the the hair stand up and gives you goosebumps. And it's more it's more subjective. like your definition of a great idea might be completely different than mine, but it it gets some kind of like visceral reaction.

And then the third quality is that it's a reliable idea. And a reliable idea is one that actually has a financial impact, grows revenue, cuts expenses, increases employee engagement, customer experience scores, things like that. Like there's a concrete outcome from it. And then I put the word consistently in front of that. consistently coming up with ideas that have all three of these characteristics because we've all seen the companies that are the one hit wonders. They do have one idea that's new, great, and reliable, but they're not able to sustain that output over long periods of time. And so when I think of innovation, innovative thinkers, innovative organizations, they're those companies that consistently come up with new great and reliable ideas that we all get excited about. And that brings us to that idea that you talked about. You call these companies or these people in the companies perpetual innovators. We better give a definition for that as well before we get stuck into the framework and the updated framework.

>> Yes. Yes. Absolutely. So I I think of a perpetual innovator as someone who they constantly think in the framework of the process that we're going to that we're going to walk through. And it's not necessarily that they have a different degree or they're smarter or anything like this. like we I've known people in every kind of industry at every level of seniority or experience in an organization who can think like this and we all know people who if we see them in the hallway or if we feel stuck it's like oh I can just call them and I I know I'm going to get like 8 10 12 40 ideas just like that and it's because they're able to think in this perpetual cycle of how do we come up with the ideas and and be able to articulate and share them. By the way, I want to tell our audience as well, it's the anniversary of your book. And I'm delighted we got this episode out in time. So, an anniversary of the book.

So, buy the book. We're only going to cover part one today. So, we're going to leave you hanging for part two. So, you'll have to buy the book to find that. But you start you start chapter two with another cautionary tale. This is one that every innovator, many many people listen to the show will feel salt in the wounds or old wounds opened up with the story of a startup in Canada and poor old Muhammad. >> Oh yes, Mentorina. So I I still feel for Muhammad. So I I was sitting at my desk in Denver and and the phone rang and it was he was Muhammad Hayel say and he he was an amazing thinker and I loved his his passion, his vision, his desire to do things in a way that consistently brought forward new great and reliable ideas. And so they had started a learning management software platform that helps students learn. And the interesting thing about working with this group is that we were able to get to a place where the reason behind why they were doing the product weren't technical reasons. They were truly to improve the lives of students.

And I think that like that shift for a lot of organizations and how that definition of like why are we actually doing the work is a really important one that I don't think a lot of companies actually get to or take the time to investigate. So I give I give mentorina and the leadership a lot of credit for that. And so Muhammad and I put together this you it was a strategy we were both so excited about and and I always ask people when they come and want to start down this innovation journey like who inspires you? Is is it a brand? Is it a person? And it could be you know a a Taylor Swift and Anthony Bourdain or it could be you know a neighbor who's always coming up with quirky ideas and things like that. And Muhammad told me that the the company that inspired him was Disney because it didn't matter where you enter the brand, you always have an amazing experience. You know, whether that's a store, a theme park, a movie, you know, whatever it is, the consistency of that amazing experience.

And so with Disney as our north star, we started to say, if Disney created a learning management software platform, what would this look like? So, we put this strategy together and present it to the executive team and you you know it was I'm I'm normally very good at thinking all the whatifs through but we were so excited about the strategy and and as Muhammad finished presenting it I I watched everybody around the table like heads nodding yes this sounds amazing but there was one person I hadn't taken into consideration in the room and I call him the CF oh you know I think I I think anybody's who who has been in a meeting where something needs money, we have a finance person, but this was the the CFO who I called the CFO and and when Muhammad was done, the guy took his glasses off and put him on the table and pushed himself back and he he crossed his arms and he's like, "We're not doing this. We we are a serious company. We have a lot of PhD very smart people. We sell to schools and universities like they're very smart people. We're not doing something that came from a princess ride or a goofy dog or something like that. What I need you to do, Muhammad, is just go back and essentially do the things we've always done. Cold call, put ads in industry trade magazines. And I watch it as I sat there in the room like I watched the deflation of Muhammad. And I think this is something that almost everybody listening can relate to at one time or another. When you're so excited about an idea and somehow how it's packaged, how it's presented just doesn't work the way it way you hope and think it should. And I think that that really sent me down the path of understanding what happened in that room and how can we fix it so others don't experience the same outcome. and we'll get to solutions as well because your process actually helps there. There was some steps that Muhammad could have gone through as well and that will help other people with. But one of the things that happened there is what you we've heard of ADD, attention deficit disorder, but this is BDD. Exactly.

>> Which is brand attachment disorder. And we've all done it and actually you know I both read the book and listened to it. I got the audio book as well. So I listened to it and it was read by you. Well done. You did a great job >> and you talked about this. You did it yourself. So even though you speak at conferences all over the world, you run conferences all over the world, sometimes you're sitting in the audience yourself and you're kind of going, "Yeah, yeah, that's not relevant to me."

And we all do it. And I was listening to you talk about this. I was like going, "Oh my god, I do it too." >> Yeah, absolutely. And and it kind of ties in with it wouldn't have mattered what brand we used as inspiration for mentoring and presented that day because the CFO couldn't see the vision of what we were trying to do. And it brought me back to I was sitting at a conference in Las Vegas, a customer experience conference and my biggest client at the time was a mining conference. It was a mining company. They mined boron.

And I'm listening to the speaker from Zapos talk about their customer experience process and journey and all those things. And I'm like, ain't nobody in this boron mining company going to do any of this. And you know, I as we do, I pick up my phone, I start checking my socials, my email, my all the things. I look around and think, you know, who who who do I know in this session that I can go to happy hour with? And I was thinking about it a little later. And I know that wasn't the first time I'd ever done that. And to to be honest, sadly, it's not the last time I ever did it.

But I call it brand detachment disorder because it's this tendency that we have to dismiss how relevant another company's experience, approach, vision, whatever it is, how relevant it is to us because what we sell is different or unique. And I hear people say this all the time. That's not how we do things around here. Yeah, that that worked for them, but that would never work there. We don't have that kind of budget. We don't sell that kind of product. I mean, shoes versus, you know, mining materials. We're not that kind of company. We don't have that kind of culture. There's all sorts of excuses.

And that's what I put together and just defined as this brand detachment disorder. And the interesting thing is it applies like I hear it all of the time and it will be an organization that brings me in to talk about like you said innovation or creativity. Help us learn from other industries. Help us bring the outside in. And inevitably they will say you know that's not going to work here because and it's some sort of psychological protectionism. You know, we don't this might not be working the way we want it, but we're so white knuckled on holding on to the status quo way of doing things that we can't see that that's doing more damage than trying something new. That they don't see that the risk of staying the same is actually the high is higher than the risk of trying something new.

And if you're thinking of tuning out, don't tune out yet because we're going to talk later on about a brand transplant, which is actually the antidote in a way for this brand detachment disorder. But one of the things you made a great point about was complexity bias and how if you're being sold innovation or you've bought in innovation, you need the consultants need to make it seem complicated because a they have a framework that only they can do maybe perhaps but also if it's simple and the rest of the company turn around and go well why didn't you think of that dumbass it doesn't look good for you and you might be ejected out of the company. So I'd love you to share this concept.

>> Yeah, absolutely. And complexity bias is it applies to every every topic and and every everything we look at is that we think something is only valuable if it's complicated. And what we don't understand is that the hard part is to simplify it. And so if I like when I look at work that McKenzie or Deoid or BCG does lot lots of paperwork, lots of diagrams, lots of things and it's not something that the average employee could understand.

And I found a really interesting statistic when I was researching this book is that 90% of innovation happens outside of a traditional R&D or innovation team. So if we think about that, if we if we've made innovation so complicated that 90% of our organization isn't capable of performing the action, we have just wiped out the most powerful and productive part of our workforce to truly change things.

And so when you when you talked about that point about if people look at the answer and it's super simple. I mean it seems simple after the curtains have been pulled apart and it's revealed. But when you're standing right in front of the problem, that's part of the blindness that comes is is our own experience, our own history, our own way of thinking. And sometimes it's just that outside perspective that can say, "Oh, all you need to do is unplug this one and plug that one in." And like literally now it will work. It's hard for for a lot of people, a lot of executives, it's hard to give credit to something so simple.

But I look at the the organizations. I mean, Apple was all about how much can we simplify this like what's you know design is everything. Let's think different and let's make let's make this as easy and simple as we possibly can. I mean Netflix did that with video act, you know, with access to video and to movies and everything. Let's make it as you never even have to leave your couch now. You don't even have to push a button to watch the next episode. Like they've made it so simple. But sometimes simple is hard. And I think when when we look at companies who say, you know, we we this is a complicated process. This is a complex situation.

The assumption is that the answer also has to be complex and complicated which generally also means time consuming and expensive and convoluted. And I just in my experience it doesn't have to be that way nearly as much as people make it out to be. I always think that like you've done a good job if people kind of go, "Oh, that was that made a lot of sense to me, you know, and it's not like they're having these huge aha moments." It's more like kind of going, "We got this. We can do this." like job done when you're working in an organiz >> but I loved so chapter three you move on to an idea I absolutely love and we'll come back to it properly when we talk about the process which is the brand transplant I mentioned earlier on because it was right at the heart of what Kerry Smith did with his company that became a fan company with a name that people would not forget and the inspiration of the brand transplant came from a Delhi company in Ann Arbor I'd love you to share this >> absolutely so So Carrie Smith, he had started this company called the high volume low-speed fan company. So you can see forgettable that very forgettable.

Like I I I know the thing and I still had to stop and and think about what order it was. And when I interviewed him, he's such a delightful man. I interviewed him and he tells me this story about they were all sitting around a table in a big warehouse and the phone rings and it's whoever is closest to the phone answers the phone and they say, "Hi, this is the high volume low speed fan company. Can I help you?" And there's this, as you can imagine, big silence on the other end of the phone.

And the person finally says, "Are you the people who sell those big ass fans?" And they heard that enough. And Carrie's a smart guy and he has just an amazing sense of humor. He said, "Well, why don't we give the people what we want, what they want?" And so they renamed the company the Big S fan company. But as he was looking at the whole industry and how it serves customers, how it designs a product, how it looks at the customer life cycle, he said what he was seeing is is companies that were manufacturing and selling essentially a lower quality product and making money on repairs and and you know backend kind of things. And then he happened to be in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and he went to Zinger Zingermanman's Deli and he said like Zingermanman's is known for their incredible sandwiches. So here he is, you know, in line to get his sandwich and it's all these different cheeses and they're and they're local and the meats and and the little cards inside the the case that describe the meats are so detailed and and the bread and all of these things. And then he gets up to the counter and he said, "It's not just like a high school kid who's working there for the summer or a part-time job. It was actually an employee who cared whether it was a high school or not and who could get into the very detail of the texture of the bread and how it blends with the meats and cheeses and all these things." And he said he was presented a sandwich. It wasn't just like slung across the counter. And he said that that thing right there, that experience inspired him as to how he wanted to build big ass fans. He wanted to make the original product so amazing and so delightful and so trusted and quality that that was the thing that made people buy. And so he said essentially what he did is he took the the ideas and the perspective and the vision of Zingerman's Delhi and he transplanted those into big ass fans.

And that's that's what I call a brand transplant. And how you fix brand attachment disorder is is you look at what is it like what Carrie did is he looked at the the details and the quality of that experience at Zingerman's Deli. And obviously they didn't sell sandwiches, but he said there's so much of that that we can transplant into big ass fans that can help us be an incredible organization. And that's exactly what he did and a huge part of why they were so successful.

One of the things I really took out of that was when you said to do it right, to to do it the way he wanted to do it, like Zingermanman's will never be a Walmart. It will never be that big because to have that level of excellence and to keep that level of quality just like big ass fans can't compete with the Chinese, for example, you have to keep within a certain constraint of size here. And constraints an important thing we'll come back to later but I thought that was a really key point that cannot be overlooked.

>> Absolutely. And I think when you like when I look at big organizations and what innovation looks like inside of them, there's constraints that smaller organizations don't have. And a lot of it is the legacy way of thinking, the legacy pace of movement, the legacy of everything has to be systematized, put into a process. And almost if you think about big companies acquiring small ones, a lot of what made it beautiful and special and unique and and desirable as an acquisition get stripped away at scale. And I think that's what Corey or Carrie was so great at understanding and thinking about it and he now runs a an investment company and he understands like those are characteristics that he looks for in these companies that he invests in. One last thing on the brand transplant essentially, but you work with companies to innovate also with their marketing processes and ideas as well. I love this one which was you say for example you met the head of marketing for Red Bull and he's like oh my god I probably only had the budget of Coca-Cola like going what the heck this guy this guy is amazing brand that so we do this everywhere >> everybody does it. Yeah. And I remember my jaw just dropping and thinking if Red Bull is saying if only I had, you know, fill in the blank. It's it's just incredible where I think everybody's we all have these reasons and excuses that hold us right back from the edge of what we think is is possible. The ifonies.

Yeah. >> I I I you know, I really took that from the book that no matter what you're doing, like you can aim for excellence. It just depends if you want it. I mean I I don't mean that yeah sometimes things that aren't going your way sometimes you might have debt or whatever but I mean the imagination to aim big and then obviously it's going to be a a tough journey to get there but do have them and it's one of the reasons I love doing the show is just to bring concepts to people to go and just think a bit bigger just think outside the box or think get rid of the box alto together but the box is important which is the constraint but the last one was share I loved loved this was how the CDC used brand essentially brand transplant from a totally different concept to totally get out something really boring about how to deal with pandemics or how to deal with hurricanes etc to be able to market to the public.

>> Absolutely. and and I think this was one of my one one of my top favorite interviews to do because it was with Dave Dagel with the Center for Disease Control and the department he worked in is communications about preparing for natural disasters and then how to recover after them. So if you think of like right now as we were talking in Colorado, we have terrible wildfires right now. You think about hurricanes, you think about tornadoes, any any kind of a natural disa floods, any kind of a natural disaster like that. And as a communication person, I mean, my background is in marketing. One of the big challenges is just to get people to pay attention to the important things so it will change people's behavior. And that was a struggle that Dave and he has he had two people on his team that they were dealing with because every year and in the Midwest in America, it's, you know, usually late May through August, it's tornado season. And they're trying to help people understand like here's how you prepare for a tornado. You know, like water, you know, dried packaged food, you know, some some extra clothes, matches, candles, things like that. you know, put put them in a put them in a place that you can grab and go to the basement or, you know, at the times in some places in in the Midwest sellers, which are, you know, dirt food storage underground kind of thing. and people didn't care. They didn't, you know, there were so many other things to pay attention to as as summer was coming and kids were kids were out of school.

And it was one particular it was one year when the hurricanes or tornadoes had already been particularly bad in in Oklahoma and devastation and and the herur the tornadoes they wipe out you know legacy farms and towns and everything and it's devastating to have to try and rebuild. and he said, "We have to figure out a way to get people to pay attention earlier and sooner and deeper because that like this this affects people's lives and can help save lives." And they were kind of chitchatting before they started one of their meetings and one of the people on his team said like, "Did you watch the last episode of The Walking Dead?" And they were laughing because in that episode everybody runs into one of the CDC offices to get away from the zombies that were chasing him. and they were laughing about it and they said, "Oh, you know, maybe that's something that the CDC needs to help people deal deal with." And then it was like, "Ding, maybe that's the connection." And that that was their brand transplant is that they looked at something that was so popular right now at the or, you know, at the time, so popular in mainstream society, and they said, "How can we transplant what people get excited about, what they love?" I mean, people were doing like zombie 5K, zombie dances, zombie raves, you everything was a zombie. How do we transplant some of that zombie zombie energy and excitement into our work? And he had an idea about positioning disaster preparedness as in we're preparing for a zombie apocalypse.

And and he went into his boss and he said, his boss was Dr. Ali Khan at the time and he said, you know, I have this idea. are you okay with it? And Dr. Khan said, you know, I love it or or something to that effect. And so they published a blog that said apocalyp zombie apocalypse 101, like how to survive a zombie apocalypse. And they put it out on the CDC blog and Dave said, you know, we kind of covered our head and winced and nobody got fired and nobody got yelled at. So then two days later they promoted it on social media and within an hour they had over 60,000 hits and the server went down. Now, mind you, a great blog post before this was maybe two or three thousand hits. So, he absolutely knew they were on to something. And and what they had done is taking the same information that they had been sharing with people to prepare for this disaster, but now just packaged it literally like they're preparing for a zombie apocalypse. And they went on to put it into a like a comic book form and posters and all of these things. It was so popular and not only did it help outcomes and preparedness, but Dr. Ali Khan was invited to speak at ComicCon.

And you think of two things that you know, oh, oil and water kind of thing is the CDC's disaster preparedness and and Comic Con. It was just such an amazing story and a hit and and how they were able to connect and get results and outcomes because they were willing to think differently. >> Brilliant. Brilliant. We we've set it up beautifully for what used to be called the perpetual innovation process. Maybe we'll just say you've upgraded this, you've updated it, which is great to see as well because obviously things change, evolve, and you've evolved the process.

>> Exactly. In every part of creativity and innovation is iteration. And so I now call it the wheel of innovation. one, it's a little easier to say, but two, it it just is a great visual for once we get the process going, it builds on its own momentum. >> I like the perpetual innovation process, the pip the pip. >> But let's get stuck into it. And I wanted to start where you did, which is the objective statement and the idea that great ideas actually come from working within the box or working inside constraints, not despite them. And you give the brilliant example of Tim Washer at Cisco, the man who managed to turn the launch of a metal box full of wires, a router, the ASR 9000 into a Valentine's Day love story. So, let's walk our audience through that and then tie in the objective

statement and why do constraints matter? So, >> absolutely. and and Tim is a is a dear dear friend and he's at the time he was telling me about this project he's working on which is a a new router box that Cisco was launching and he goes you know Carla here here's the typical process like we have we have the technology specs we have the engineer we you know do a video and we do a press release and we do a launch and Tim's background is in standup comedy in you know comedy writing he was a writer for Amy Polar's weekend update on Saturday Night Live. He worked for Conan O'Brien and he's just a dry, funny, witty guy who ended up in corporate marketing at Cisco and he worked at IBM for a while as well. And he said, you know, I just I just feel like we have a better opportunity here. And what we talked about is is sometimes the reason that our creative ideas or our approach to innovation doesn't work is because we aren't actually clear on the outcomes that we're looking for. And that's was the the impetus for creating the objective statement, which is we need new ideas, too. And oftentimes that's very easy for a company you know to to specify you know to improve our customer experience scores to you know you know have a great product launch or whatever but the next part is so we can and I tell you every single person group I've ever worked with struggles for this definition and this is why outcomes generally never hit expectations is because there's no agreement and alignment on what is it that we're actually trying to accomplish here. And I think so many organizations, I mean, we see it now, we're running at such a fast pace and we just we throw technology at it, we throw AI at it, we we throw so many things at it, but we don't understand, have defined or agree on what is the actual outcome we're looking for.

And then we also say with these constraints. Now oftentimes the constraints are budget time. It could also be will Kevin in in branding allow us to present like that you know things like that. So everything we do has constraints and once Tim was able to define those clearly then it was very natural and made sense how to transplant comedy into this approach. And and as anyone, they study their profession. And Tim was at a comedy club in New York City and he was watching Ray Romano. And he said the way he talked about things brought people in in understanding. He was talking about, you know, in-laws and marriage and kids and things that people in the audience could understand. And the more he talked about it and made made people laugh, the more he watched the audience lean in and laugh. And he said it was a group of strangers who came together and a lot of it was based on just laughter and humor.

And he watched people's walls go down and their tension go down and their stress go down. And he said, you know, even though this is a box of metal and wires, it's a major purchase. He said, "How do we take that idea of humor and relieving the stress and pressure of of a buy or a sale? How do we put that together?" And so the the product was launching right around Valentine's Day. And he put together this video about, you know, for Valentine's Day, a lot of times we think it should be, you know, flowers or chocolates or carving your heart into a tree and and those kind of things, but now you can say, "I love you with the new Cisco ASR9000 router." And and he describes it in the way that you would a Valentine's Day gift. and and it was so humorous and they didn't put a big PR campaign behind it. They didn't put a lot of money behind it. They put it on YouTube. They sent it out to the salespeople. The salespeople laughed and then they would go into sales meetings and they would open meetings with this video and that laughter right there made their tension and their stress and and you know th those walls go down and all of a sudden conversations were happening that had never happened before. and he said it was it was you know a a lot of it due to humor and laughter and they were able to get two new customers who they had been trying for years to get in the door and it was a beautiful way for Cisco to show up as a very human company you know somebody that's relatable and that's how the media and the analyst responded to it and if he would have started out to say we need to make the funniest video ever about a product launch that would never have worked but he understood the details of that experience in that comedy club with Ray Romano and what humor did and that's what he transplanted into his idea for the video.

>> We're all set up now for the wheel. >> That's right. >> So, cuz when you when you The reason I I thought it was so important to share those stories and thank you for doing such a great job of sharing them is they exemplify what the wheel shows and one of the main things is observation. So observing Ray Romano and then kind of going, "Oh, hm, what if I transplant that onto what I'm doing as a marketer or observing The Walking Dead or the whatever the show is dead, the Waking Dead. I never watched it, but I I do like the odd zombie movie, but observing it and then kind of going, hm, I wonder if and it's that observation." And you talk about the importance of this observation down to the fact that we should have an observation journal. If if we're perpetual innovators, if we're always doing this innovation. So what I'm going to propose for audience is if you're listening, it's fine. We'll have empathy for you as a listener. But on YouTube, for those people joining us on YouTube, we're going to share the diagram, the wheel, and we're going to take you through the wheel, take you through the steps, so you have no excuses anymore.

Well, you still need to read part two of the book afterwards. So, over to you and let's take it away with observe. >> Yes, absolutely. So, the first step of the wheel of innovation is to observe the world around you. And I know I am guilty of having a little screen in front of me probably more than is not only healthy but productive many days. And we get into our habits and our rituals. We drive the same way to work.

And so when there's repetition, our brain just becomes efficient and it's like, "Oh, I don't need to pay attention to that or that or that." And so we don't observe little details. And I remember one time I rode bikes with my kids to school one day and I thought I turned on one street and it was another. And it was like I had never seen this world before. And it literally was a route I had run four days a week for 5 years. But because it was outside of my normal pattern, I observed it completely different. And this is so important for us because the process of observing is neutral and it's not full of judgment.

It's not looking at something and saying, "Is that right or wrong?" It's purely sitting and looking at a comedy club experience. You know, maybe you're at a mall or, you know, you're watching your favorite TV show. like what are the little details that make it something that's so interesting to you? Is it how the character looks? Is it the the litany of the dialogue? Is it the coloring? Is it the the lighting of the scene? Like what are all of those little details? And I encourage people to literally like I have a note I have a notepad right here, but I have notebooks I carry with me everywhere. And I'll write the date.

I'll write where I am. And I just start writing down, you know, what do I see? Colors, sounds, like, am I sitting on a park bench? How does that feel? Am I laying in the grass? Like all five of your senses. Really truly observe the world around you, which for some people can give them a physical discomfort because it requires us to slow down. And I think at the pace that we work right now, we think, I don't have time to do this. like I have to get to the real work, but this really is the foundation of the real work. And even if we're looking at what work are we creating, let's observe is it being used? Are people responding to it? And I'm not talking about like the data and analytics, but just like between you and I and the conversations that you and I've had, you know, I look at what do you nod your head at? What do you find interesting? there are it's it's such a fascinating skill that I think we've been trained and rewarded out of. But it is the foundation of every single highly creative, highly innovative person because highly creative and highly innovative people are also highly highly observant people and they see things that the rest of us miss that literally are right in front of us because they observe. I think there's an important thing behind that that it's not just that you turn observation from a passive thing into an active thing. It's actually you're disciplined about it.

You I mean you have a notebook and one of the things that always surprises me is people will go kind of go oh do you not run out of things to write about or thoughts. So I write a weekly article called the Thursday thought. But I'm having conversations like this all the time. I've read your book like I'm connect I'm connecting dots all the time and then comes the next step to distill the ideas >> and and under there lies discernment but distillation is connecting them and creating constellations but I find it just fascinating that you know you cannot write you cannot write or you cannot have thoughts if you don't collect the dots in the first place which is observation and then the distillation comes afterwards Because if you collect enough of the dots, they start to connect in and usually in weird ways like zombie movies or whatever it might be. And that's where the marination happens. And you told me, for example, your book marinated for 5 years before you you wrote it. And that's necessary, I think. But in there, those dots, the right ones bubble to the top and the right ones connect. And they connect in a unique way to you, which is a way to bring us to the next step, which is distillation.

>> It is. And you mentioned an important thing that I want to make sure to really emphasize is that the the process of observing truly is connecting the dots. And we'll get to the part where we connect the dots. And we hear that all the time like, oh, you know, creativity is great. All you have to do is connect the dots. But if you only have four dots to connect, you're not going to have very original ideas. And that's why people who consistently and intentionally put themselves into new and different experiences, conversations, what you know, what they choose to read or learn or listen to or watch. They're collecting all sorts of very different kind of dots. But we our brain does need to organize them and our brain naturally loves to find patterns. And so the second step is to distill those observations into patterns. And they can be totally random patterns. It could be like I remember sitting in Times Square in New York City going through and I had all of my observations and as you can imagine Time Square there's a lot of things to to observe and it was some of it was just things like tall buildings or tall things you know the the color red which is very prominent in New York City and as we get further into the into the process like just something as simple as that helps you understand what makes something else so successful. ful.

So during the ALS ice bucket challenge where people would either pour a bucket of ice water over their head or they'd write a check, it wasn't about doing something dramatic and different like an pouring a bucket of ice water over your head. It was about community. It was about something that was super simple to share. Like those were the patterns that came out of if you observed all the details of of that campaign. Now, it would be hard for a lot of people in many companies to get an executive to to say, "Yes, our campaign should be dumping the ice bucket of water over our head." But what what you can do instead is is to say, you know, this was my inspiration. Here's what I observed that worked about that. The pattern here is that we is that they gave somebody very something very simple to share.

Now, that right there is a pattern that an executive or a leader of a team or whatever is much more likely to say yes to. So, now we're taking something that's unique and different that we've observed and may seem like it has absolutely no relevance to our work or our company at all and we're starting to put context to it and why it might start to have something to do with the work that we're doing. So that's the second step is is to distill all of these random observations into patterns.

>> I kind of think of it also like you're you're whittling away. So it's it's it's like a funnel. So yes, it's a wheel, but it's getting thinner as you go around. So you're not going to have a random idea to to give to a a CFO. At least the idea has been somewhat somewhat filtered before it gets to them. But the next one then is the one we loved and this links to brand transplanting which is relate.

>> Relate. Absolutely. And I believe that this is the step that makes or breaks an idea when you go to share it because observe and distill are kind of outside in the world sort of things and relate is where we take the outside world and start to bring it inside our own walls, our own teams. And if you don't do it or you don't do it correctly, this is where you trigger that brand detachment disorder of people saying that we're not that kind of company. Like it the the idea feels too risky and threatening.

And so with relate, it's it's really that bridge from the outside to what we are trying to accomplish as a as a team or an organization. And so the relate is is starting to say, okay, if if the pattern is something that's easily is a is an idea that's easily shared, if it's about something that, you know, is big and bold and red and tall, like those are things that we can start to relate into our own world. Well, if we're wanting to make our product or conversation about our product something that's super easy to share, well, now that starts to give us structure and context for when we go to to generate ideas, which we'll get to, but it's it starts to bring inspiration in to the actual idea generation process that's fresh, that's different, but we've also started to minimize the feeling of this is a risky thing to try because we can connect the dots and show the journey from what is it that inspired us and truly literally how does this relate to what we're trying to do.

One of the things people miss with the work that we do, say working with organizations, running workshops, facilitation, etc. is the language we choose is very specific and that might be just an afterthought for some people. But there's a quote by Vickenstein I love the limits of my language mean the limits of my world. And in the book, I loved you cite the work of Min Bassador, th this lady who did decades of research showing the words we use can actually kill an idea before it's even born. I was delighted to see you you highlighted this and something that people often miss and if they're doing internal workshops or they're talking to a CFO, it's important what language they use.

>> Oh, absolutely. And and I'm happy you brought that up. So Min Bassador, he worked for PNG on the marketing team and he it was this >> sorry man this nuance of how we ask a question can shift the entire mindset around how we approach it. So if we say how could we be as creative as an apple? how could we be as creative as you know fill in the blank with any kind of organization our brain starts to answer that question and often times it will say well to be honest I don't know if we could I we don't have that kind of budget we don't sell that kind of product we don't you know our brain answers the questions that we ask it or we say how should we

fill in the blank your brain starts to go you know I don't know if we should that's a little risky It might might go over budget. It might be might affect my career that promotion. I don't know that we should. And so what he understood is that asking the question in the context of how might we there's no place for your brain to go to put on the brakes and it's the the the meaning of the word might. It's almost like let's pretend. There's no nobody says this is going to be a real thing.

there's no consequences tied to it. So, your brain naturally goes, "Oh, well, how might that happen? Well, we could." And then it it starts to go to work and it starts to connect the dots like, you know, how how could we be more sharable? How could we build a bigger community? You know, how could we be, you know, how could we be as interesting and dynamic and create a hunger for our content like The Walking Dead? How might we? And again, your your brain is going, there's no risk here. Like there's no there's nothing on the line. And that's when it really starts to open up.

>> It's so important that language, I think, when you're selling ideas in a corporate in particular where it's all about de-risking. >> Yeah. >> And that language. And sorry, Min, you you subtly told me, hey, M's a men's a dude. >> I feel I owe that to him and his work. >> Yes. I'll have to check his work out. But in the relate step, we looked at how might we, which is important language that Min talked about. But in the generate step, which is next, we ask what if we tried this? So we start to get closer and closer to that pitch that we're so much after.

>> Exactly. And and it's to your point like it it does feel like a funnel. And there was another piece of research that I found interesting in that we don't get to truly creative ideas until we've gone through the first 200 ideas. And if you look like we've spent how much time already talking about the first three steps of this process, but typically what happens when we need a new strategy or an idea, we say like let's all get in the conference room, let's have our off-site, let's get our ideas together.

And there's no such thing as a bad idea. Everybody throw out your ideas and we know what happens. There's a whole lot of really bad ideas. And the person who talks the loudest or talks the most or is the highest ranking person, their ideas always move forward. And everybody else is going, "Well, why did we even bother?" And I'm so far behind in my work and my email and and no wonder people have this aversion to creativity sessions or innovation planning or anything like this because we don't give it time to get to that great work. And the reason the research says 200 ideas is because your brain will start out and dump the most likely, the most familiar, the most safe, the most riskaverse. Like it it it's it's a little bit like AI.

What's the most likely answer that you will say yes to? And we don't get to that new fresh ground until we essentially get that out. We have to get that out, push it aside, and then we continue to push and almost go into the the ridiculous, the audacious, the, you know, things that are so crazy they could never work, but you know what? They're so ridiculous they just might. And that's when we get, you know, it's so ridiculous that the head of the CDC's disaster preparedness could ever be invited to ComicCon, but look at that outcome. Now, they they didn't set that out as their objective, but it was an outcome because they kept pushing and saying, "What if we tried this? How about if we did this? What if we remix this?" And it can be two crazy and ridiculous ideas that come together and make a really amazing realistic idea. Or maybe you've gone through this process a couple of years ago and somebody goes, "Oh, you remember when we thought about that one thing that wouldn't work then because of whatever? This would be perfect right now." And that's when you see the whole energy in the room and what the whole group of people begin to shift. The whole reason behind why we do I generate idea generation is not to get the one right idea. It's to generate as many ideas as possible because in order to get to great ideas, we have to start with a lot of ideas.

>> I love it. And the next one I I'm guilty of this. So I worked as head of innovation, head of digital in roles in the past and sometimes you think that your past success is enough to carry the idea through the organization once again and you don't put as much work into that and even work to understand the incentives of the CFO or the senior executive team because really they're almost like a VC buying your idea and to try and bring it to life. So we underestimate the pitch and your big reframe in the book is that the pitch isn't a sales ask. It's more like an idea journey. And if you do bring it the the team on that idea journey with you, it has a way better chance of survival. But the one thing I want to emphasize is the amount of work we did to get here. And often that's skipped or we might jump straight to the pitch or we think that the idea is you know for we have loads of ideas and we think let's try and let a flous thousand flowers bloom blah blah blah and I think that that's the piece that we miss in innovation so much is that it is a discipline >> and it it's counterintuitive for somebody who feels creative and innovative that they have to go through all this feels like red red tape. It feels like bureaucracy, but it's so so important, which is why I love that your process, but let's share pitch because it's so important all the work we did to get to this point and this is the point where we make or break.

>> Absolutely. And I and I always say bad pitches kill great ideas. And a pitch isn't just like, hey, let me get your buy in. A pitch is truly telling the story of the journey of your idea. And I'm I'm a big fan of Shark Tank and I know there's a lot of different versions of that in a lot of different countries, but I was watching it and I mean it's one of those shows that seems to be on all the time on some channel. There's you can catch Shark Tank. And I was watching it and and a contestant was giving their pitch and Barbara Corkran, she's my favorite. She's like, "No, no, no, no. Like, stop right there. Your pitch is so bad that I don't even care what your idea is. I'm out." You know, and I think that's so true. We don't understand. I mean, a a lot of pitches start with data, justification, all those things.

Yawn. There's no emotional attachment or engagement. And if there's no if there's no emotion, there's no attachment. There's no engagement in the idea. We really do have to go back. And this is a beautiful part about the wheel of innovation is that by the time you get to the pitch step, you've already put the pitch together because it literally is just going back to the beginning and saying, you know, here here's something I observed in the world and you know, I observed this problem that we're having in in the company which is secret.

That's your objective statement, you know, and I observed these things and I realized it's there's a pattern behind it and here's the pattern. tall things, community things, and I started to see how those related to what we're trying to accomplish inside our organization or team. And that generated some ideas for me. You never want to go with just one idea. You know, there's lots of different options. You have over 200 now. And it's a discussion point. And that crazy radical or whatever thing that you observed at the beginning now has flowed very realistically and most of all it has context as you've brought people through the journey of your idea to why you're standing in front of them right there and pitching and sharing that idea. The last thing I'd love to share which is so so important is the importance of feedback both as a recipient of the feedback if you've pitched the idea but also if if for example and often heads of innovation will find themselves in this position where they're the judge and giving feedback to other people inside the organization. So you're not actually damning them so they because they won't come back with more because maybe it'll hurt their feelings or damage their ego in some way. I'd love you to share because this is a so often overlooked part of the process that's so so important from the other side of the table.

>> Yeah. Well, you know, I talk to a lot of executives and I'll hear them say, "My teams just don't come to me with ideas." And I'm thinking, okay, you know, there could be a lot of reasons, you know, they don't feel safe. They don't what whatever whatever it is, you know, or maybe, you know, they used to, but they just don't anymore. And I don't know what happened. And then I'll talk to the team and they'll say, "Why waste my time? They say no to every single thing that I do or they give me so much homework, so much more to just do with this simple little idea that I don't have time to do that in my job. So why bother? So why bother? And I believe that problem that dynamic is because we don't understand how and in what ways we should give feedback. So, I think anytime somebody steps forward and shares an idea, it doesn't matter how bad it is. I'm going to be honest, we need to recognize their courage and bravery for being willing to step forward. Now, I personally have a very strong opinion about how to fix that bad idea. And it's a process called the wheel of innovation that gives them structure for how to come up with an idea that has a true business objective, how to put it into the context of the business problem you're trying to solve and and how to structure it and share that idea. So there's so there's that part, but I think just acknowledging that it takes a lot to put behind you.

They they're thinking of the business. They're thinking of ways to improve. That's something that should be encouraged and supported and and openly celebrated and and recognized. Now, move moving on, assuming it is a wellthoughtout, structured kind of idea that they're sharing, start to go into, you know, here's what I like about it. You know, there's always something good in the idea. So, let's let's get down to the details of what are the good things. And I think this is always really helpful to do in a in a team setting where other people can learn from that feedback and understand with a real life example what does a good idea look like and see the very detail. You know, I I like how you, you know, maybe thought through how it specifically connected to this one problem we're having with customer retention or something like that and then and then the details. Now, rarely ever is an idea presented and it's just ready to go. So, there's going to be there's going it needs to be iterated. It needs to be, you know, adjusted to whatever degree, but it's important that how that feedback is presented doesn't feel like criticism.

Again, what we're looking at is how do we improve this idea, not how do we make this person sharing it feel judged. And that's where when there are opportunities instead of to to make it better instead of it feeling like criticism and judgment we say what I wish this idea had what I wish we could understand more about is and look at it like this. And so what happens is in this kind of exchange, the leader can be very specific and communicate what is it that they like about an idea. Like how does their vision come into play with what's been presented? And also here's what I'm looking for that I'm not getting in this idea that would not only help me understand it better, but maybe make it a better idea for whatever problem we're trying to solve. So that helps the leader communicate better and clearer which helps everybody on the team. Now it also helps the person presenting the idea because it's not unusual for them to present an idea and their executive or their team leader says, you know, it's it's not quite right. It's not quite there. Go back and flush it out a little more. That means not there's no direction. There's no feedback. Like what does flush it out a little more mean?

And so they have a clear direction of, okay, I I did this right. I I need some more of this. This I need to dig into. Maybe this I need to leave behind altogether. And it helps both sides be more clear and have that alignment back to that alignment about what is it that we're trying to accomplish here. >> Fantastic. We've come full circle literally around the wheel and we've got to the end of the wheel. As I said, there's way more in the book. There's a way to understand yourself. what type of character you are in the innovation journey as well. But for people who want to find you, I know you do keynotes. You help organizations all over the world.

Where is the best place to find you, Carl? >> The best place is my website. It's my name, Carla Johnson.co. It's not.com. It'sco. I say for the great state of Colorado because I live in Colorado. And there you can take the innovation archetype assessment that you just mentioned. You can sign up for my newsletter that's every other week that teaches people detailed ways to build their own innovation skills, their mindset around it, how they can look at leading their teams, and truly building that culture of original thinkers.

>> It's been an absolute pleasure joining you. I look forward to seeing more. I know you've out there as well and looking forward to sign up to your newsletter as well. Author of Rethink Innovation, Carla Johnson. Thank you for joining. >> Thank you so much for having me. It's been a great conversation.