

redsky STRATEGY

Making the Box Bigger: Why Innovation Starts With Divergence

Ask a room of executives how many uses they can think of for a brick. Most offer two or three and then stop: build a wall, prop a door, break a window. Ask a five-year-old the same question and the list runs long enough to get boring; a boat for a doll, a hammer, a paperweight, a pet. Somewhere between those two answers sits the entire problem of corporate innovation. Divergent thinking is the practice of generating many answers to one problem, and it is where nearly every real innovation starts.

1. We Learn to Filter Before We Learn to Imagine

Divergent thinking is also a habit that we quickly unlearn in most formal education settings. From the earliest grades, we learn that there is one right answer, that finding it quickly earns praise, and that the other possibilities are noise to be filtered. We become expert filters. What settles in over a career is what psychologists call functional fixedness: approach the same problem from the same angle for long enough and it will keep yielding the same tired answer. Maslow made the point with a hammer and a nail. This is where conventional innovation processes fail. They tell people to think outside the box, then seat them in a conference room with the same data they had last quarter. But nobody can think beyond their own experience. That is why, at RedSky, we systematically include divergent thinking into our innovation process.



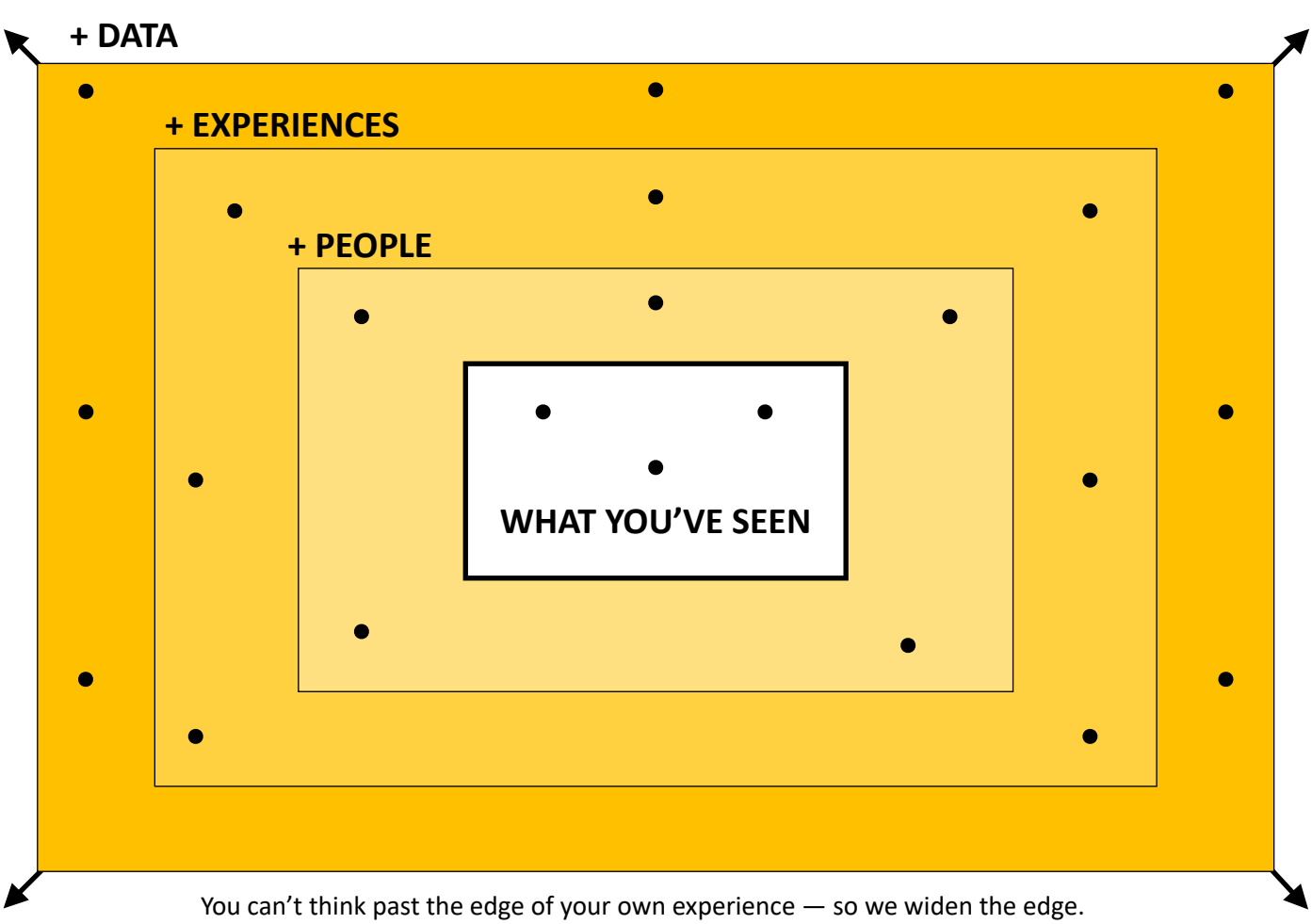
2. Build the Discovery Journey Before the Idea

Before we ask a team for a single idea, we build them a discovery journey: a designed sequence of encounters meant to widen what they have to think with. Typically, we include three different types of stimuli: people, experiences, and new data sources.

- **People** usually means interviews, and deliberately not only with the target; we talk to heavy users and lapsed ones, to customers acquired last month, to internal and external experts, and to people whose relationship with the category is extreme or downright odd. And different types of interviews, they could be ethnographies, speed dating, etc. On an energy project in the food category, we interviewed extreme-sports athletes, night-shift workers, and research academics: everyone whose day depends on solving energy, whether or not they had ever bought our client's product.

- **Experiences** means getting out of the building. Walk in the customer's shoes. Understand what it feels like to be them. Spend a day where the target spends theirs. Shop the category, then shop an adjacent one. Try the competitor's product. Working in the sleep category? Ask team members to go a night without adequate sleep. Trying to create ideas for meal planning? Try cooking a family meal every day for seven days in a row. We ask teams to keep journals throughout, because the object isn't just to collect findings; it's to catch what surprised them while it's still fresh.

- **Data** includes prior research, tracking, online customer reviews, trends borrowed from other categories, etc. The output is an experience map, and the team walks into the workshop already changed by it.



You can't think past the edge of your own experience — so we widen the edge.

3. AI Needs Deliberate Design to Diverge

AI, meanwhile, is the most convergent thinker you will ever work with. A language model is trained to predict the most probable next word, so its natural output is the consensus answer, beautifully expressed. Ask one for new product ideas and it returns the category's stale wisdom in polished prose. Pulling divergence out of it takes deliberate design.

Divergent inputs come first, exactly as with people: feed the model the extreme-user transcripts, the adjacent-category scan, the trend material, not the category's own marketing copy. Then stop asking one model one question. At RedSky, we run many agents in parallel, each assigned a substantively different lens, and we keep them from seeing one another's work until they finish, because agents that read each other converge every bit as fast as people in a meeting.

We name the obvious answers up front and rule them out, which forces the search further from the center. We insist on volume before any evaluation, since a model permitted to critique while it generates will quietly talk itself back toward the middle. And we keep generation and screening in separate rooms, tuned for variance in the one and precision in the other, because the settings that make a model inventive are the same ones that make it unreliable.

Breadth is the machine's contribution; judgment stays ours. And breadth is a considerable gift: a model has read across more categories than any person alive, which makes it a superb analogy engine the moment you stop letting it reach for the average.



4. Don't Think Outside the Box. Make It Bigger.

Which brings us to the phrase everyone repeats and no one can act on: think outside the box. It assumes the box is a cage you could simply step out of, if only you were more creative. It isn't. The box is nothing more than the sum of what you have seen, and no amount of trying harder will get you past the edge of your own experience. So we never ask anyone to leave the box. We make it bigger. Every unfamiliar person a team interviews, every store they walk that isn't theirs, every dataset from a category nobody thought to check, each one pushes a wall outward. Do enough of it and the ideas that were unreachable last month are simply inside the box now, sitting in plain view, obvious in hindsight. That is why RedSky builds divergent thinking into every innovation project we take on; we make the unexpected, expected.

Red Sky. Illuminating the pathway to growth.

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