

# Peter Cook

## Why you can't just perform other people's ideas your whole life

### Speakers:

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

Peter Cook

### Expert Interview transcript:

**Nick Skillicorn:** Hello everyone and welcome to another expert interview series in the innovation and creativity summit 2017, today on the line we have got Peter cook, the founder of human dynamics the academy of rock and author of leading innovation, creativity and enterprise. Peter it's wonderful to have you

**Peter Cook:** Thank you very much to spare in the time with me.

**Nick Skillicorn:** No problem, So for people who aren't really aware of what work you do, can you give us a brief background of what the academy of rock does and what your background is on creativity and innovation.

**Peter Cook:** I have three sorts of parts in my background. I used to be a chemist scaling up energy pharmaceuticals, that the first human insulin treatment, the first treatment for HIV and aids, so I use to develop products to make them safe to go to the market, so I had a chemical and scientific background, two MBA's for eighteen years, I am also a musician and I synthesize all those three things science, business and music into what I do, it manifest itself in several ways, giving dynamics part of what I do is the business and organization development part which is sort of a long hold to solve problems of a client that keeps them awake at night, something that is a wicked problem or a vocal problem I think perhaps is a good phrase or phraseology, something that is volatile, complex and ambiguous. So I sometimes spend time as a catalyst over on longer periods on some companies nibbling away at a problem. I use the word catalyst quite correctly as a chemist literally as my involvement tails off as their involvement takes off and working with large companies like Pfizer, unilever and people like that. The academy of rock is sort of a keynote and conference type of stuff of what I do where people have made the best of energy and I tend to then synthesize the ideas from business and cross them with science and music and it allows me to pay rifts In the seminars. I have gone around the world doing it for an hour or half or perhaps a longer master class that brings together what the business schools offer with I guess the part of music which reaches their heart not their head.

**Nick Skillicorn:** That's one of the reason I am so keen to speak to you today, a lot of the other experts that we are having at the summit have their expertise in either academia or internal innovation labs or other sorts of expertise into how to get ideas out there, you are at this unique

blend of the art side and the business side, that's why I am sure you have got a couple of great insights that we are going to learn today.

**Peter Cook:** I am kind of like a Toyota hybrid car really in that respect many people run academic and other people run pragmatist. I am Pragcademic it's a combination of the two, I think to be serious from my own, the combination of business and the arts is an artificial divide that we had when we were very young of being separated into an artist or a mathematician or an engineer but in fact they are not really accepted at the highest level of the greatest physicist or often musical. I think that organizational development is often not just what spreadsheet says and the numbers, when the heart is not there, the energy and the drive, you don't get any sort of implementation of a great status, you do need you know the math's and arrows to drive a great company and rather companies on the virgin are a very good examples of ones that have both, the sort of the analysis and the passion. You know we have discredited the left and right brain but it's a very good analogy and you need both.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Let's start from the beginning with the art creative side that you mentioned, your background in music, what is your background in music and how do you feel that has evolved your thinking of what creativity is.

**Peter Cook:** Well if you study creative art, these great engineers and business people, you look at what they do when they are alone not obviously the disgust able things that they do when they are alone, you find out that there are certain state, to use the word from nlp that people get themselves into to create some sort of news that is necessary to have great ideas, in my first book which was written about twenty years ago, I look, scoured the earth to this state that caused people to not have creativity like a tap of will, what makes it more probabilistic and you find out lots of things that work for lots of people but they don't work for everyone. So if I run a seminar for hundred people, you don't tend to get you know maybe forty percent on average if you say wondering lonely as a cloud you know wondering about walking being in motion actually for a lot of people really works as a great way of being like having ideas, some people of course really benefit from that if they are introverts where they process their ideas internally and get their energy from the inside so getting away from the office is a great way of doing that. Some extroverts of course don't enjoy brainstorming much more. so there is another dynamic between being alone and being popular or externalizing your ideas. There are other ideas about being distant from an idea. Some people don't get very good ideas when they are sort of sitting on a desk immersed in the ideas, sometimes they need to get distracted. Creativity techniques which are there are many often, I took an MBA course that introduces a hundred and thirty of these things. All a creativity technique does is giving you the recipe; it's not like the cooking recipe for what naturally works. So there is a particular technique that uses, it's called force relationships and maybe you are working on a business development problem that had a congregate market, so a force relationship like you take this pair of glasses and you study them for a while and you put down the business development problem, so let's look at and follow the rule, they are rigid but they have a flexible where you just drop and see what is that going to do with this thing and by taking yourself away from that problem and putting distance between them, sometimes, many times actually we find that people will get great ideas. I have a case in point and a practical example of that, I was working with Pfizer for long enough to go to mention but I won't mention the product but they were looking for a new ideas to break through from a drug that was off pattern and was going to soon be a sort of thrash by the competition and I

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needed to extend that pattern life saving, if you understood pharmaceuticals a year's pattern life is a lot of money. So we lock them away for a day and half including having a musical jam session to sort of break the ice between all the people and I supplied them with about two types of paper, magazine lifestyle and research papers in one corner and in fact I had the tele tubbies take in another corner with little lifestyle magazines inside it for people to sort of read. I still told people not to go into the other corner better study at the lifestyle magazine instead but quite surprisingly they did study the lifestyle magazines and I bought a load of sort of off topic magazines, they were honest enough to admit that the breakthrough, they had that seven ideas that they implemented for the day and a half we spent together and this is the most of them came from the lifestyle magazines because it prompted them to look at the sort of people that were buying a certain demographics which they didn't find in the clinical papers. So by just distracting them actually and this is the same thing is they find a story of cats eyes, the guy who thought of that says it was a raining day and he was looking at the tram tracks and noticed it's the reflection of rails and positive the idea that if you could lure a lot of cats along the end six you would be able to see better at night from that insight. Just like a distraction and they were many and many more in the book but there's two so being off topic is important for some people, being alone movement and movement and of course with moving goes with adrenaline rapid movement. Running this like sports often work for some people but it also often combine with being alone. Introverts don't always get their greatest ideas in a brain storming session because there are advantaged people like me that like to talk.

**Nick Skillicorn:** We have spoken previously in one of my podcast episode and one of the things that I really loved about that chat is the metaphors that you can use from music to a take it beyond the theme of just being something artistic and how you can actually take that concept of musical creativity and apply it to other fields. Can you just elaborate a bit on what you meant by that.

**Peter Cook:** Well I used the word parallel lessons in some of the books I have written. You said I have written this book and yes I did, I have also written this book which is a deep insight into some sort of parallel insights and musical basis and I think that there are no absolute ever, you can't transport an idea from one sector to another and just apply, it never works. Because these things are analogies in people say best practice is move it from organizational height to be, there are certain contextual factors that don't allow you always to just transplant almost like you are sort of copying and pasting in a document or sticking a memory stick in your computer. Organizational life doesn't work like sticking of memories but there are parallel lessons which if you look beneath them, you can start to see what is transferrable from a different genre. So in the field of music, I think a lot of people over the years now including Roberta Flack, a bunch of people from prince's organization is based by Nielsen who is a superb all round musician but he is working at the highest level with one of the greatest artists on the planet and various other people, the Osborne, the guitarist and so on. What you find time and time again from these people who are great at what they do is when they are on stage, it looks really easy and in fact what they have often done in one concept is transferrable to organizational life is the concept of flow and that of ten thousand hours of practice whether it's ten thousand, fourteen thousand, three thousand I don't really care. Great musicians are masters of their own and they practice a lot and they value practice and if I am going to be rude to managers just for the sake of amusement here, I think managers sometimes think that is enough just to wing it. And the idea of improvisation in music when people think oh that is winging it, it isn't, you see a great musician, what you don't see is ten thousand hours of work and their ability to put

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themselves in a site of effortless mastery now I think that is very transferable to managers, managers are not so keen on practice because they think that is for dummies. So managers could do deliberate practice and I know that Nick you might make a big point of separating the idea of deliberate practice from just banging the head against the wall and practicing the wrong moves, it's not gold if you don't practice the wrong shots you will not get better.

**Nick Skillicorn:** You are very good at doing the wrong shot.

**Peter Cook:** Exactly, so I think that's one transferrable parallel, is the idea of deliberate practice, an immersion in your art and being great at it rather than thinking. a lot of managers don't ever study management, it disappoints me that I get to manage this a lot of time and I go " I love your work with Oozy Osborne you know I love your work with Prince and George Clinton and this is great" and I go I want to know what you know about Tom peters or Charles Handy and they can repeat the word of the beginning of rhapsody to you but they haven't read the great books of business gurus like that and they should know Charles Hendy's lyrics, they should know what Tom Peter has said about business excellence and they should really know but unfortunately, they know more about queen lady gaga and things like that, I think its slightly disappointing, they should practice more.

**Nick Skillicorn:** One thing on this concept of practice that I would like to pick your brains on, it might be a bit off topic but let's see where it goes. It's this concept of performance versus creative interpretation and it's something that is very clear in my view and in certain artistic pursuits especially in music where sometimes you are just performing someone else's creative output and this might just be more true in something like a symphony where you need to stick to the rigid plan and then somewhat something like a band or a jazz player where there is more room to interpret but does every musician need to go through the basis of performing someone else's idea before they can start producing their own ideas or is there room for both and probably then seeing how you can transfer that into innovation

**Peter Cook:** I think it's a great question which at least gives me the breathing space to try and think of an answer which proves that this interview is live because we do know there were no prepared questions am flannelling a bit, I am going to answer with the title of an album because the answer to your question is definitely maybe. Because it's not only but also to quote my name Peter Cook the comedian, in some cases, I mean you look at the musicians and the playlist they try to play and managing around ten years and sometimes they get better on some part they are still trying that ten years later and they never escape from just being a repeat performance of that thing and I have just come back last night from a jam session where I have heard most of those songs done far worse than the records and in one or two cases far better. So actually the idea of practicing and building on other people's art form can actually strike a lock into being a repeat performance. The best performance takes a piece of this, take a piece of that, take a piece of the other and they synthesize that and then they build upon that and they create their own style. If we would use an example of that, I mean Prince's "so I love" bless his soul, is a great song and someone like Jimmy Hendrix who is his Godfather took a piece of funk, took a piece of soul, took a piece heavy metal, he didn't just follow his grandfather's of using the effect of pedals to singing, he turned it upside down to see what they would do. So he had this experimentation and then from that eventually with thousands of hours of practice, a real style emerges. And Jimmy Hendrix style, you can hear Centari, you can hear prince, you can hear James brown in his dance and vocal styles, you can hear a lot of guitars, but it

isn't all just a repeat performance, it's been turned to something new. In the book I talked about Michael Curtin, professor Michael Curtin's ideas of adapters versus innovators. Adapters improve the world, they take the glasses and think there's something not quite as, it should have a USB attachment or something or whatever they do, they come as a bit weird but they find a better way of perhaps you want travelling glasses, they follow up with something some form of small improvements but they don't transform the glasses. The innovators which Michael Curtin talked about you know rethink glasses and pat contact lenses are slightly more innovative ways of thinking about glasses. So those in business actually we have a depth of adaptation in terms of continuous improvement of course that makes you a lot of money because the other stuff is risky. But the truly transformative thing that change our lives like canals in the century around the 18 century, can remember the century it was on, those things transform the way we live our lives and the chimneys in the united kingdom where a massive transformer because certainly people didn't have to live in the same room. Where is all before they had to have together all tribes and sort of Chinese, so those disruptive innovative things tend to be, they come from the innovators, the people who take what's great and just build upon it and transform it. Prince I think is a great disrupter and innovator whereas Eric Clapton bless his soul, brilliant guitarist but he is a baby king with better lightning. I hope the he is not listening; I don't mean that in the blue, He has taken a lot of baby king's flying, perfected it, put a brand on top of it and made it popular where it sold a lot of records. And the adapters tend to rule the earth, because they sell lots of records which the innovators can't in fact you know paint themselves into a corner. Is one of the risks of being an innovator? I have drifted hugely and that answers the question.

**Nick Skillicorn:** It's great and I love those examples. Let's take it to the next stage and talk about innovators and innovation in companies, from your experience and the work that you do, what sort of challenges do companies come to you with and how do you help them overcome this challenges.

**Peter Cook:** Well on the human dynamic side, they come to me with all sort of problems that keep people awake at night, is the headline that I use. They are wicked problems, they are not sort of how to buy a new pencil sharpeners, you know that's a sourcing problem, you get into the catalogue and find that, that's a simple problem but there are ones which are worrying, they are usually long term and strategic. Importantly there are some good reasons to hire someone like me, an external person and some bad reasons. The bad reasons are because you know you just can't be bothered to do it yourself, but the good reasons are so close to this problem that nobody can see between the wood and the trees and so they need someone to take it upon and find out what the real problem is and not the one that is presenting itself. So the first thing I do is to understand what is the problem that if they fix it would actually make them a lot of money and make them happy, Whatever it is they are looking for, there's usually some complexity analysis before you can just lead to a solution. It's not problems solution problems, these are things like world peace not perhaps that peace but going on that way but they are going on that way where there are no easy answers, everyone in the organization is so close to it that, they can't see it, what they are doing and they need someone to who can help them pick it and see what is written beneath and where is the point of entry where is the elegant place we can make progress, because a wicked problem you can't always solve but can resolve it so you can move to a better place. My analogy for this is like a rot in a carpet, you got a rot in the carpet, you can move it somewhere else, you cannot get rid of the rot unless you take the carpet out and take a piece off and relay it. When an organization is trying to move the rot around

the carpet by moving the problem from HR to IT that fixes the problem of the HR and makes the problem of the IT worse. It doesn't fix the problem of the organization, it doesn't bring a return on investment usually the organization cannot re lay the carpet, it's like starting over again but there are things that they can do that makes it more elegant, makes it better to handle and that is the sweets of dealing with wicked problems. So that's the warming of what I do the simple answer to describe the sort of academy of rock and science. Some says that we want to boost energy on creativity and innovation, how do we lead a company that becomes that makes innovation more probable, more likely, more frequent can you give us some sort of a live master class on this usually with some guitars and example and usually with the engagement of people, I get people involved, I get them to learn to improvise, I might get for example to play jazz or blues with a little bit of assistance and the band, here's two typical examples, one is long term provoking catalyzing supporting facilitating quite clever not easy to describe in a seminar like this but on one hour seminars, there are tons of them on YouTube, so the best advice I can give people is go and have a look on my YouTube channel which is academyofrock and you will see some examples of what I actually do in one hour, two hours sorts of seminars format where we are trying to digest all this academic wisdom down to a couple of hours or might be a day if they want to spend a bit longer time on it.

**Nick Skillicorn:** We are coming up to the end of this session but one thing I want to leave the audience with that I ask all the experts for, if you can give one piece of actionable insight or one tip that people can try out either today or this week to improve their personal creativity or embed innovation in their company, what would it be,

**Peter Cook:** Get off your computer; I am saying this to the young people. I have a twenty two year old and a twenty year old son at the university and they are addicted to these things that we are sitting in front of and I am also addicted to them but get them by, go for a walk, go for a bath if you can't do that because the bath is the three B's, the bedroom, the bath and the bar, I am not going to describe what happens in the bedroom but go and go and have a shower because this shower works sometimes just get yourself away from this dam computer from time to time. I cycle a lot, I need the exercise, I swim a lot, I get some of the greatest ideas after I am gone about sort of fully on things. so get out more, it's the simple thing that they can do this afternoon, don't be attached to the computer

**Nick Skillicorn:** And then we are going to get all of the links to your resources in the description below but where can people go to find out more about what you do,

**Peter Cook:** The quickest way to do this is to Google me and if you Google peter cook human dynamics, you will come up with my sensible work, I am saying that, very grab it, that's my catalytic work, the stuff I didn't really describe and if they Google peter cook academy of rock, they will find keynotes, master classes and a whole lot of other stuff and of course if you go on Amazon there is an Amazon page for the books, I even have a provocative very short read about what you can learn from HR from punk rock, very short books I don't have them on pages long but it took longer to write and six leadership and rock and roll important conversation between sex and leadership got into trouble with Pfizer because they feel it's a book about sex but I haven't got rid of that. If you put sex leadership into Google you will get very different answers so don't do that.



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**Nick Skillicorn:** Peter it's been wonderful having you here and I look forward to speaking with you again soon.

**Peter Cook:** Thank you very much Nick, it's been a pleasure.