

*Title:*

# **EVERYTHING IS A PROTOTYPE**

*Subtitle*

→ **THE SECRET  
TO BOLDER IDEAS  
AND BIGGER  
BREAKTHROUGHS**

**BRENDAN** *(author)*  
**KEARNS**

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KEARNS** *(author)*

**BIS**

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# AUTHOR'S NOTE

Too many people spend a large portion of their lives avoiding mistakes at all costs, searching for familiar answers to new questions, unaware of being trapped in a mental prison of their own making. Nowhere is this more evident than in our blindness to our most innate capacity: the everyday use of our creativity.

Before you dive in, there are two things I want to share about this book:

- 1. It's designed to be a practical, no-nonsense guide to creativity**—grounded in experience and stripped of the self-indulgence that sometimes sneaks into books like this. If you've ever felt let down by promises of transformation that left you unchanged, this one is meant to deliver something different. Every page is the product of my obsession with the power of human ingenuity—crafted to be useful, economical, and worth your time.
- 2. This book uses stories as a frame for its practical tools.** You'll encounter moments from my own life and the lives of others that are meant to inspire and guide you, but I know not everyone reads the same way. Some of you may love the stories, while others might prefer to jump straight to the actionable parts. That's okay. The book is designed

to support both approaches, with clear visual cues and section markers so you can find what you need. Whether you choose to follow the narrative flow or dip into specific tools, the ideas here are meant to meet you where you are.

I've never liked the saying, "There's no such thing as a bad idea." There are bad ideas—not because they fail, but because they're careless or even harmful. Take my own teenage misadventure with a speargun in a garden pond, which cost me a tooth and a good deal of pride. It was a foolish idea, yes, but it taught me the difference between mistakes we can learn from and ones we're better off avoiding.

This book isn't about judging ideas by their moral weight. It's about making space to pursue ideas with purpose, then shaping, testing, and refining them. It's about cultivating the mindset to bring ideas into the world and see if they stand on their own merit. If you're willing to prototype enough ideas, I promise you'll eventually uncover ones that truly matter.

So how do we turn our ideas into action without risking more than we can afford? The tools in these pages are here to help you sidestep the traps of modern life and work that stifle creativity and ingenuity. My aim is to empower you to have, make, build, and share ideas relentlessly. Because even if most of those ideas don't work, the act of trying will lead you somewhere remarkable. And when you get there, it will be a beautiful thing.

—Brendan





# **INTRODUCTION**

*A Crisis of Playing It Safe*

“Caution is the path to mediocrity. Gliding, passionless mediocrity is all that most people think they can achieve.”

FRANK HERBERT



## TWO BAKERS

Nestled between a dusty hardware store and a dry cleaner on a busy high street in North London is an abandoned shopfront. On its door hangs a sign from a local real estate agent, promising a 'unique retail opportunity' and 'ample foot traffic.' A little over a year ago it was the home of a budding new bakery. Today it's empty and deserted.

Its previous tenant, Jack, had always dreamed of opening his own bakery. He'd learned everything about running one for the last 10 years—working his way up from dogsbody to baker's apprentice to manager. When he walked past the shopfront on his way home from work one day, the sign stopped him dead in his tracks. He'd made this same journey hundreds of times and always imagined one of the shops on this street being his own. Staring through the window, he could see it all come to life. He imagined polished wooden countertops, assortments of delicious treats, the smell of fresh ground coffee, the hiss of steaming milk, and rows upon rows of fresh sourdough, baguette, and brioche. A few weeks later, he took his £10,000 in savings and a £40,000 loan from the bank and signed a two-year lease on the building. The vision of Jack's Bakery was born.

Over the next eight weeks, Jack worked tirelessly on the fit-out of his new store. He hired carpenters, electricians, painters, and even convinced a well-known graphic designer to do the branding. With a small team of casual sales staff, he

opened the doors a little over two months later. Jack's Bakery was in business.

Sales were slow in the beginning. Initially, he blamed it on a spike in wet weather and the train station across the road being closed for renovations. As he'd been counting on attracting hungry commuters, he told himself that it was just a hiccup, things would get better once the station reopened.

A week or two later, with the weather improving and an influx of passing commuters thanks to the re-opening of the train station, sales still didn't improve. After a few more weeks, still nothing. Very quickly, Jack had to let go of some of his casual staff. To be fair, they were spending most of their time pretending to be busy anyway.

After three months, Jack's bank balance was getting dangerously low. He did everything he could think of to get more customers: changed the type of snacks he sold in the morning; introduced a loyalty scheme; offered discounts; he even gave away free coffee vouchers to tired commuters, trying to entice them into his now struggling business. None of it helped. He was barely making enough money to cover expenses, let alone make a living.

Late one night, Jack did the numbers and realised that he only had enough left for two more months of rent, loan repayments, and supplies. The writing was on the wall. Jack had no choice. In less than six months, he'd spent tens of thousands of pounds and his dream was all but dead. He would be left with nothing.

Lisa didn't know Jack but she'd watched him go out of business. A pastry chef by trade, she loved seeing someone doing what she'd always dreamt of. When she heard Jack was shutting down, she wondered what had gone wrong. She always had her professional opinion about what could've been done better, but she never imagined Jack's Bakery would go out of business in six months. It didn't make sense. They were in a great location, so she thought, and the shop looked fantastic. When she shared her thoughts with one of her friends, they made an off-hand comment about her being just as qualified to run it as anyone else. This got her thinking...maybe she could make it work? Maybe she could do it better. Maybe this was the opportunity she was looking for? After all, the shop was already fitted out with everything she needed to open a bakery.

Lisa called the real estate agent a few days later, half curious and half hoping for a good deal, given that Jack had gone out of business and left the landlord without a paying tenant. Annoyingly, the agent said that the owner wasn't willing to rent it to anyone for less than a two year minimum and a sizable deposit. Once bitten, twice shy, she guessed. Two years was longer than Lisa was willing to commit to the idea so she let it go, for a while. But the idea was seeded. After a series of late nights browsing commercial real estate listings for alternative locations and a lot of back-of-a-napkin planning, Lisa stumbled across a company that rented out specialised retail space by the day. You could run a coffee pop-up in central London on Monday, a cafe for the creatives in Shoreditch on Tuesday, and another for the old money crowd in Kensington on Wednesday. All without a two year contract.

The idea of not being locked-in to a long-term lease got Lisa thinking; why not test the idea for her bakery before committing to it full time? Instead of quitting her job and going all-in, she could rent a new location for a couple of days to see if it was worth the risk.

And so Lisa went about her experiment. She rented a new space every Saturday in different neighbourhoods. Instead of spending hours baking each week, she arranged to buy her stock wholesale from someone else. She even roped in friends and family as cheap labour in her pop-up bakeries while she was building up her confidence (and cash reserves to hire some weekend staff.)

In less than a month, Lisa had created a system that would allow her to run temporary bakeries all across London, all without the risk of hinging everything on the one location. She avoided the stress of committing to long-term leases and the financial risk that goes with them. This gave her time to focus on other questions: Was her dream of opening her own bakery a viable idea? Was it more viable in the north, east, west, or south parts of the city? And if she went full-time on her new business, which location made the most sense?

Lisa is what I call a *Prototyper*. Instead of assuming that there was only one way of setting up a bakery, she did what all good prototypers do—experiment. Instead of taking over Jack’s lease and committing to a fixed location, she took her idea and found a way to test it in different neighbourhoods. She had ideas, found a way to test them, made mistakes, and learned how to make small changes each time based on what she’d

learned (which we'll learn more about in the Iteration chapter later in this book). Instead of spending the early hours of every weekend baking, she bought her stock from someone else to test different kinds of breads and pastries, cakes, macarons, cookies, and more. She carefully tracked how many people came into her pop-ups, what sold in different neighbourhoods, the busiest times of the day, and the different store layouts that turned over the most customers. Of course, it goes without saying that she made mistakes. But she made them cheaply. She learned quickly that three baristas on weekdays in the city and extra waitstaff in the suburbs on a weekend made everyone's life a lot easier, and made her a lot more money. In the same amount of time that Jack opened and closed his bakery (6 months), Lisa had perfected hers. She'd done it experimentally, allowed herself room for drastic changes, and did it all at a fraction of the cost.

Prototyping gave Lisa the feedback she needed to be more certain about the kind of bakery she would eventually open and where it was most likely to be successful. She removed the stress and uncertainty that comes with going all-in, like Jack did, and gave herself an edge over someone trying to do the same thing the "conventional" way. In a strange twist of fate, months after Jack was forced to close, the landlord that refused to rent their shop for less than two years finally listed his space with the same company that Lisa used to run her pop-ups. She had an opportunity to set up shop there for one Saturday only. And so, sandwiched between a dusty hardware store and a dry cleaner on a busy north London high street, Lisa learned with a prototype in one day the same lesson that cost Jack his life savings...it was a terrible location for a bakery.

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# A BETTER WAY TO SOLVE PROBLEMS

This isn't a book about how to open a bakery or run a business. This is a field guide for having better ideas and how to test them. It's about untangling how we're taught to judge our thinking against a rigid criteria of right and wrong, good and bad, and the debilitating effect this has on our capacity for innovative problem solving every day.

Over the next few chapters, I'm going to teach you how to think and behave more experimentally about everything from sport to side hustles, your career, and even parts of your personal life. Along the way, you'll develop a fool proof method of using your creativity to bring your ideas to life, and learn how to make course corrections when necessary. By the end of this book, you'll be a Prototyper. You'll take big risks in a more manageable way—with structure, self-compassion, and objectivity, which are all key ingredients to worthwhile creativity of any kind.

Above all else, I'm going to teach you how to make better mistakes by making them cheaply and relatively risk-free. You'll also learn how to make better decisions by sorting the wheat from the chaff. This is an integral reminder, because ultimately—the most successful companies and people in the world have learned that while mistakes are a cost of doing business, the wisest use it as fuel for growth. Having gone through the gauntlet of companies like Google and Twitter myself, I've seen

first-hand the power of understanding and celebrating your biggest cockups. It leads to better work, bigger breakthroughs, and more innovative ideas. Not to mention a better way to spend your time. However, it takes more than just airing your mistakes to make them useful. First you have to understand why we make them.





# A CRISIS OF INGENUITY.

Blurb

There is a dangerous belief that governs how we live and work. It kills the best ideas, stifles ambition, and suffocates our natural capacity for creativity. From the soot-covered factory to the glittering heights of Silicon Valley, it has cemented itself as dogma in society for over a century. Being *wrong*, we're taught, is a symptom of flawed ability. Or worse, a sign of bad character.

This book challenges the age-old stigma associated with errors and introduces a toolkit for better ideas, built on the reality that making mistakes is not only normal but a secret of genius when done deliberately. It unpacks conventional wisdom about how we're taught to solve problems in life and work, proving how experimentation, not perfection, is the critical ingredient for *original thinking*.

Whether you are daydreaming about starting something new, grappling with a creative dilemma, or trying to live and work more experimentally, *Everything is a Prototype* is a field guide for the unknown and uncertain. It challenges deeply held beliefs about our own inventiveness and shares proven methods for finding your best ideas among the noise. Starting with permission and covering vulnerability, consequences, experiments, and iteration, it offers a toolkit for navigating the fears and frustrations of whether an idea is worth pursuing or not.

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