

The Zen of Business:
7 Habits of the Highly
Creative MATTHEW E. MAY

Frank Zappa once said: “The most important thing in art is the frame. For paint, literally. For other arts, figuratively—because, without this humble appliance, you can’t know where the art stops and the real world begins.”

What he’s saying is that how we frame something, like an idea or a problem, for example, has everything to do with how well it turns out. He’s saying that there is an art to framing. That framing is an art.

Frank Zappa had it right. And the reason I believe that is because how I view the world changed completely a few years ago, during an eight year long engagement with a very large and very successful Japanese company. The focus of my engagement was essentially to help unite two distinctly different cultures—Eastern and Western—in a common approach. This meant I had to straddle two different ways of looking at the world—two completely different ways of looking at the same thing.

And I must confess I had a difficult time of it. Somewhere in the middle of my tenure, I found myself up against the proverbial brick wall, at an utter loss as to what to do in a particularly challenging project. And in the midst of that struggle, thanks to a few precipitating bits of wisdom from a variety of sources, I had one of those moments.

All of a sudden, everything became clear. I felt wide awake, connected and balanced, and everything made sense. I knew exactly why I was there, what was needed, and what I wanted to do.

It was a breakthrough moment. It was beyond “flow” or “being in the zone.” Both terms are inadequate to capture the essence of the moment. It was moment of *shibumi*.

Shibumi is a Japanese word, the meaning of which is reserved for just these kinds of experiences. With roots in the Zen aesthetic ideals of art, architecture, and gardening, it has no direct translation in English, but has come to denote those things that exhibit in paradox, and all at once, the very best of everything and nothing: Elegant simplicity. Effortless effectiveness. Understated excellence. Beautiful imperfection.

Shibumi is ... Elegant simplicity.
Effortless effectiveness. Understated excellence.
Beautiful imperfection.

James Michener referred to shibumi in his 1968 novel *Iberia*, writing that it can't be translated and has no explanation. Soetsu Yanagi in his 1972 book *The Unknown Craftsman* talked about shibumi in the context of art, writing that a true work of art is one whose intentionally imperfect beauty makes an artist of the viewer. The author Trevanian (the nom de plume of Dr. Rodney William Whitaker) wrote in his 1979 best-selling novel *Shibumi*, “Shibumi has to do with great refinement underlying commonplace appearances.”

The pursuit of shibumi in business, work and life is guided by several key concepts, seven of which fit neatly under the heading of creativity.

Koko (austerity)

The first principle is that of *koko*, or austerity. *Koko* emphasizes the disciplines of restraint, exclusion, and omission. *Koko* involves things that seem spare, even Spartan, yet impart a sense of focus and clarity. Examples abound.

W. L. Gore and Associates, recognized as one of the world's most innovative companies, does not give job titles and refrains from the typical corporate hierarchy in order to release the creativity of its staff employees. Product designers of Toyota's youth brand, Scion, refused to advertise and left out hundreds of standard options on its vehicles to allow ad-averse Generation Y buyers to make a personal statement by customizing their cars with trendy accessories. Europe's "do nothing" default on organ donations—meaning you are an organ donor unless you opt out—results in nearly quadruple the participation seen in the United States. The British bank First Direct has no physical branches, yet is the most highly recommended bank in the United Kingdom.

There is a wonderful picture widely available on the Internet of the young Steve Jobs, circa 1982, sitting in the middle of the fully furnished living room of his Los Altos house. There isn't much in the room, save an audio system and a Tiffany lamp. No furniture—Steve is sipping tea, sitting yoga style on a mat, with but a few books around him. The picture explains a lot about his "buttonless" aesthetic and sensibility, and the motive driving virtually every Apple product designed under his command. After all, the keyboard for the original Macintosh had no direction keys for the cursor; until 2005, the Mac mouse had only one button; desktop Macs had no traditional i/o power buttons. He had removed buttons from elevators in multilevel Apple retail stores, along with standard retail queues and counters. Rarely if ever can he be seen wearing a shirt with buttons.

Zen creativity habit #1: Refrain from adding what is not absolutely necessary in the first place.

Kanso (simplicity)

“I wouldn’t give a fig for simplicity on this side of complexity, but I would give my life for simplicity on the other side of complexity.” — Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.

We’ve all heard the cliché, “keep it simple, stupid.” And this is the principle of *kanso*. *Kanso* dictates that beauty and utility need not be overstated, overly decorative, ornate, or fanciful. *Kanso* imparts a sense of being fresh, clean, and neat.

The Flip video camera created by the designers at Pure Digital Technologies is a great example of product *kanso*. The Flip is wonderfully simple and elegant. In much the same way the ubiquitous Google splash page does with search, it takes all of the complexity of a very complex thing— here a high definition video camera—and hides it behind an amazingly simple and user-friendly interface.

Kanso dictates that beauty and utility need not be overstated, overly decorative, ornate, or fanciful.

There is no misunderstanding how to use this little number. There is no power adaptor or software on CD or incomprehensible manual to read. It plugs in to your USB port to charge, and the software self installs from the camera. It does one thing and one thing only. And it does it very well, taking great high-quality video that’s easy to view and share. which should be the primary value adding feature of any HD camera, no matter how many bells and whistles it might have.

Zen creativity habit #2: Eliminate what doesn’t matter to make more room for what does.

Shizen (naturalness)

“If we observed first, designed second, we wouldn’t need most of the things we build.”

— Ben Hamilton-Baillie

The principle of *shizen* seeks to achieve a balance between being of nature, yet distinct from it—to be viewed as being without pretense, without artifice, not forced, yet intentional rather than accidental or haphazard.

When UK-based urban designer Ben Hamilton-Baillie goes about designing the kinds of “shared spaces” found at Kensington High Street, Sloane Square and Exhibition Road in London, he is taking a page from the redesign of high-traffic intersections in the Netherlands that have been artfully redesigned to be void of traffic controls.

“Shared space” design is the brainchild of the late Dutch traffic engineer Hans Mondermann, who believed, and proved, that the busier a street is, the safer it becomes. In the 1970s, Monderman began to realize through his investigation of accidents that traffic controls robbed motorists of their intelligence. Monderman once said that traffic lights and signs are “basically telling you to ‘go ahead, drive fast, don’t worry, we have it under control for you.’ That’s a very dangerous message.”

In a shared space intersection such as those in Drachten and Oostervelde, curbs have been eliminated, asphalt replaced with red brick, and there are fountains and trees and café seating right where you think you should drive. When you come into this intersection, you have no choice but to slow down, have human interaction, and use your intelligence. The result is an organic, naturally self-organizing order, with half the accidents and nearly twice the vehicle flow.

The only rule is driven by the context: first in turn with all due respect to the most vulnerable. The naturally emergent self-organization is far better and far more powerful than anything we could artificially impose. It's like looking at a crowded ice skating rink for the first time—it looks chaotic but there's a natural order to things.

Hans used to like to demonstrate his premise that things are safer in the presence of danger by walking into the middle of the intersection... backwards.

Zen creativity habit #3: Before taking action, look for naturally occurring patterns and rhythms, and construct your ideas to fit them.

The principle of *shizen* seeks to achieve a balance between being of nature, yet distinct from it.

Yugen (subtlety)

"The poet must be able to end a thought so masterfully that a rich space of suggestions unfolds in the imagination of his audience." — Fujiwara Teika

The principle of *yugen* captures the Zen view that, because the human spirit is indefinable, the power of suggestion is exalted as the mark of a truly authentic creation. Finiteness—dotting every "i" and crossing every "t"—is thought to be at odds with nature, implying stagnation and loss of life.

Two examples of Zappa's "art and the real world" are on point: In art, The Mona Lisa. And in business, the launch strategy of the iPhone in 2007.

Leonardo da Vinci recognized the power of yugen—that when things are left open to interpretation, we inject ourselves in the equation and use our imaginations. He knew that limiting information seduces the viewer. The reason the Mona Lisa looks different each time you look at her isn't because of some secret code or conspiracy. It's because he deliberately blurred the corners of her eyes and mouth, the two most expressive parts of the human face, thus leaving her look completely ambiguous, indistinct, and uncertain.

In Apple's case, if you recall, the iPhone was hailed as the most hyped hi-tech gizmo in history. Now, to hype something means to push it heavily through marketing and media, but that's not what Apple did. It used the principle of yugen. Steve Jobs demonstrated it just once—at Macworld 07. He gave a masterful presentation there in January, but it didn't go on sale until June.

In between? Radio silence: no publicity, no promotions, no leaks to press, no price discounts, no prototypes to reviewers, no advertising blitz, no preordering. There was essentially an embargo on official information with only the Jobs demo online to reference. The bloggers and Apple loyalists took over, interpreted and extrapolated, completed the picture as it were, and the iPhone "tipped" before it ever went on sale, with over 20 million people expressing an intent to buy.

Zen creativity habit #4: Leave something to the imagination by limiting information.

Fukinsei (imperfection, asymmetry)

“Perfection is achieved not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left to take away.” — Antoine de Saint Exupery

The goal of *fukinsei* is to convey the symmetrical harmony and beauty of nature through clearly asymmetrical and incomplete renderings; the effect is that the viewer supplies the missing symmetry and thus participates in the act of creation.

No better example exists than that of sudoku. Little did Indianapolis architect Howard Garnes know in 1979 when he modified a 200-year old numerical array (known as Latin squares) into a numerical brainteaser (that the puzzle magazine *Dell* would originally publish as “Number Place”) that it would go on to be renamed Sudoku by Japanese publisher *Nikoli* and become a worldwide obsession. But that’s exactly what it now is—millions play it everyday.

By the end of 2005, the World Puzzle Federation had declared Sudoku the number one logic puzzle in the world. Today there are online versions, Sudoku radio and television shows and games, Sudoku clubs, strategy books, videos, card games, and competitions. In 2006, Italy hosted the first World Sudoku Championship, with teams from around the world participating. Being the champion in one’s own country is tough enough, but the competition in these international games is even more fierce.

A Sudoku designer fully employs *fukinsei* in creating a puzzle. A complete solution is crafted and then the designer symmetrically subtracts filled-in squares to arrive at the starting grid, which is predominantly empty.

Sudoku could not be easier to learn: you do not even need to know how to count, its one rule can be explained in a single sentence, it takes but a minute to grasp, and it is universal in nature (unlike crossword puzzles, which are knowledge-based as well as language-specific) because the numbers are just symbols. And yet, the underlying complexity behind the logic needed to solve a Sudoku puzzle can be incredibly challenging.

Will Shortz, the famed crossword puzzle editor for *The New York Times* and the only person in the world with a degree in enigmatology (the study of codes and puzzles), describes himself as a Sudoku “addict.”

**Zen creativity Habit #5: Appreciate the beauty of natural imperfection.
Leave the door open for others to co-create with you.**

Seijaku (stillness, quietude, solitude)

“Stand still when the hippos charge.” — Boyd Matson

The principle of seijaku emphasizes the fundamental Zen theme of emptiness, which implies an inexhaustible spirit. It is in states of active calm, tranquility, solitude, and quietude that we find the very essence of creative energy. Silent pauses in music, as well as motionlessness in dance and theater, illustrate the power of seijaku.

The idea here is this: doing something isn’t always better than doing nothing. In other words, instead of “don’t just stand there, do something,” it’s “don’t just do something, stand there.” This is far more difficult than it sounds. Doing nothing is actually quite hard, because we have a fight or flight mechanism built in.

I learned a very valuable lesson from *National Geographic* adventure journalist Boyd Matson. A life-saving lesson as a matter of fact. I learned how to stand still when the hippos charge. I don't care if you're an Olympic class sprinter, you'll die if you run.

If I told you to do nothing for the next five minutes, you'd have a hard time of it. Unless you know how to quiet your mind through, for example, meditation.

For 20 years neuroscientists have been studying Buddhist monks in Tibet. Why? Because the most experienced practitioners, adepts they're called, with over 10,000 hours of meditation under their tunics, exhibit abnormally high levels of gamma brainwaves—the kind that has been recently shown to immediately precede the proverbial aha! moment. Maybe that's why so many high performing athletes and executives meditate or use neurofeedback training. It seems the brain needs the calm before its storm.

Zen creativity habit #6: Learn to quiet your mind; designate a time and place for creative solitude.

Instead of “don't just stand there, do something,”
it's “don't just do something, stand there.”

Datsuzoku (break from routine)

“Best New Year’s resolution? A stop-doing list.” — Jim Collins

Closely related to seijaku is the principle of datsuzoku, which signifies a break from daily routine or habit, a certain freedom from the commonplace. It involves a feeling of transcending the ordinary and conventional. The result of datsuzoku is pleasant surprise and unexpected amazement.

Tony Schwartz, CEO of The Energy Project, wrote his new book, *The Way We’re Working Isn’t Working*, using a “pulse” method, working without interruptions for three 90-minute periods, and taking a break between each one. He had breakfast after the first session, went for a run after the second, and had lunch after the third. He wrote no more than 4 1/2 hours a day, and finished the book in under six months—half the time it took him to write his previous book, at which he toiled for 10 hours at a time.

Numerous research studies show that our bodies operate in 90-minute rhythms during the day. When we’re awake, we move from higher to lower alertness every 90 minutes. And here’s the thing: our bodies clearly signal that rhythm, in the form of restlessness, hunger, drowsiness and loss of focus. Generally we either ignore or override those signals, because we have a lot to do and many ways to artificially pump up our energy with various supplements. The problem is that after working at high intensity for more than 90 minutes, our brains begin to shut down. We become more reactive and less capable of thinking clearly, creatively, and reflectively, or seeing the big picture.

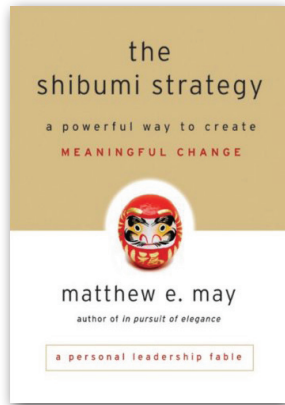
In fact, human beings are designed to pulse, to move between spending and renewing energy to meet our four key needs: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual.

Zen creativity habit #7: Re-energize your creativity by taking regular “timeouts” every 90 minutes.

Take these seven concepts together as a cohesive set of principles to guiding your own pursuit of shibumi. Think of them as the Zen of business, or, as I refer to them, **“The Shibumi Seven.”** 

Human beings are designed to pulse,
to move between spending and renewing energy
to meet our four key needs:
physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual.

info



BUY THE BOOK

Get more details or buy a copy of Matthew E. May's [*The Shibumi Strategy*](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matthew E. May is an internationally recognized innovation author, design strategist, and columnist for the American Express OPEN Forum Idea Hub. He is a popular speaker and master kaizen coach, working with organizations all over the world. His previous books include *In Pursuit of Elegance*, and *The Elegant Solution*. He lives in Southern California.

SEND THIS

[Pass along a copy](#) of this manifesto to others.

SUBSCRIBE

[Sign up for our free e-newsletter](#) to learn about our latest manifestos as soon as they are available.

BORN ON DATE

This document was created on January 20, 2011 and is based on the best information available at that time.

ABOUT CHANGETHIS

[ChangeThis](#) is a vehicle, not a publisher. We make it easy for big ideas to spread. While the authors we work with are responsible for their own work, they don't necessarily agree with everything available in ChangeThis format. But you knew that already.

ChangeThis is supported by the love and tender care of 800-CEO-READ. Visit us at [800-CEO-READ](#) or at our daily [blog](#).

COPYRIGHT INFO

The copyright of this work belongs to the author, who is solely responsible for the content.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License. To view a copy of this license, visit [Creative Commons](#) or send a letter to Creative Commons, 559 Nathan Abbott Way, Stanford, California 94305, USA.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

You are given the unlimited right to print this manifesto and to distribute it electronically (via email, your website, or any other means). You can print out pages and put them in your favorite coffee shop's windows or your doctor's waiting room. You can transcribe the author's words onto the sidewalk, or you can hand out copies to everyone you meet. You may not alter this manifesto in any way, though, and you may not charge for it.