



# Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H04YT9  
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG  
MAY 23, 2019

## **ARTICLE** **CREATIVITY**

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Better Ideas, Practice  
Paying Attention

*by Bill Taylor*

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# To Come Up with Better Ideas, Practice Paying Attention

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We live in a world where virtually every business is an “ideas” business. Executives and entrepreneurs are desperate for insights that allow them to amaze customers, reimagine products, and otherwise separate themselves from the crowd. But it’s hard to see new things if you don’t know how to pay attention, how to cut through the endless meetings, messages, and emails, how to really listen to and begin to decode what’s happening in the world that truly matters to your organization.

Rob Walker, a veteran columnist and design teacher with an eye for the creative side of life, has just published a delightfully instructive book called *The Art of Noticing*, meant to help people see the world differently. The most creative among us, he says, “notice what everybody else overlooks,” which is why he challenges his students to “practice paying attention.” He wants them to reflect on “what they notice, what they miss, why it matters, and how to become better, deeper, and more original observers of the world.”

Walker’s book offers exercises and practices to help aspiring artists, designers, and filmmakers do just that. But creativity is too important to be left just to “creative types.” As I read the book, I reflected on some of the most innovative business leaders I’ve met and practices they’ve developed to notice what others have overlooked. Here are four unconventional ways to get better at the art of noticing:

**Organize a business field trip.** Several years back, I spent a day with [hedge-fund manager Tom Brown](#) and his colleagues at Second Curve Capital. Brown makes big bets on banks and financial services companies, so he spends lots of time grilling CEOs and CFOs. But, once a year, Brown shifts his line of sight from the executive suite to the streets. Every person in the firm, from the receptionist to top portfolio specialists, gets five crisp hundred-dollar bills and is assigned to a team for what he calls a Branch Hunt, a kind of mystery-shopping experience with the fun spirit of a scavenger hunt. That team walks a designated avenue in New York City, visits every bank they encounter, and uses the money to open checking accounts and otherwise do business, searching for inspiring acts of great service or head-scratching episodes of bureaucracy or indifference. One member of each team takes photos. After a long day pounding the pavement, all the teams reconvene for a high-energy debriefing session complete with slide shows. What different teams found was impressive, disappointing, and absurd. Watching them present, I realized that when you ask lots of smart people to train their collective eyes on a part of the financial marketplace, they notice things that others miss.

**Swap jobs with a counterpart from a different company.** I’m a big fan of Maxine Clark, the retailing entrepreneur who created Build-a-Bear Workshop. Clark was always eager for new insights about the retail experience, and she admired what her fellow founder Kip Tindell was doing at the Container Store. The two companies were both young, high-profile retail brands, albeit in very different fields. So [Clark and Tindell did a switcheroo](#): each worked as a front-line associate in the other’s company. They noticed all kinds of ideas and practices about merchandising, employee motivation, and in-store communication that worked in one place, and just might do the same in the other. The lesson: Sometimes the most creative ideas in your field are ideas that are already working elsewhere. The challenge, of course, is to notice them.

**If you can’t swap jobs, change hats.** Not everyone has the flexibility or authority to literally swap jobs with a counterpart from another field. But you can do the next best thing. The creative types at TBWA, the [disruption-oriented ad agency](#), use what they call the “CEO Hat” exercise to help clients tackle problems. Executives search for out-of-the-box answers to important strategic questions by

reaching into boxes filled with hats, shirts, and other swag from iconic brands such as Apple, Virgin, or Southwest Airlines — and then adopt the mindset of those companies as they analyze their own. As one TBWA leader explained to me, “The sheer act of being free to think like somebody else gives you permission to generate ideas that you might not get to otherwise.” One way to pay closer attention is to look at the world through the eyes of someone else.

**To change what you see, change how (and to whom) you listen.** As Rob Walker notes, paying attention is as much about voice as it is about vision — who you listen to shapes how you make sense of the world. That’s why “[reverse mentoring](#)” is such a valuable practice. At PwC, the consulting giant, more than 120 millennial employees formally mentor some 200 partners and directors. By spending time with colleagues several decades their junior, senior leaders get a very different perspective on technology, culture, and work — and hear and see things they never would have noticed on their own.

The job of leadership today is to see things that others don’t see. But what you see is shaped by how and where you look and listen. If you practice paying attention, you may be surprised by the insights you unearth and the creativity you unleash.

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