



## INSPIRATION AT THE INTERSECTION

BY BOB KODZIS

**Insight**, I believe, refers to the **depth of understanding** that comes by setting experiences — yours and mine, familiar and exotic, new and old — side by side, learning by letting them speak to one another.

— Mary Catherine Bateson

During this leg of the Quest for creative inspiration, we're spending some time at one of the most exciting places in the creative world: the intersection. I'm not talking about the middle of the road, I'm talking about a place of extraordinary creativity; a place where the possibilities bubble up to the surface like creative carbonation.

You might want to hold off on launching MapQuest to find this mystical location. It's not a true destination, yet it's a proven path to creativity and innovation.

Entrepreneur Frans Johansson, author of the best-selling business creativity book "The Medici Effect," coined the term "intersection." In his book, Johansson describes the intersection as a "place where ideas from different fields and cultures meet and collide, ultimately igniting an explosion of new discoveries." This explosive impact is what Johansson calls the "Medici Effect" — referring to the era of unprecedented creativity and artistic creation made possible by the Medici banking family in 15th century Florence, Italy. During this period, the Medici family brought together an extraordinarily diverse group of gifted artists, scientists, poets, architects and philosophers. They created a community in which all of these talents and diverse points of view intersected. The result was the launch of one of the most creative and progressive eras in history.

Johansson contends that creative intersections, like those funded by the Medicis, can be found and created in many of today's teams and organizations. His many examples of breakthrough creativity and innovation at the intersection are compelling and pretty darn interesting. Working with powerhouse clients such as Honeywell, IBM, Nike, PepsiCo, Volvo and Microsoft, he has had the rare opportunity to further road test his ideas.

Johansson sat down with me on two occasions and offered some fascinating insights. Pay attention as he guides us toward the intersection. We are entering the eye of the brainstorm. This wisdom just might help you and your team to generate even more amazing ideas.

### A LIVING EXAMPLE

Frans Johansson is a living example of a creative intersection. Raised in Sweden by an African-American and Cherokee mother and a Swedish father, Johansson was educated at Brown University and received his MBA from Harvard Business School where he began his research and writing on "The Medici Effect." He is a striking figure at well over six feet tall, with a broad, white smile and a loud, contagious laugh. His energy is frenetic, and he moves constantly and fluidly while he speaks.

When we last spoke he had just returned to his home in New York City from a trip to Bangkok, Italy and Sweden. This kind of travel is typical for Johansson and very likely contributes to his ability to see things from many different perspectives. He is generous with his time and his experience as he enlightens me with his insights about creativity at the intersection.

### DIVERSITY RULES

"Diversity is the key to achieving the Medici Effect," Johansson says. By intersecting diverse fields, cultures and disciplines we approach our creative challenges from a surprising variety of directions, making the possibilities almost limitless.

The key to creating an effective intersection is to bring together people who have genuinely and significantly different points of view. There is a wide range of ways to identify the diversity of a group beyond culture and discipline, including but not limited to: history, field, socioeconomic, family, education, religion and geography. The logic is simple but powerful: people with different backgrounds, knowledge and skills each look at creative challenges differently. Given the right environment, the result is a natural explosion of diverse ideas.

### PASSION MATTERS

If diversity is the primary vehicle for creative collaboration, then passion is the fuel that propels that vehicle to new heights. Johansson is passionate about passion. He makes it very clear that those seeking to innovate must attack the challenge with extraordinary enthusiasm. Without a very high level of energy and commitment, few innovations will survive beyond the drawing table.

As important as passion is to the success of creativity at the intersection, it is not a concept that is readily embraced in the corporate setting. "Many organizations get uncomfortable when you raise the topic of passion," Johansson says. "Leaders love

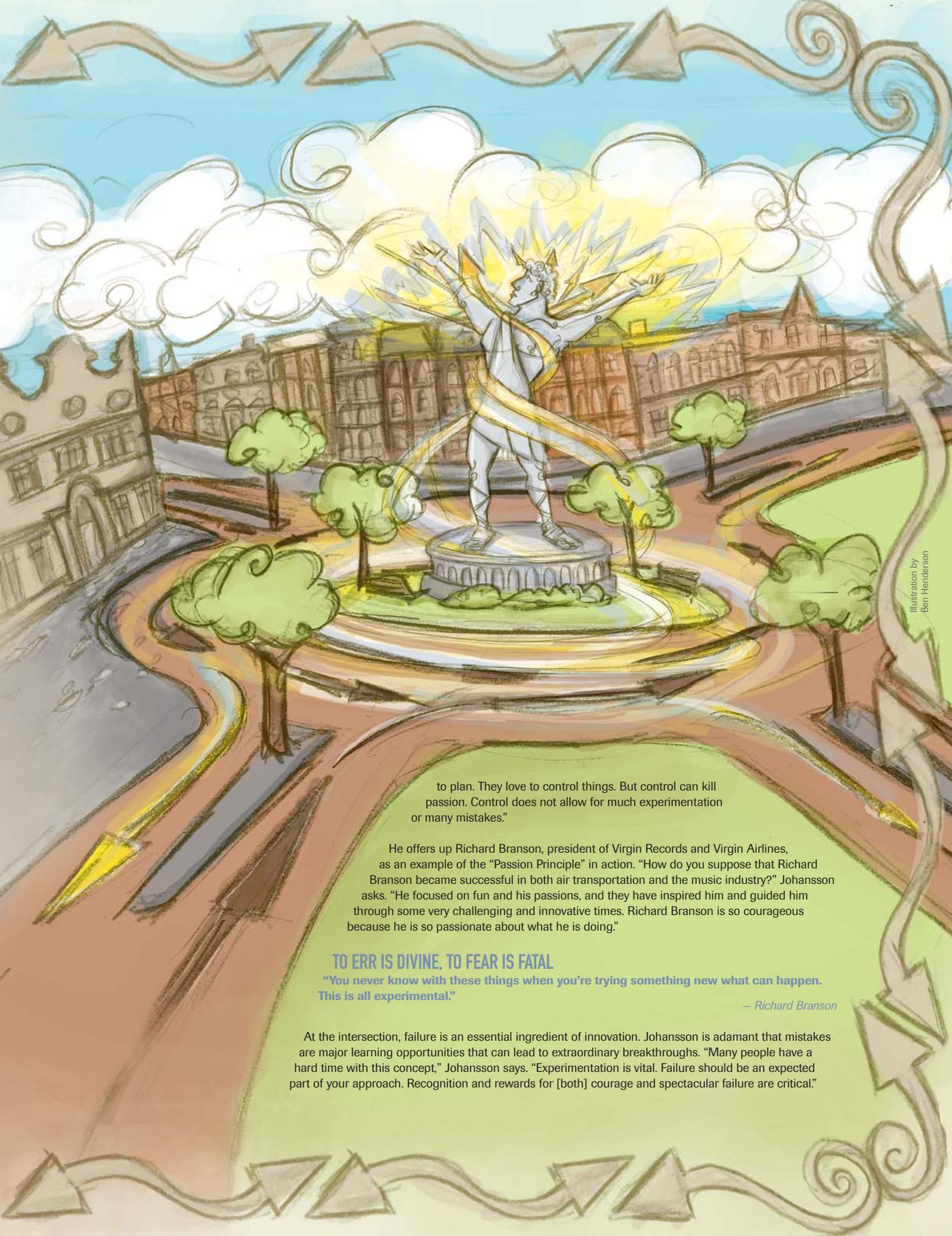


Illustration by Ben Henderson

to plan. They love to control things. But control can kill passion. Control does not allow for much experimentation or many mistakes.”

He offers up Richard Branson, president of Virgin Records and Virgin Airlines, as an example of the “Passion Principle” in action. “How do you suppose that Richard Branson became successful in both air transportation and the music industry?” Johansson asks. “He focused on fun and his passions, and they have inspired him and guided him through some very challenging and innovative times. Richard Branson is so courageous because he is so passionate about what he is doing.”

### **TO ERR IS DIVINE, TO FEAR IS FATAL**

**“You never know with these things when you’re trying something new what can happen. This is all experimental!”**

— Richard Branson

At the intersection, failure is an essential ingredient of innovation. Johansson is adamant that mistakes are major learning opportunities that can lead to extraordinary breakthroughs. “Many people have a hard time with this concept,” Johansson says. “Experimentation is vital. Failure should be an expected part of your approach. Recognition and rewards for [both] courage and spectacular failure are critical.”

What keeps this from happening most often is fear – in particular, fear of failure. “In this process, fear is the enemy,” Johansson says. “Too often a manager’s fear of failure is greater than their fear of losing what is truly at stake if they do not innovate.”

Johansson believes one of the best ways for a leader to overcome fear of failure is to share stories of their own failures with their teams. He adds, “Unfortunately, that is not happening enough in the corporate world. The culture is focused on talking about our successes, not our failures. So often we learn more from our failures.”

### MONOTONY IN THE MIDDLE

Dealing with top executives on a daily basis, Johansson feels that many CEOs sincerely understand the importance and value of innovation. “Yet, for a multitude of reasons, they fail to push that thinking through to the next level.

“The biggest obstacle to innovation and creating intersections is middle management,” asserts Johansson. “They spend all day trying to justify doing the same thing over and over again. They hear about an innovative approach and they say, ‘I believe that works, but here’s why it won’t work here.’”

### FINDING INTERSECTIONS

If you are seeking to find or to create a few intersections in your team and organization, here are a few suggestions from Johansson:

- Ensure diversity among your teams/participants. This is the most critical element. Tap into their differences.
- Involve people who are passionate and committed.
- Listening is critical. As Johansson puts it, “Don’t just shove ideas down their throats.”
- Do everything in your power to drive out fear. Embrace failure as a normal part of the process.
- Fun is extremely important, but remember that too much fun can kill the process as quickly as the absence of fun altogether.
- Keep the process interesting and engaging.
- Break out of your habits and networks – see the world from a new perspective.

After offering this partial list, Johansson laughs and says, “It sounds basic and easy ... and it is. You just have to make it happen.” These basic guidelines can help you increase your chances of discovering some truly innovative solutions to your challenges ... and those of your clients.

### SOME COOL INTERSECTIONAL INNOVATIONS

Here are a few interesting examples of innovations spawned by intersecting various disciplines and fields and cultures:

#### At the Intersection of Running Shoes and Tire Treads

When I ask for a good example of an intersection that produced good creative ideas, Frans Johansson starts talking about Hummers. He even sent me a photo to illustrate his point. The

new tire treads on the 2007 H3 Hummers are the rage. They leave a very cool signature trail unlike any other vehicle. They even stand out on the street, sometimes emblazoned with bold geometric strips of neon rubber. To arrive at this sexy new tread, engineers at GM looked outside their industry to the sport shoe designers at Nike.

By creating an intersection that allowed them to combine their diverse talents and knowledge, they created a truly original and hip concept in trademarked tire treads.

#### At the Intersection of Lollipops and Pubs

Johansson’s blog links you to this amazing story. It involves a simple yet creative solution that required some intersectional thinking. The owner of a pub in Angus, Scotland was faced with the challenge of finding a way to keep his patrons quieter and less rowdy as they headed homeward after closing.

His solution? Lollipops. By giving all patrons lollipops on their way out of the bar, he significantly decreased the amount of noise they created. Instead of yelling and frolicking, they were enjoying sweet treats. Police in the area are also known to carry suckers to pacify revelers and nightclub-goers in the downtown region.

#### At the Intersection of Spiders, Goats and Textiles

Another cool example comes from the second chapter of “The Medici Effect.” It tells the story of bio-technicians introducing a silk-producing gene from a golden orb-weaver spider into a herd of goats. The goal is for the goats to create milk that contained the properties of spider webs, a material that, ounce for ounce, is several times stronger than steel. The company behind the experiments, Nexia, believes that the commercial and scientific applications of such a material will be endless – from sporting goods to lightweight bulletproof clothing to artificial tendons.

These are just a few of dozens of fascinating examples offered in “The Medici Effect” and on Johansson’s blog at [www.themedicieffect.com](http://www.themedicieffect.com). If these concepts intrigue you and inspire you, find a copy of this book and read it. It may open your thinking to a whole new range of possibilities. ■

*Many thanks to Frans Johansson for his amazing insights, contagious passion and willingness to share what he has learned with Create Magazine readers. His research and observations have added another valuable piece to the puzzle on our quest for creative inspiration.*

Until next time – stay inspired.

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