Alan Iny

How to challenge your assumptions and think in new boxes

Speakers:

Nick Skillicorn – Innovation and Creativity Expert and Host of Innovation & Creativity Summit

Alan Iny

Expert Interview transcript:

Hello everyone and welcome to another expert interview at the innovation and creativity summit 2017. I'm very happy to have Alan Iny with me today. Alan is the co-author of Thinking In New Boxes and the Global Creativity Head for Boston Consulting Group one of the world's largest Consulting Groups. Alan it's wonderful having you here.

Thanks very much Nick looking forward to our chat

No problem. So for people who aren't really aware of who you are why don't you give us a brief background as to how you got into consulting and then how you became the creativity expert within Boston Consulting Group.

So I i joined BCG in 2003 for "a year or two" after business school and now suddenly it's been 14 years because I've really enjoyed the culture and the people here. I started out on the more traditional path at BCG, but over time i've morphed into become the creativity guru which in some ways means that instead of working on one or two or three projects at a time I have this amazing luxury of a global role across industries working with clients on all sorts of problems related to creativity, looking at things differently, looking at themselves differently, looking at the future differently. So a lot of really fantastic sorts of topics.

And for people who aren't aware of how consulting works, I'm quite similar to you i joined Deloitte's in 2005, so not too far away from you did when you did. But quite often you get one project that last you for, well in my case anywhere between nine months and 18 months or my longest one was two-and-a-half years. Is Boston Consulting Group a similar setup?

They might tend to be a little bit shorter we tend to focus on strategy consulting for

the top-tier you know fortune 500 companies or equivalent in different countries and so if the person right out of business school the junior folks at PCG spend a few months in a row on a proud

victim then move on to the next one you know that's certainly one viable business model these days there's a lot of other interesting things or you might bring in the digital experts or the creativity expert or someone else as

needed for different projects which is you know to have morphed into this role over time as I say is is really something quite fun to be able to help from project to project on a very regular basis so you work across the

entire business with multiple projects is that right yeah essentially at any given time juggling a number of things in a year for example I might work on a hundred and fifty different projects which by necessity means the majority of

those are only 3-4 hours of my time giving advice on how to bring creativity to a particular challenge that a client is facing and then a smaller number maybe 40 or 50 might be two three four five days of my time and then really a

handful over the course of the year might be deeper engagement which might take twenty thirty percent of my time for 23 months and even then I don't anymore have these kinds of things that are full-time for me it's really

constantly juggling a big range of things so the big question is what is creativity in consulting house like Hills well to me creativity is a change in a mental model creativity is looking at something differently and this is

really a fundamental difference between what i would call you a creativity and innovation because innovation to me is about changing reality and really making things happen whether it's a new product or just changing your opening hours or

whatever the case may be but some sort of change in reality is to me innovation whereas creativity is what starts with spark light up going off whatever you want to call it a change in mental model change in perception and iíve spent far

too many days for me to remember doing strategy consulting work using tools like I don't know the five forces analysis fishbone root cause analysis all of these things those the sorts of tools you use when you're talking about

creativity in consulting context as well or is it fundamentally something different there's no doubt that BCG will use those 47 esses and 5 p's and all the rest when needed on a given project of course but

I think for me when it comes to creativity you know as I say I like to start with people's mental models for me because we are human as are all of my colleagues and all of my clients so far and because we're human we all think

using these mental models and so if we say I work at a web company i work at a consulting for my work at a pen company whatever the case may be this is a mental model my customers are these my customers are those my

competition is this this is how we think about this process this is the way it's always been done all of these things are mental models their assumptions that we hold and usually we can go for a certain amount of time without challenging these

assumptions because it's fine you have to use these in order to function as a human being however sometimes we do need to change them especially in this world that is changing more quickly than ever i mean

the the fundamental proof of that is if we acknowledge that the world is constantly changing whether it's simply because there's more uncertainty and volatility or or practice of you can swim in the same river twice and you

know whatever reason you want if you accept the world is constantly changing and our mental models or boxes are fixed at least for a time then by definition every single box or mental model that we use is at some point going to become out

of date or another way of putting it is no good idea will last forever whether it's you know the iphone or coca-cola secret formula our penicillin or whatever they want and so the trick for us and the trick for my clients is to

find what's next at the right moment that's really what it boils down to and so to be willing to challenge one's mental models and assumptions at the right moment is really what it is to be a leader have this challenging of mental

models is this the crux of what you talked about in your book yes it is my book so it's called thinking in new boxes and the crux of it as you say is to acknowledge that this this this thing that we've been exported

to do for 5060 years already since the bono of thinking outside the box it's a catchy phrase that everyone uses but to me it's not sufficient because if we accept that indeed we all use mental models are

boxes for various things and that sometimes they will become out of date then to say think outside the box is basically saying your existing ways of thinking are no good but it's not giving you any useful direction it's like

saying I'm don't drive on the highway but it's not telling you if you should take the side roads or a helicopter or use a webinar instead and so to actually the title of my book then thinking in new boxes is basically to say yes we

need to think outside the box we need to find useful new boxes for whatever the challenge is that we're facing is this something that you find comes easily to people if you essentially say what what's gotten you here so far isn't

necessarily going to continue working for you in the future quite often what I find what I'm doing client work is they they might not and realize that yeah thatthat's good in theory but when you actually press them

to start doing it they they freeze up a little and they they find that quite challenging is that something you find as well yes you're entirely correct think i agree with you one hundred percent

because again we're human beings and we don't like it when we're forced to change our assumptions and that goes by the way even for the most creative people the most senior people that great leaders and even a hundred and five

I don't know hundred years ago when when Henry Ford was tinkering and making an assembly line he was a great innovator a great creative by the first car for the masses Model T and then when they big millions of units and so on look the

world started changing and General Motors started making higher and lower end all the rest cars and he famously fired people for coming into his office and saying we need to try things like that and he said look at my customers

can have any color car they want as long as it's black the the famous quote there and so you know even him even Steve Ballmer seven or eight years ago saying the iphone is nobody's gonna nobody's gonna be interested in the iphone

basically there's no chance that the iphone will replace what's out there you know it's we are all no matter how good leaders with CEOs strong creative innovative people we are human beings first and we

don't like it when we're forced outside of our existing boxes and so all the more reason why we sometimes need a prod why we sometimes need some thought exercises some ways to help us do that sort of thing which is a perfect segue I

hope into the question of how do we actually do that so I'm sure in the book you go through some techniques and exercises that people can can use to think in these new ways but why don't you tell us first hand what do you find

actually helps people break down the the berries that they have to think in these new ways and what sort of techniques actually help them get from whatever challenge they have now to the new way of thinking that they are hoping for a

fantastic yes let's let's go through an example then I mean because you know there are times when people say look we need a day-long a half-day a two-hour ideation session and of course there's a time and a place for those i run those

all the time but fundamentally if we start with first of all rather than simply bringing smart people together in a room with some snacks and posted and saying all right off we go to think outside the box let's go to actually

take the time first to lay out a clear question and to identify some of our existing boxes first that's what people skip when they jump right into this so you an example first let's lay out the question we're

trying to answer there are times when this question might be we need to growth ideas we need to product/service etc is there are times when it could be we need to cut costs there are times when it could be we need to redesign this

process or whatever the case may be but I'm you know to fundamentally understand the question of course we want to be more profitable but does that mean that we're tackling the costs doesn't mean we're looking at growth in revenues does

it mean that we want to just be slimmer or be out there too we want to be innovative in terms of incremental things which have their time in place you can think relatively incrementally the iphone 2 3 4 5 6 which made a lot of

money but we're not as transformational as the iphone one which also made a lot of money so there's a time and a place for both but more than that I mean let's let's rewind than 50 years i give you an

example when the you know today we all know what a low-cost airline is of course whether it's southwest in the US or ryanair and easyjet Europe or jetstar in Australia anything all around the world into go whatever you want i'm

sixty years ago before Southwest which was first pioneered this new business model you know how would you actually go about starting at how would you then think about this thing well my oversimplified claim is that you have to

start by understand the existing boxes of everyone in the industry so if everyone would have said hey we need many different types of planes their fundamental to know we're going to have one type of plane and that's going to

save on maintenance and all the rest if everyone said we use travel agents of course we're not going to use travel agents we have assigned seats we're gonna have open seas we have all inclusive pricing we're gonna have

unbundled pricing and charge extra for things we fly to primary convenient airports we can apply the secondary out-of-the-way airports we have a hub-and-spoke system now we're going to 5.2 point to different places we

consider safety our number one top priority well we can keep that one right and so it becomes a question of taking a bit of an inventory of our existing assumptions and mental models that are relevant to

our problem and then thinking which of those are really set in stone like the safety one because again the travel agent one was just a set in stone for many people and which of them might be ready for a change

so one sort of 5-10 minutes thought exercise that I often do with clients is literally to just tell that story and think of all the mental models that shifted from this to that from sciences the open seas and now think about your

problem think about your challenge whether it's empowering women in Saudi Arabia or cutting costs at an industrial pipe company or whatever the case may be what are some of the assumptions that we

have relative to this problem and how might they change in a fundamental from two-way and just opening the door to some of those you might not get the answer in 5-10 minutes but to at least the door to some of these new sparks

that come out with that analogy to the low-cost airline can be very helpful it's something i see so often once you just frame things in a different way and I like this idea of thinking specifically about the criteria that

make up a business model and because quite often when I'm speaking to clients about concept of thinking around boxes that there's a few things worse than a completely blank slate and quite often people say oh we need blue sky we need

blue ocean we need to find the next big thing but quite often that's not actually what's best for business quite often they want to find something that fits within a set of constraints that the business already has just improving

upon what they already exists and if you can find out what those constraints are it's what's gonna fit inside that box of constraints is often the most effective solution yes you are right this concept of you

know we need blue sky no guardrails out-of-the-box all of this i mean it can be a recipe to have fun for a few hours but it's absolutely not a recipe for practical creativity and really useful new ideas to actually understand what

exactly the constraints I mean maybe we need ideas that cost less than X because just the reality are ideas that can be implemented in less time than X or ideas that can be whatever the case maybe ideas that are safe for children or

ideas that I don't know what to lay those constraints out first at then actually he likes of the locust that's exactly the way to go for really practical and useful creativity even though it's harder by the way to

brainstorm within those constraints but then the the result has a much higher chance to be use with you and Alan what's your actual background in developing these theories because coming from a consulting background I know

quite often you've got your prerogative to do the right work let make sure they're all the data is backing up everything you're claiming then present the correct answer to the clients and it sounds like you are

coming at the these challenges from differently from a different way if you got a background in I don't know design thinking or creative problem solving or any of these other methodologies or is this something that's come to you or

chemically yeah it's a good question i think that look my background academically is in the worlds of of mathematics and music and various other sort of occasionally left-handed or right brained different believes in that

concept which is some of the bunk and those fields and what I think that time a lot of it looks a lot of that sorry for the noise a lot of that is fundamentally 13 years at PCG 13 years working with clients around the world

different industries in understanding what makes them tick as well as a sort of aptitude for group facilitation I used to have a hobby of sort of conducting choirs and orchestras and lots of musical things like that and the

idea of facilitating a creative workshop is in many ways not so different as you understand and so I'm bringing all of that together puts me into this rule where it's a lot of fun and whenever I have spare time not seeing clients i get

to start thinking about writing and books and all the rest but in the meantime helping all around two to dig into that so taking the work that BCG does the strategic work visionary work looking into the future that there's a

lot of creativity that can happen there and I just want to find out your views on how companies can improve their ability to think through strategy and think through future scenarios if you got any advice around that

yeah i think you know some of the ways i often frame things with clients are that what we need to try and do is think creatively about the future now if we're trying to think creatively about the future we have to start with how we

think which we already done in little bit in terms of our mental models and challenging them and how we think creatively which is about understanding and then thoughtfully challenging some of our existing boxes but then to think

creatively about the future is another step as well you know every company has to make decisions all the time about strategies should we merge with this should we buy this should we hire this person should we move into

this space whatever the case may be and in order to get at those strategic decisions one automatically has an underlying sense of what the future is going to be if you hire this person with these capabilities and competencies that

really good at this then you have these implicit assumptions that suggest you think the world is going to be more digital marble or whatever you want in the future now what I often do with clients is push

them to think about multiple possible futures that might evolve yes we all believe things will be more digital and more global or at least we did into last June and now with the results of some surprising for many

people votes in the last year maybe people are thinking there is a space for something that is less global and more local coal and more protection system or whatever you want i don't know but to lay out some possible future scenarios

which very clearly build upon the facts and the trends you know I'm doing this now with with an automotive company so clearly any thinking about the future effort has to start with the current facts in terms of here's what we know

about smart mobility and autonomous cars and this and that and the other and ride sharing and sustainability and organization ok so we gather these facts any consulting from or any large company has

this sort of trends available but then how might these trends surprise us how can we look at these things in fresh ways and the idea of coming up with multiple possible scenarios for the future using creative tools can a be a

lot of fun but more than that the real value comes from looking at each one of them and saying okay well if this scenario did come to pass what would be the opportunities for us what would be the risks for us how would

we prepare what would you do differently in the near-term what sorts of things would we at and then if you do that for scenario A and then B which is completely different than C and D as well then suddenly your strategy overall

becomes a little bit more robust because you can try to pull out some moves that might make hands under all scenarios for some more big bed type things that would only make sense under one or two but then for the

big bets what do i need to monitor in the next six months to see if the world is moving in that direction and hence the best more likely to pay off I really digging into the strategic

implications of these wild future scenarios can be a very very powerful way of making your strategy more robust what I think scares a lot of cum companies though when they think about this innovation strategy looking into

the future and as you said you have 2 3 4 5 10 20 different scenarios where the future might go some companies might then asked the question okay well which strategy do we actually invested and not only that how does that strategy turn

into a portfolio of projects to change the company for the future you have any advice on how companies can approach that question indeed you're quite right i mean look there's there's clearly an infinite number of possible scenarios

and so some of the criteria that i use from what makes a good set our look we need a set that is you know each one is fundamentally different from the next collectively they cover the full range of trends and inputs and so on that are

necessary each one is roughly the same in terms of possibility i don't want one that's completely wild like teleportation to the moon and another one that's the same as the status quo but rather eat should

have shades of gray and be somewhat plausible but also stretch the boundaries of it just in a different direction anyway if we have a set that means all the criteria yet then that's good enough and it becomes the

difference between the predictive mindset of here's what we think is going to happen and allowing ourselves to let go a little bit and enter the prospective mindset of here are some possibilities for what might happen and

it can be very very powerful thing and I give you a quick thought exercise I mean imagine imagine a company where everyone's doing their job really well and everyone is functioning if every department everything everything is

functioning smoothly so what's the job of the CEO in that case with the W so so my answer I would claim at least other than you know putting her feet up on the desk and playing golf and whatever else she wants to do but the top of the CEO

in that case is to simply wonder what's next and when and that's not so easy i mean as you know very well i mean think about YouTube for example you know it exploded at some particular moment in time but beforehand that were

plenty of other startups the wanted to do the same thing in terms of video sharing and failed because nobody had high speed bag with yet and so at some point you know the ones with you too early that's no good

and if you're too late well that's obviously no good either but it's a tipping point of enough people having high speed internet at home had come a little bit earlier than we'd be calling it something else instead of YouTube

whatever the case maybe it's a question of what's next and when and that sort of thing is a critical thing for leaders to do because that's where you have to challenge the assumptions of this is the way we've always done it this is how we

are organized and be willing to look at things in fresh ways from that perspective is there a way that you can help leadership make that mental transition though and the the reason i ask that is there are so many examples

of differences between visionary focused leaders and operational focus leaders and quite often the founders of companies are very visionary they they want to see the the breadth of products grow that focuses on the customer that

focuses on building the company but eventually when they step down quite often they're replaced by people who are more operational focused and their focus is on profitability shareholder value business as usual and those are then the

companies that often come to people like us and say we need some help with innovation because it's just not working internally is there a way to get operational minded people to think in a more strategic scenario-based visionary

way yeah i think we have been indeed that sort of the crux of what I do because it won't surprise you that if i say that most PCG clients are fortune 500 companies are the equivalent that you

know these are filled with people who have made their way and been successful precisely because of being somewhat productive and logical and analytical and predictive which is not exactly the same as being out there and creative and
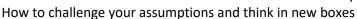
prospective although maybe there's there's room for and i agree with you fundamentally that not only the sort of founder vs successor approach but indeed many great partnerships even sort of roles and

Royce for Hewlett and Packard or Lennon and McCartney if you want gates and Alan you know any of these things yeah exactly yeah there's no shortage of great partnerships where one is the more out there and the other is the more

tangible practical but I think fundamentally if we can find a way to understand the leader or the person's assumptions and why they're behaving this way like let's suppose that this CEO is not being responsive to change

and being is refusing to adapt and and and thinking new boxes and whatever you want let's try to understand why that is is it because he doesn't like me ok maybe but unlikely because i'm

generally friendly and the rest is it because he's focused on something else he's got a lot happening at home he's focused on his next promotion and six months to become chairman or here is retirement in six months he doesn't care

and whatever it is to understand a person's existing mental models and why they're behaving the way they are can be a very powerful way of bringing them on board with this need for change even mean I give you a super simple example

if you have a loved one who are trying to get to quit smoking you know there are some there are some people who will resonate with the argument of well if you could smoking you'll have many more years with your grandchildren

okay well that really lanswell with this person but the other one doesn't care about that but you'll save x hundred thousand dollars per year that really or you'll be able to climb the stairs without wheezing or you'll have the

whatever-it-is to try and understand why the CEO why this smoker why whoever you want is behaving the way they are and reacting the way they are and refusing to adapt and then to tailor your intervention accordingly the right that

the same thought exercise will not work for the same person every day and so trying to understand what works best in any given circumstance for the person you're trying to bring on board is a very powerful thing finally then

we're coming up to the end of the session but I want to talk a bit more about these scenarios and the the looking forward strategy because i think that's really the crux of what we're talking about today

do you see there being a bit of a trend nowadays for every company one thing to be like the next goober even companies that don't necessarily have business pipelines that can move that rapidly they they always think what would

netflix do what would you do what would that will do is that necessarily always appropriate to be asked it's a great question i think that again it boils down to having a good understanding of the question we're

trying to tackle and then sometimes we can use process to push people out of their usual ways of thinking I mean if I am an industrial pipe company trying to come up with new growth ideas something relatively unsexy in terms of industry

but still we want growth in a lot of ways well if we are people who have been at this pipe company for years or even decades it can be hard to push them outside their ways of thinking so some

thought exercises that might make sense are you know what you five instead of being executives at this company imagine you were people from apple just for the sake of argument for the next 10 minutes how would Apple tackle our challenges

they were here in our shoes well Apple would think about simplifying the whole ecosystem or redesigning the whole ecosystem they would think about really elegant design they would and what might that mean for us and maybe the answer is

nothing but what if you took a Disney Disney would think about delighting customers starbucks would think about making everyone really comfortable and about new payment mechanisms and something that you know sometimes the

idea of taking a different company perspective whether it's uber or anything else can be powerful when one tries to think creatively about the future but just like anything else if you have execs who say hey I heard about

this new autonomous whatever this new app for this I want one of those and if you simply jump in that direction because the CEO so without having a clear innovation strategy in a clear sense of why you know that is obviously

much less productive and so if you can start with a clear strategy for what you want to achieve whether it's look we need a lot of incremental things to achieve growth or we want a portfolio big bed type things

that are more out there and or we need new capabilities around this or the other which comes as a consequence of all of that you know then you can suddenly try to act in accordance with this strategy but jumping in without a

clear sense is obviously going to be less productive yeah I mean there's there's probably nothing more scary than someone just suggesting oh I read about drones now we need drones another business or oh I

read about the the big one now is artificial intelligence and neural networks and computers and now everyone needs artificial intelligence and the software sometimes chasing the next shiny object is is just not necessarily

what's actually going to help company be successful in the long term right understanding your existing business models and which bits of it you want to change in Y as part of a thoughtful innovation strategy is so much more

effective than just helping in the littlest sexy direction yeah Alan we're coming up to the end now but before we leave one thing i like to ask all the experts is if you have one tip one thing that people can try out

this afternoon or this week to get better it's thinking creatively or improve the way they innovate what would it be it would be to be willing to doubt to be willing to not think of doubt as a bad

word but to be willing to doubt your existing assumptions your existing ways of doing things your existing ways of thinking and it doesn't mean that every one of your existing boxes or mental models is out of data needs to be

changed right now but to be willing to challenge some of them is a very very powerful thing perfect and we're going to get links down in the description to your work where's that where's that link going to

take people fantastic i'll be delighted if people visit thinking in new boxes dot-com which will take you to a page where there's plenty of thought exercises around thinking in new boxes my TED talk

various other bits and pieces there and people can also feel free to follow me on twitter Alan underscore me for whatever I find interesting around Creighton perfect thank you so much and I look forward to speaking

again with user likewise make all the best and thanks for having me