THE FUTURE-READY MINDSTATE

An Inside Look at How Google Innovates

Google's inaugural Chief Innovation Evangelist describes the mindstate that has propelled the company to innovation greatness.

Interview by Karen Christensen

Innovating for Impact is the relentless pursuit of knowledge and creating opportunity that includes –

A. Being Curious and Open Minded

B. Strong Look Ahead and New Thinking

C. Being Good at Experimenting and Testing Hypothesis

D. Accomplished at Connecting and Collaborating

E. A Desire to Make a Difference and Create Meaningful New Value

F. The Ability to Effect Change and Achieve Results

Karen Christensen: You spent over a decade as Google's Chief Innovation Evangelist. Early on, you noticed that 'Googlers' shared a distinct outlook that guided their approach. Please describe it.

Frederik Pferdt: After working with thousands of Googlers in my first few months, it became clear to me that every person I encountered shared what I call a 'future-ready mindstate.' This outlook isn't about following a specific process or pre-set methods; it's a dynamic way of thinking and being.

If you are asked to picture someone who is highly innovative, you might picture them in a certain type of environment, using specific processes and resources. But something very different was happening at Google, and it consisted of three elements. First, Googlers shared what I call *radical optimism,* which means seeing the possibilities in every challenge in front of them. Second, they exhibited *unreserved openness,* which involves embracing new ideas, people and perspectives without any hesitation. And the third thing I observed was *compulsive curiosity,* which drives a relentless pursuit of knowledge and understanding. Together with *perpetual experimentation* and *expansive empathy,* these elements make up the future-ready mindstate.

It became clear to me that this mindstate is the secret to igniting the potential that the future holds. It created a culture where innovation could thrive and people were constantly exploring, experimenting and empathizing with others to create meaningful solutions. These people were able to navigate ambiguity and uncertainty with ease and intention.

Tell us a bit more about the future-ready mindstate.

In this mindstate, people are tuned in to optimism, openness, curiosity, experimentation and empathy, as well as their Dimension X - that unique thing about them that makes them special. When these dimensions are dialled up, you can make impactful choices that are focused more on people and outcomes – and less on process, that are more circular and less one-directional, more equitable

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The Future-Ready Mindstate

Radical optimism goes far beyond seeing a glass that's half full. It reframes problems as positives and embraces a vision of an exceptional outcome. It enables you to see opportunity in every aspect of your experience.

Unreserved openness is free-falling into the (metaphorical) arms of others, not because you trust them to catch you but because you trust yourself to benefit from what happens whether they catch you or not. It puts you where opportunity can find you.

Compulsive curiosity turns you into a native in the land of the unknown. It gets you caught up in mystery and wonder, exploring roads you've never taken. It creates pathways to opportunity that didn't exist before.

Perpetual experimentation fuels immediate discovery. It tests ideas rapidly and repeatedly and keeps pressing you towards where the learning leads. It determines the most desirable opportunity to pursue.

Expansive empathy connects one human experience to another. These are the intersections you create and the bridges you build on the path towards your future. It compounds the impact of every opportunity.

Dimension Xis your unique superpower - the force that runs hot in you. It has a strong hand in what's happening to you right now as well as in what your future will look like tomorrow. Look for and act on opportunity.

and less biased, and more purposeful, natural - even spiritual. The good news is that these are deeply human qualities and capabilities that we can all be trained in and achieve. My goal at Google was to bring them to the forefront to help my colleagues create break-through innovations.

In the book you use the term 'expansive empathy.' How do you define it?

For me, expansive empathy means not just empathy for others - authentically trying to walk in someone else's shoes - but also, empathy for yourself, and in particular, your future self. At Stanford there is a research project called the Future Self Research Project, which is run by a couple of my former colleagues. They asked 20-year-old students to imagine themselves 10 years in the future. Most of them would answer, 'Sure, I can totally see myself in 10 years; I'll have a bit more money and maybe a better car.' Then they were asked to picture themselves in 20 years, and they were able to do that, too; maybe they'd have a family and a good job, maybe a nice house. But when they were asked how they saw themselves 30 or 40 years out, the picture got really fuzzy. They could not describe anything about where they might be or what they might be doing.

Another part of this project saw these 20-year-old students wear virtual reality glasses that showed them a much older version of themselves. The result was amazing: after several minutes of taking in images of their future self, the majority stated they intended to pay more attention to their health and save more money for retirement - to actually double the amount they were saving.

The key finding here was that the future has a lot more meaning for us when it's right in front of us, instead of being far off on the horizon.

I encourage people to see that your future isn't somewhere off in the distance, it's right here in front of you. It consists of the countless choices you make (or don't make) that determine where you go in your life and how you get there. Every choice you make is part of a process of weaving and shaping your own future.

Throughout the book, you provide 'Change Your Mindstate' exercises. Can you share one with us?

One exercise comes with the Compulsive Curiosity chapter. It consists of a small graphic of an arrow that points beyond the page of the book. I invite people to look just above the arrow on the page and ask, "What do you see?" The intention is that you physically look beyond the book you have in your hands; maybe you see your partner, maybe you see an airplane seat from the back, maybe you see a screen in front of you, or you see a beautiful view outside the window. Whatever it is.

Then, I ask three questions: What do you think you know for sure about what you see? What don't you know at all about what you see? And how can you find out more about what you see? These questions spark curiosity about what you see and observe, but also a deeper curiosity. This kind of 'compulsive curiosity' can really unlock ideas and insights that you haven't thought of before.

Another exercise is called the M&M Change Your Mindstate, and this is really about challenging your assumptions. I ask people to set up two jars and get a bag of M&Ms. That's all you need. Then, over the course of a day or a week, label one jar with 'Assumptions' and the other one with 'Learnings.' Every time you test an assumption, drop an M&M into the Assumptions jar. And after you test your assumption, drop as many M&Ms in the jar that is labelled 'Learnings' from that experience. You can actually watch the jars fill up - most importantly, the Learning jar.

Here's an example. Say I need to go to the bank. By default, I always avoid using the drive-up window that many banks in California have, because I believe it to be less convenient than going inside. But one day, I decide to test that assumption and pull up behind the two cars in line. What I discover is that, as I suspected, using the drive-up window does actually take a few more minutes than going inside. However, I also discover that while I wait in my car, I can make a quick call; I can listen to some music; I can enjoy the coffee that I brought with me. As a result, one M&M goes into the Assumptions jar and three go into the Learnings jar. You can do this with every experience you have throughout the day. For me, this is a great way to learn how to experiment your way forward.

In the book you distinguish between creative inputs and outputs. Describe the importance of this distinction.

I began considering the role the creative process plays in 'future readiness' after I started working with the Stanford d.school in 2009. There, I was exposed to an approach to design that made me see design as a verb - an active process that combines convergent and divergent reasoning to identify problems or opportunities and develop new ideas and solutions. Soon I saw the creative process as the most important component of creativity.

The creative process is simply the way your brain makes associations across everything your senses take in. Everyone makes these connections constantly - sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously. But they are happening all the time. What you do with those connections-that's the crux of the relationship between creativity and future-readiness.

A creative *output* is something that we all love and enjoy. When we look at a piece of art or hear a piece of music or whatever it is, we consider it a creative output, which is born from a blend of curiosity and and experimentation. It's what **Steve Jobs** called 'connecting the dots.' For me, that's just one side of the creative process. What I am even more interested in is the process of *collecting* the dots before you can connect them.

I think of creative input as lots and lots of dots. These dots are the countless pieces of information, experience and ideas that are all around me at any given moment. When I'm receiving creative input, I'm seeing these dots. I am alert to their presence, and I am collecting them - introducing them to my thoughts.

Your Secret Superpower: Dimension X

Becoming aware of your Dimension Xis the first step to using it. Dimension X can come in a variety of forms that perhaps can be defined using simple adjectives - gritty, funny,selfless, creative. But Dimension Xis more than a generic word. It's more likely a string of a few words that others - and you - have seen in action. And it's not a one-time thing. It's your signature trait that defines what you do and who you are, especially as you navigate the highs and lows of life. Mine,for example,is 'a bias for action,' which informs so much of my thinking about creativity,innovation and the future.

Instinctively,you likely know the Dimension X of the people around you who you admire - your partner, your kids, your colleagues. You feel what makes them different, and that's why they hold so much of your respect and love.

Your Dimension Xis the lens through which you see your world (not the world, your world). You may have some sense of it already, but it's worth trying to define it in a few words. Here's how:

STEP 1: Reflect on your journey. Think about the key moments in your life. Not the 'big deal' moments,like graduation or marriage, but rather a subtle realization related to a personal relationship or event in your life,like the moment you knew your partner was 'the one' or a career setback when you showed resilience. Draw a simple timeline on a piece of paper,marking five to 10 important events that have shaped who you are. Ask yourself:

- How did I respond in these moments?
- What inner strength helped me through?

STEP 2: Get an outside perspective. Ask three friends, colleagues or family members who play different roles in your life to share a story about you - specifically a time when they saw you at your best and worst. Listen for any traits they highlight.

STEP 3: Identify your Dimension X. Look for common themes in your timeline and the stories you've heard. What traits keep coming up? This recurring trait is likely your Dimension X - the strength that guides you.

STEP 4: Put it into action. Now that you've identified your Dimension X, think about how you can use it in your life this week. Whether it's embracing curiosity, acting decisively or showing empathy, let this trait guide your decisions.

Recognizing the X-Factor

Next time you're inclined to thank or compliment someone, see if you can go one step further. Really define what you see as the gift that makes them unique It's likely a variation of a compliment but with more specificity:

I've noticed that in pivotal moments, you really show up by ..(e.g. Coming up with creative ideas... using humour to make others feel comfortable in difficult situations... asking the questions that nobody else thinks of).

Maybe it's something they haven't seen in themselves, or maybe it reinforces what they subconsciously believe to be their Dimension X. Either way, you're doing something super powerful: Giving others a permission slip to use their uniqueness in new ways.

Then, the creative output starts: I begin connecting the dots, playing with the infinite combinations that the information and ideas can form. As a result of these connections, sometimes I push something new out into the world. My empathy, openness and experimentation enable me to connect the dots in a valuable way.

The fact is, you can control creative input by sensitizing yourself to the existence of the dots all around you. You can train yourself to see more dots and bring them closer to you. And you control creative output by choosing to do something with the dots. You can train yourself to connect more dots and make something new with them.

How can we improve our awareness of creative inputs or 'dots'?

By immersing ourselves in different fields, for example, or exploring new cultures and staying open to unexpected ideas, we can accumulate a rich array of dots over time. For me this stage is crucial as it broadens our perspective and equips us with a variety of elements to draw from when creating something new. This is something we can all train ourselves in by throwing ourselves into different experiences and exposing ourselves to different ideas and so forth, really using our senses more to collect those dots.

And the final act is connecting these dots. But the more dots you collected beforehand, the more you can connect afterwards. Bringing together diverse ideas and insights in innovative ways really transforms our collective experiences into creative output. This process is not linear but is a dynamic interplay of curiosity and experimentation and connection driven by the future-ready mindstate, which embraces the unknown and can transform it into something meaningful.

Given all that you know and understand about the future, do you think we should be more worried or excited about what's coming?

As soon as we think about the future, AI or some other technology often comes to mind because we hear so much about it in the media. I use a different approach. As I said earlier, I want to bring the future *closer* to people. I want to bring their future into the here and now, so they understand that every choice they make is determining their future. And as a result, the future is something that we all have some level of control over.

In particular, we have control over *how we want to be* in the future. We can control whether we want to be a bit more kind, more open and curious, more compassionate. When we look at AI and other technologies, many people worry that it's out of our control. But we actually can control how we experiment with these technologies. Instead of listening to individuals who see the future as something dystopian, I suggest bringing it back to you and what you can actually control.

It's natural to feel some anxiety about the future because it is, by definition, unknown. But we can transform this uncertainty into possibilities. If you experiment with new technologies, if you show more empathy, if you have optimism about the future and are more open, there is great potential for positive outcomes.

The bottom line is that the future is not singular, it's plural: Countless possible futures exist for you and the communities of which you're a part. Your future-ready mindstate fuels collaboration and partnerships with others that can have an exponential impact on the future you share. 'What will the future bring?' is a passive question. The future-ready question is 'What future do I want to create?' **RM**

Google's first ChiefInnovation Evangelist **Dr. Frederik G. Pferdt** is the author of *What's Next Is Now: How to Live Future Ready* (HarperCollins, 2024). As the founder of Google's Innovation Lab, he trained tens of thousands of Googlers to develop and prototype cutting-edge ideas and taught courses on innovation and creativity at Stanford University for more than a decade. He has also worked with dozens of organizations ranging from the United Nations to NASA and the NBA. Born in Germany, he lives with his family in Santa Cruz, California.