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## **Meet the MasterMinds: Words from the Wizards of Aha's! A Conversation with Jordan Ayan**



Jordan Ayan, dubbed the "Wizard of Aha's" by Roger von Oech, is not only the founder of Create-It! Inc., a Chicago-based consulting firm, but he's also an entrepreneur, speaker and author of the book "Aha! 10 Ways to Free Your Creative Spirit and Find Your Great Ideas," which is a here's-how guide that every consultant can use.

Ayan sat down with MCNews and shared his view that, in our increasingly complex industry, "...creativity will become one of the most important personal and business strategies for survival and success."

**MCNews:** Are there common myths about creativity?

**J. Ayan:** There are a lot of myths, but one of the most common is that only certain people are creative, while others are not creative, but are better at execution and the operational end of things. Nothing is further from the truth: everyone has far more creative capability than they realize.

People often think of creativity as artistic and not business-oriented...the soft side of an organization. I believe that's another myth, because creativity is the area from which the most profitable growth in any organization will come.

**MCNews:** Management Consultants are often asked to be creative on demand. How do you tap your creative side when you have a deadline, and what are the most common barriers to creativity under pressure?

**J. Ayan:** My creative side is often more active under deadline pressure than when I've got plenty of time. It's certainly nice to have lots of free time for thinking, but then you're not necessarily focused on achieving something specific. Having a deadline gives me an artificial barrier within which I've got to do my thinking. I have to step back, and say, Ok, I've only got X number of hours, days or weeks to complete this work, so how am I going to think about it differently so I can create the result the client needs within the deadline?

A common barrier to creativity, especially in consulting, is that we tend to rely on what's worked before. While it's easy to rely on a similar solution to one used before, you're not necessarily looking at that problem with a new set of eyes, but just going back to something that's worked before.

Experience is very valuable, but what is even more valuable is allowing that experience to help you think creatively. You can be creative only if you've had the experience and exposure to different frameworks within which you can solve a problem. You can build on experience, which is a great benefit when you have a deadline. But, there's an even greater benefit to be realized if you can take that experience and explore how you might expand, change or contract it to take a new direction.

**MCNews:** Is it possible that some people's experience...the fact that they've seen it all before...can make them lazy?

**J. Ayan:** I think very much so. For a time, I accepted some projects to review proposals from major consulting companies...to look at them and ask...how realistic is this? When I looked at proposals for two different clients, they were almost identical in structure and design. So, I think it's very easy to take what's worked and put a different spin on it...or sometimes not even to spin it...and take it in to another client.

Every problem, even though it looks the same, is different. If you really want to be successful in consulting, you can't just take what you've learned and put a new spin on it; you must dig into the depths of your knowledge and form it in a new way.

**MCNews:** How do clients these days evaluate the ideas contributed by consultants?

**J. Ayan:** Today, clients are looking for more than unique solutions and ideas; increasingly, they are searching for solutions that add tangible value to the organization...ideas that work as well in reality as they do on paper. I've said for many years that an idea without action is just a thought. So, it's imperative these days to help people execute ideas, as opposed to just providing ideas.

**MCNews:** You developed the concept of the "Idea Journal." What is it, and how can a consultant use one?

**J. Ayan:** There are different methods, but it is critical to have some process for recording your ideas. Linus Pauling, one of the great scientists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, found that if you don't capture an idea within 10 minutes of the point it pops into your head, your odds of losing that idea skyrocket. The greatest thinkers, inventors and creators in history regularly captured their thoughts in some form of journal.

You need to come up with a system that works for you...recording on a Dictaphone, entering in a database program, or physically writing ideas down in a book. But, that's really only the first step. A lot of people are good at capturing their ideas, but then they don't go back to comb through those ideas, tweak them in different ways, take some action on an idea, or apply it to a project. Sometimes when you are stuck on a problem, just thumbing through your Idea Journal can provide a breakthrough.

**MCNews:** If you're looking at a very tough problem, and can't see the answer clearly, what's your best technique for unlocking your brain?

**J. Ayan:** I take a shower...I have my best ideas in the shower. Matter of fact, I had a second water heater installed in my house so I could take longer showers. In the shower, I use a waterproof writing device...like scuba divers use...to capture my ideas, and then make a copy later in the office.

Brainstorming with others is a standard, but very effective technique I use a lot, including bringing in outside people with a totally different perspective.

**MCNews:** What's on your reading list right now?

**J. Ayan:** Four books come to mind: “The Age of Spiritual Machines,” by Ray Kurzweil, an outstanding book about where we’re going next with computers, and what happens when they exceed human intelligence; “Free Agent Nation,” by Daniel Pink, talks about independent workers and how they are changing the way we live; “Thriving in 24/7,” by Sally Helgesen, offers strategies for finding equilibrium in the new world of work; and, “Survival is Not Enough,” by Seth Godin, borrows from evolutionary biology to develop great new ideas for business survival.

**MCNews:** Can you tell us a little about your most recent venture?

**J. Ayan:** I’ve launched a new business to help clients with the heavy lifting of email marketing. Our service allows any client to develop and send eye-catching, content rich email newsletters with ease. Check it out at [www.pointclicksend.com](http://www.pointclicksend.com).

**MCNews:** Thanks for your insightful comments.