



Eight Minutes, Not Eight Hours



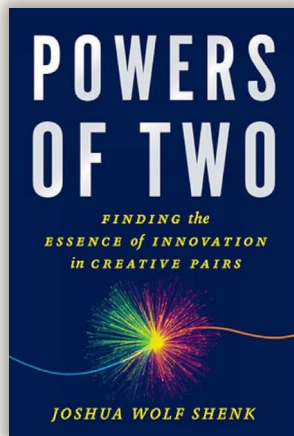
September 2023

# Powers of Two

Finding the Essence of Innovation in Creative Pairs

BOOK AUTHORS: JOSHUA WOLF SHENK

Published 2014



In **Powers of Two: Finding the Essence of Innovation in Creative Pairs**, Joshua Wolf Shenk seeks to disprove the common theory of the ‘lone-genius’. He studied recognizable pairs throughout history like John Lennon and Paul McCartney; C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien; Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak; Marie and Pierre Curie; and Vincent and Theo Van Gogh. As a result, Shenk developed a life-cycle for creative pairs that involves meeting, attaining confluence, developing dialectics, working through distance, participating in the Infinite Game, balancing power, and succumbing to interruptions. Shenk says that the pair as the “primary creative unit” presents more flexibility in understanding creativity.

## Key Quote

“More is possible—more intimacy, more creativity, more knowledge about this primary truth: that we make our best work, and live our best lives, by charging into the vast space between ourselves and others” (p. 25).

## KEY POINTS AND CONCEPTS

### Meeting

Many pairs meet each other at “magnet places,” a place or event where those with shared interests convene (p. 5). But this doesn’t mean that two people who share the same ideas will be more successful—“we need similarities to give us ballast, and differences to make us move” (p. 13)—or that pairs who meet early on in life will be more successful—“pairs with deeply entwined early lives must also develop disparate experiences, attitudes, or emotional styles” (p. 10).

Shenk explains the importance of interlocking disparate ideas or ideologies during the “coming together of strangers” in creative pairs. He references Thomas Kuhn, who writes that paradigm shifts need to be headed by people who are both insiders, with the knowledge and influence to effect change, and outsiders, without conventional constraint (p. 14).

Success in pairs comes from discord more than it does complete union. Shenk writes, “Many of us believe that finding one’s partner or soul mate means arriving at a place of consistent satisfaction. But it may be quite the contrary, that a pairing proceeds from an awareness that there is a gulf to cross, and all you have is a dinghy” (p. 22).

### **Confluence**

After meeting, pairs’ identities intertwine like the convergence of two rivers becoming one. Shenk writes that he found three stages of confluence: presence, confidence, and trust (p. 30). Presence is the act of going beyond your self-interests and truly seeing that there is another person in an authentic and intimate way. In the stage of confidence, pairs exhibit an assurance in each other’s specific and systematic capabilities and behaviors. Lastly, pairs develop a holistic trust in the other person (pp. 32-33).

The ritual of having a distinct meeting time helps pairs “discipline the unruly mind, [and] make acts that are automatic and definite amid a creative process that involves so many utter unknowns” (p. 41).

Once confluence is reached, pairs engage in mimicry, linguistic alignment, and even “transactive memory,” where each remembers different specifics about an event, person, or place, and together they share a vast recall of the past (pp. 48-49).

### **Dialectics**

Shenk found that there are three archetypes that occur most often in creative pairs:

- **The star and the director:** where one member is in the spotlight and one member is offstage. This archetype forms because an audience is more likely to engage with creativity when they can imagine an intimate relationship or identify with the source, which is easier to do when it’s just one person (p. 68). While it may look like the star runs the show, it’s often not true. Stars need their directors. Shenk writes, “[Stars] often lack self-knowledge and internal restraints. They can be delusional and even paranoid, lost in their own worlds. The metaphor of the spotlight is apt. If you’ve ever stood in one, you know that the same light source that allows an audience to see you makes you blind to them” (p. 69). Examples include Warren Buffett and Charlie Munger; Mohandas Gandhi and Mahadev Desai; Martin Luther King Jr. and Ralph Abernathy; Vincent and Theo Van Gogh.
- **The liquid and the container:** where there is a relationship between order and disorder; the sweet and impish; the charmer and the mischievous. Shenk explains, “liquid-type creatives are drawn to make lateral associations rather than linear progressions. They’re often exciting, excitable characters; boundless” (p. 79). Liquids are both resistant and welcoming to those who offer them shape. While they avoid constraints, without them, “they will spill out onto the



*After meeting, pairs’ identities intertwine like the convergence of two rivers becoming one. Shenk writes that he found three stages of confluence: presence, confidence, and trust.*



sidewalk [and] evaporate in the sun” (p. 79). Container-types have order, but their structure is hollow inside. They need to become the vessel for the character of a liquid. Examples include: John Lennon and Paul McCartney, and Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks.

- **The dreamer and the doer:** where the pair has one member that is results driven and the other is ideas driven. The dreamer inspires action and the doer produces. Examples include: Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld from the Seinfeld years, and Trey Parker and Matt Stone, Co-Creators of South Park.

Creativity Researcher, Alfonso Montuori, says, “Creative individuals alternate order and disorder, simplicity and complexity, sanity and craziness in an ongoing process” (p. 100). Dialectics exist between each person and within each person and “the clear distinctions [of roles] matter less than that [exciting] frisson” between them (p. 105).

Schenk realizes that while studying the behaviors of two different people is important to understanding creativity, single-minded creative acts still exist. He explains these acts as an extension of the inter-connectivity with the “other,” which has come to exist within one’s own psyche (p. 107). This is all achieved through a dialogue of sorts, “a moment of insight, when suddenly an organic structure emerges from what had been before a mess of scenes or ideas.” He continues, saying, “we may describe [these] as ‘thoughts’ that ‘emerge.’ But if we pay attention to our own experiences—and to the accounts of exceptionally creative people—what we discover is a kind of dialogue” (p. 109).

- Schenk quotes Henry David Thoreau, who wrote: “With thinking, we may be beside ourselves in a sane sense. I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another. However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it, and that is no more I than it is you” (p. 111).

### **Distance**

Schenk found that rather than ask how close two people are, it is more meaningful to ask about how two people “animate the space between them[selves]—how they maintain the élan of curiosity and surprise alongside familiarity and faith” (p. 119). He argues that “creative individuals often have been mistaken for hermits, when the clearer picture would show skillful and productive relationships engage from a deliberate solitude” (p. 122).

Creatives that engage in such “deliberate solitude” may have a higher sensitivity to sensory information. He writes that “these people are not chilly but rather have the kind of heat that needs ample room to dissipate. They are highly empathetic, highly reactive emotionally, and extremely sensitive to stimuli” (p. 125).



*Creativity Researcher,  
Alfonso Montuori, says,  
“Creative individuals alternate  
order and disorder, simplicity  
and complexity, sanity and  
craziness in an ongoing process.”*



There is no formula for distance and it can take many different forms, but a key characteristic is the transition from being close at times and being distanced in some way at other points in time. All of us fundamentally participate in balancing our urges to socially connect with others and our urges to experience autonomy. These urges facilitate different ways of thinking and “while each mode has its distinct advantages, the real magic happens when they can be applied in alternating fashion” (p. 133). The separation of idea generation and idea evaluation or elaboration fits with this alternating, back-and-forth model of thinking, which generates more creativity (p. 135).

There is an “optimal distance” for pairs that is fluid, continual and “emerges not from clarity about space, but from ambiguity and uncertainty” (p. 136). Shenk says that the optimal position is more like a dance: between desire and control of the other, there exists an eroticism—not of a sexual nature, but of wanting passionately what you cannot have—that heightens the creative spirit (p. 138). Without the wanting, the eroticism is gone. Therefore, pairs usually push away from each other to stay close creatively: “intimacy coincides with separateness, and the essential creative paradox, where expression comes, at least in some measure, from frustration” (p. 147).

### The Infinite Game

Creative pairs usually engage in a competition with one another, despite their deep confluence (p. 150). Shenk believes that the competition between a creative pair develops into a rivalry, and the best word to describe each member is foil, saying, “as a verb, from the French fouler (to trample), foil means ‘to prevent something undesirable; to impede, hinder, or scuttle.’ As a noun meaning ‘a thing that by contrast emphasizes the qualities of another,’ it derives from the practice of putting metal foil...underneath a gem to enhance its shine” (p. 155). More importantly, these foils need to be in a lifelong and infinite rivalry; there is no personal benefit from being in a zero-sum game where one person wins and the other loses (p. 162). (Think of Larry Bird and Magic Johnson).

To explain the importance of the infinite game further, Shenk writes: “Where finite games follow predetermined rules, intended to eliminate players until one stands on top alone, infinite games are constantly adjusted so that both players can remain standing. Where finite games are impersonal and hewn to established forms, infinite games are peculiar to their players and grow increasingly distinct. Finite games are like formal debates, where artificial constraints impose order. Infinite games are like the grammar of a living language, where organic growth magnifies complexity. Where finite games hinge on competition, infinite games operate at the intersection of competition and cooperation” (p. 162).

### Power

- Focusing on power differentials in creative pairs, Shenk found that the leader-follower dynamic has to have both a hierarchical structure and fluidity. The more powerful person, who has greater access to certain modes of thinking and “tends to see the world from his own point of view” needs the perspective of the follower, which usually has a greater awareness to others’ points of views and situational context (pp. 175-176).



*Creative pairs usually engage in a competition with one another, despite their deep confluence. Shenk believes that the competition between a creative pair develops into a rivalry, and the best word to describe each member is foil, saying, “as a verb, from the French fouler (to trample), foil means ‘to prevent something undesirable; to impede, hinder, or scuttle.’*



- Shenk likens this process to dancing the tango, a dance form without set steps that relies more on the exchange between the two partners. He interviews tango dancer Jillian Lauren, who says “at the highest levels the leader is leading, absolutely, but part of leading is paying immensely close attention to the follower and her responses. And the follower is responding, but the nature of her response can, in an instant, change everything. The follower teaches the leader how to lead” (p. 176).
- Shenk also writes that “the star may present as swaggering and all-powerful, but this is a symptom of a profound uncertainty. It’s natural, then, for the star to associate with someone who is quietly self-assured—who can assure him” (p. 189).

While Orville and Wilbur Wright were designing their flying machine, esteemed physicist Samuel Pierpont Langley was also in the race to be the first in flight. Langley imagined a large, 50 horsepower engine that would be stable enough to push through any wind condition. The Wright brothers’ machine was small in comparison and had a twelve horsepower engine. The Wright brothers’ process and product are a perfect model for the “dynamic stability” that is present in creative pairs. Dynamic stability is conflict and intimacy, distance and confluence, and a fluidity of leading and following. Partners in a creative pair value and embrace instability over stability (p. 185).


Shenk references what he calls The Hitchcock Paradox to explain another theory of power in creative pairs. He writes that, “the alpha behaves in a tyrannical way, inducing some flavor of fear in his subordinate, who then works all the harder to please or satisfy—or to challenge him...This leads to good work—so much that even the abused underlings often want to do it again. And if they don’t, there are others waiting” (p. 188).

Shenk writes that one of the best ways creative pairs can handle power is “domesticating the tension,” as John Lennon and Paul McCartney had done. While each had their own personal musical goals and styles, their “aggressive energies had an outlet in the creative work itself” (p. 199). Their power struggle became “a source of greater intimacy and creativity” (p. 199).


### Interruption

Shenk found that there are two ways that creative pairs are interrupted: by stumble or by wedge (p. 209). While opposites originally attract, there is a point where the pair stops celebrating differences and the irritation is more challenging than they know how to handle. Adviser Diana McLain Smith theorizes that patterns of strained difference become self-reinforcing. She says, “The thing each one of them does brings out more of the thing they don’t know how to deal with in the other. The worst part of these destructive patterns is that each person in the pair doesn’t see them as patterns—or as anything mutual. He or she just attributes the problems to the other partner” (p. 210). A wedge most likely arises in the form of wild success or a third person.

Stumbles and wedges create confusion, but Shenk writes that “confusion itself isn’t fatal to creative work. Nor is a feeling of rejection or betrayal, or a wish to get the hell away. No, the only thing that is fatal to creative work is when the creatives stop working” (p. 219). Diana McLain Smith again contributes saying,



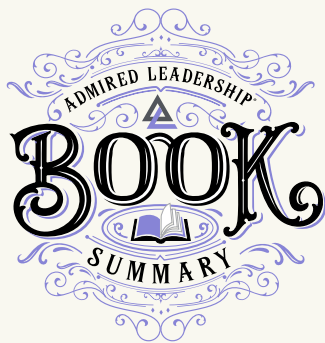
*Stumbles and wedges  
create confusion, but Shenk writes  
that “confusion itself isn’t fatal to  
creative work. Nor is a feeling of  
rejection or betrayal, or a wish to  
get the hell away. No, the only thing  
that is fatal to creative work is  
when the creatives stop working”*



“If you're up against the wall with another person...you have a chance to learn something that no one else is going to teach you, because if you learn how to deal with the difference, you can transform yourself and grow, and suddenly the context, which presents as a ceiling on creativity, becomes a much higher floor” (p. 230).

The most important thing to remember about creative pairs breaking apart is that it might not be completely possible. Shenk writes, “When you get mixed up with another person, you become something else—for better and worse. Once in, there is no way out” (p. 234).

Shenk, J.W. (2014). *Powers of Two: Finding the Essence of Innovation in Creative Pairs*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.



*Creative pairs usually engage in a competition with one another, despite their deep confluence. Shenk believes that the competition between a creative pair develops into a rivalry, and the best word to describe each member is foil, saying, “as a verb, from the French fouler (to trample), foil means ‘to prevent something undesirable; to impede, hinder, or scuttle.’*

### The Latest and Greatest Books for Leaders

We work hard to stay abreast of the current writings on leadership, especially those books our clients are reading or have been recommended to read. As a benefit to our clients and to facilitate our own learning, the Admired Leadership® team has long maintained a tradition of summarizing the newest books of interest to leaders. Better to read a summary for eight minutes before investing 8 hours in the entire book. After reading a good summary, we believe leaders are able to make better choices as to what to ignore, what to peruse and what to make the time to read closely.