

Building **inspiration** into your work and life ... and **inspiring others.**



An interview with Dr. Brad Shuck

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Most often it happens at the new year. We assess what direction we're headed, what we need to do to get there and how can we stay inspired along the way. **Pablo Picasso** may have said it most simply, "**Inspiration exists, but it has to find you working.**"

Brad Shuck, Ph.D., University of Louisville, has developed further thinking around the topic of **intentional inspiration**. He started by segmenting the impact of inspiration into three clear categories: **organization, leadership and individual.**

To get a deeper understanding of how we can realize intentional inspiration at these levels, we sat down with Dr. Shuck to talk more about the ideas behind intentional inspiration.

To help us level-set, can you define what you mean by **intentional inspiration**?

Dr. Shuck: Intentional inspiration is about pursuing those activities that inspire you to go to the next level, and not waiting around and hoping that it happens. Intentional inspiration is being proactively motivated and self-directed. When we are intentional, we are aware and mindful. The research has been clear that when we are aware of our surroundings – about those things that give us energy and take away our energy – we are more likely to be inspired. And when we are inspired, we reach new heights.

For me, inspiration is grounded in hope. Hope that I can do it. Hope that I can accomplish an aspirational goal. And then belief that when I accomplish it, my circumstances will be better. It is joy in a future place and it is hope in action. When we are inspired, we feel a sense of urgency and excitement. We cannot wait to get started!

Being intentional is not ignoring the things that are not going well or the challenges in our life. It is a mindset and we can intentionally shift into that mindset. Being intentional is about driving that discipline every single day. For some, it is about journaling and quiet time in the morning. For others, it is new experiences or a genre of music. Still, watching someone accomplish an incredible feat, like running an Ironman, can be inspiring. And when we feel inspired, we tend to elevate to that same level of inspiration in our own lives.

I like to think about intentional inspiration on three different levels. First, I believe organizations can be set up to encourage inspiration and become inspirational organizations. Second, as leaders – whether I have a defined position of leadership or if I am leading a volunteer effort or simply influencing others on my team – I believe that leaders provide the key to driving inspiration with their teams. Third, on an individual level, I believe that we can lead inspirational lives and that we can be intentional about driving levels of inspiration every day.

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What does an **inspirational organization** look like?

Dr. Shuck: An inspirational organization actively promotes opportunities for employees to seek inspiration and live into those moments of excitement and urgency. There are really three key qualities to the inspirational organization.

- 1** First, to be an inspiring organization, we have to create systems of experimentation and thinking outside of the box. It has to be safe to do so. This looks like opportunities for brainstorming and the pursuit of ideas that are big and bold. Big goals inspire us because of the way that our brain is wired. When we believe we can accomplish something big and bold – that we can actually do it – our brain releases a chemical called dopamine and we begin to develop new pathways in our mind. Systems of experimentation allow us to think beyond the ordinary and live into moments of extraordinary. One of the best resources I know for developing the habit of creating these kinds of systems is the concept of design thinking. **Stanford d.school** has some of the best resources that I know for developing this organizational-level habit.
- 2** Second, we tend to be inspired when we are around others. The last few months have been really difficult for many of us, including me. Being around others is not just for the social piece but it is the support we feel from those we know care about us and the opportunity that comes along with feeling valued. Our most recent research at the University of Louisville has explored the role of connection and isolation. As you can imagine, feeling isolated was a terrible experience but it also resulted in feelings of loneliness, low work productivity and lower levels of engagement. When people felt connected, however, they were not only more engaged in their work but they were willing to work through tough problems and ride out the challenges that 2020 brought.
- 3** Finally, I like to challenge teams to think about powerful questions that drive inspiration. Powerful questions are open ended and allow for active experimentation. A laser focus on day-to-day priorities can miss larger shifts in market conditions. It is, in a way, literally not being able to see the forest because you are staring at the tree in front of you and your view is blocked. However, when we step back and ask questions like “*What will it take to get this right?*” or “*What is possible?*” we broaden our view and all of a sudden the landscape changes. We see more. We can do more. And, we are inspired to take action because of what is possible. This is intentional inspiration in action.

Tell us more about the **inspirational leader**.

How are these leaders driving inspiration across teams and the organization?

Dr. Shuck: Think about those leaders who really inspired you – took you to the next level in your thinking and your work. These are the kind of leaders who we want to work hard with and learn beside. If we want to be inspirational leaders, we have to do some intentional work.



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First, **awareness** becomes the currency of inspirational leadership. Inspirational leaders are aware of their landscape and they choose moments of inspiration carefully. They know that moments matter and they capitalize on those opportunities. Moments come in meetings or one-on-one's where we have the chance to inspire possibility. They come in projects that push our boundaries and drive hope and possibility.

One quality of inspirational leaders that can cut across all types of organization is **presence**. Inspirational leaders are present in moments and share in both the ups and downs with their team. When leaders are physically present, they share in social spaces with their team and drive emotional and social inspiration. But when leaders step away and are emotionally and socially absent, or they build barriers between themselves and their team, they crush even the faintest hint of inspiration. Barriers can come in the form of physical barriers such as office walls and separate facilities to emotional and social barriers like someone feeling left out, isolated or ignored. When someone feels ignored, the capacity for inspiration is just not there. Leaders who share in those moments, who bring people along with them and who are emotionally connected to their teams, inspire long-lasting results as well as higher levels of engagement and innovation.

Inspirational leaders also use **framing** to their advantage. Our words matter and how we see the world often shapes what we think could be possible. Instead of framing something as a problem, they shape it as an opportunity to get better – to learn or reinvent. In our research, leaders who embodied this quality used words like **hope, future and possibility** instead of words like **cannot, impossible or the past**. Framing our words is a psychological heuristic that most of us use to make decisions about the way something is presented. We base our decisions, and our inspiration, on how a context is framed.

Lastly, inspirational leaders encourage teams to set aspirational goals and listen to their employees. Nothing takes the wind out of the sail than someone putting hurdles around what is possible for us personally. Research from my colleagues at BI WORLDWIDE shows that inspiration was 23% higher with employees who believed their leader really listened to them. In fact, additional research from Thrash and Elliot offered that employees who had leaders that listened and supported inspirational goals were more creative, had higher levels of self-esteem, worked toward mastery and set bigger goals. And the list goes on and on.

And finally, let's talk about ourselves. What can we do to be and stay inspired? Is that even possible or do we have to wait for **inspiration to strike?**

Dr. Shuck: Living with inspiration intentionally is hard for many of us. We get into a routine and experience the same thing over and over. We easily find ourselves in the rut of ordinary. Uninspired. We do not often think of inspiring ourselves but we can, with a little intentionality.



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One of the first things we can do to live with inspiration intentionally is **develop a routine of inspiration**. To seek it out and be intentional about it. For some, this looks like writing in a journal each morning - maybe a few things they are grateful for and their goals for the day. For others, it is reading a new book, volunteering, meeting new people or writing an article for LinkedIn. For others, it's going to the gym and taking a notebook to jot down any moments of inspiration that pop up while they're running that 5K. Here is the key though: discipline. You have to develop a routine that evokes inspiration. Every day. And there will be some days that you want to skip. Skip the gym. Skip the journal. Skip the quiet time. But don't. Don't skip it. On the days we don't feel inspired, stay true to your routine and reflect on how you feel and why you might feel that way.

One of the most challenging things about finding inspiration is choice. I believe that you can architect that choice and architect opportunities for inspiration. Sometimes, when I am at the grocery store, I find myself staring at too many options. There are about 100 different kinds of cereal or 100 different kinds of soup. So many kinds of soup. The trick is to narrow your options based on what you need or what you want. And the same thing holds true about inspiration.

We can feel stuck, uninspired and lacking motivation to even move forward. So many cans of soup can feel overwhelming. Planning can help us with feeling overwhelmed. We like plans or at least a path forward, and if you are feeling stuck and uninspired, one of the best things to do is write down a few of the goals that you have on a piece of paper. The simple act of writing this down can get your inspiration moving. After you have your goals down on paper, you should pick one or two of those goals you are most excited about. Writing that book. Making that movie. Painting that picture. Connecting with a colleague. And set aside time each day to make progress. The progress will help, but being intentional with your time and what you give your energy to will remain essential to creating moments of inspiration in our lives. Making progress shows us there is hope for a future that we have the power to create. From that hope, we get urgency and excitement. Inspiration flows.

As we wrap up, inspiration really challenges the status quo for our organizations, leaders and in our life. Things can be better and with some intentionality, we can reach those goals. Set bigger goals. And, architect our experiences. This is what make inspiration so powerful in driving sales, boosting performance, and setting aspirational goals.

Inspiration takes us to a better future state and though it may seem like a difficult concept to grasp, you can impact moments of inspiration by your intentionality. And at a time when everything seems to have changed, moments of inspiration have never been more important.

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