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In The Art of Innovation, author Tom Kelley uses a didactic means to detail the success behind his brother's brain-child and America's leading design firm IDEO, in which he is general manager. Formerly named David Kelley design, the Palo Alto-based firm has found that creativity is both elusive and not at all. I was surprised to learn about IDEO's "line of work," if you will, that companies far and wide (even Fortune 500 companies) indulge in "outsourcing" to bring more energy to their name, or to revamp their products. For example, in 1988, Procter & Gamble came to IDEO with the goal of redesigning their Crest-brand toothpaste "twist-on" caps. They had seen that due to paste build-up that comes with the continued use of a tube of toothpaste, the caps became increasingly difficult to twist on. IDEO came up with Crest's "Neat Squeeze Tube," which caught on with consumers by storm and continues to thrive today. Throughout the book, Kelley heavily name-drops while almost fondly recollecting on the collaborations IDEO has partaken in in its time. While it was interesting to learn that IDEO designed the original Apple mouse, I found myself undecided about his motivation to write the book. Was this book more of a Cinderella story, or a guide written to help the creatively-stuck become unstuck?

Eventually, I decided on the latter. Tucked away between Kelley's dialogue, he exposes the reader to IDEO's much sought-after methodology. As almost a disclaimer, Kelley brings forth the idea of "practical application, not management theory." He continues to talk about understanding, observing, visualizing, evaluating and refining, and implementing. Kelley is a man of verbs. Product design seems like it would be a noun-based venture, right? Kelley is totally revolutionary in his belief of regarding products as verbs. In order to understand, for example, a tube of toothpaste in its true form, "in motion" or in use, one has to think of it not at a plastic tube, but as "releasing," or "flowing," or another verb of similar nature. Although as much about fun as they are about profit (having pulled some pretty heinous office pranks in their time), IDEO uses a controlled approach to creativity. I especially felt this "refined chaos" in chapters 4 and 10. Within these chapters, Kelley talks a lot about the importance of "brain-storming," starting off by telling the reader that they probably do it wrongly. However, as much as an artistic and crazy process it is considered to be, there are regulations to be considered. He gives the quick-and-dirty on the most effective way to brainstorm, which is well, quick and dirty. IDEO's execution of brain-storming is done in one hour-long increments, involving a mess of paper, pens, other three-dimensional building material, and even something Kelley calls "body-storming," acting out behavior and usage patterns of the consumer. Besides these little nuggets of wisdom that I found to be inspiring, IDEO's methodology appealed to me because to them, success isn't just a seven-letter word. Kelley's book opened my eyes to innovation that can be start up-sized and beyond, and while anecdotal, I really valued his lessons.