



Economic Services Administration

# HOW TO CLIMB OUT OF MENTAL VALLEYS (AND WHY IT MATTERS TO CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION)

Jennifer Phillips, User Experience Design Manager,  
DSHS/ESA Organizational Development

# CREATIVITY

“The ability to *transcend traditional ideas, rules, patterns, relationships*, or the like, and to create *meaningful new ideas, forms, methods, interpretations, etc.*”

Dictionary.com



# INNOVATION

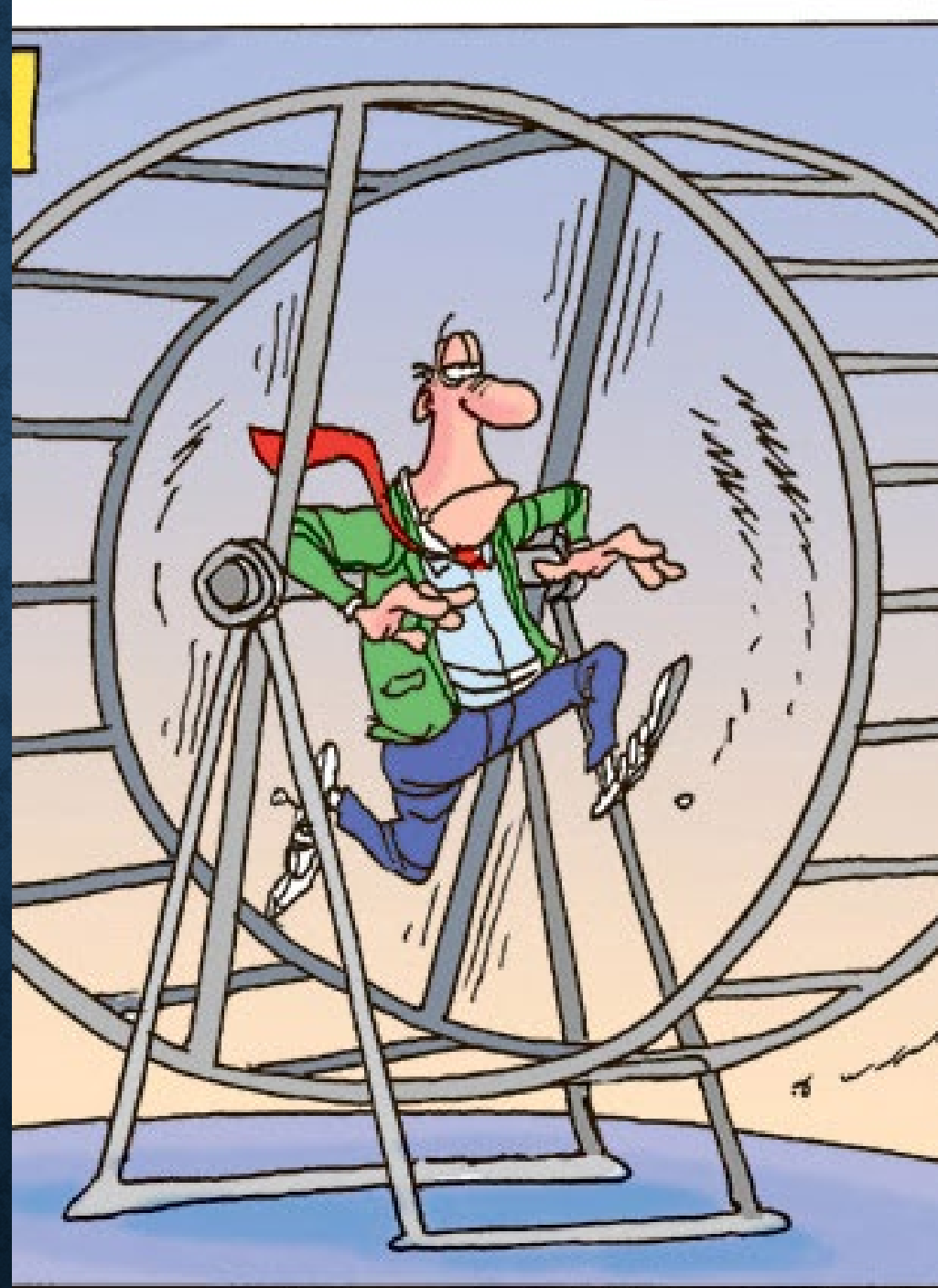
“Doing things differently,  
and doing different things,  
to create a *step change in  
performance.*”

*Creating the Culture for Innovation –  
Practical Guide for Leaders, NHS, 2010*



# LOOK FOR THE SIGNS

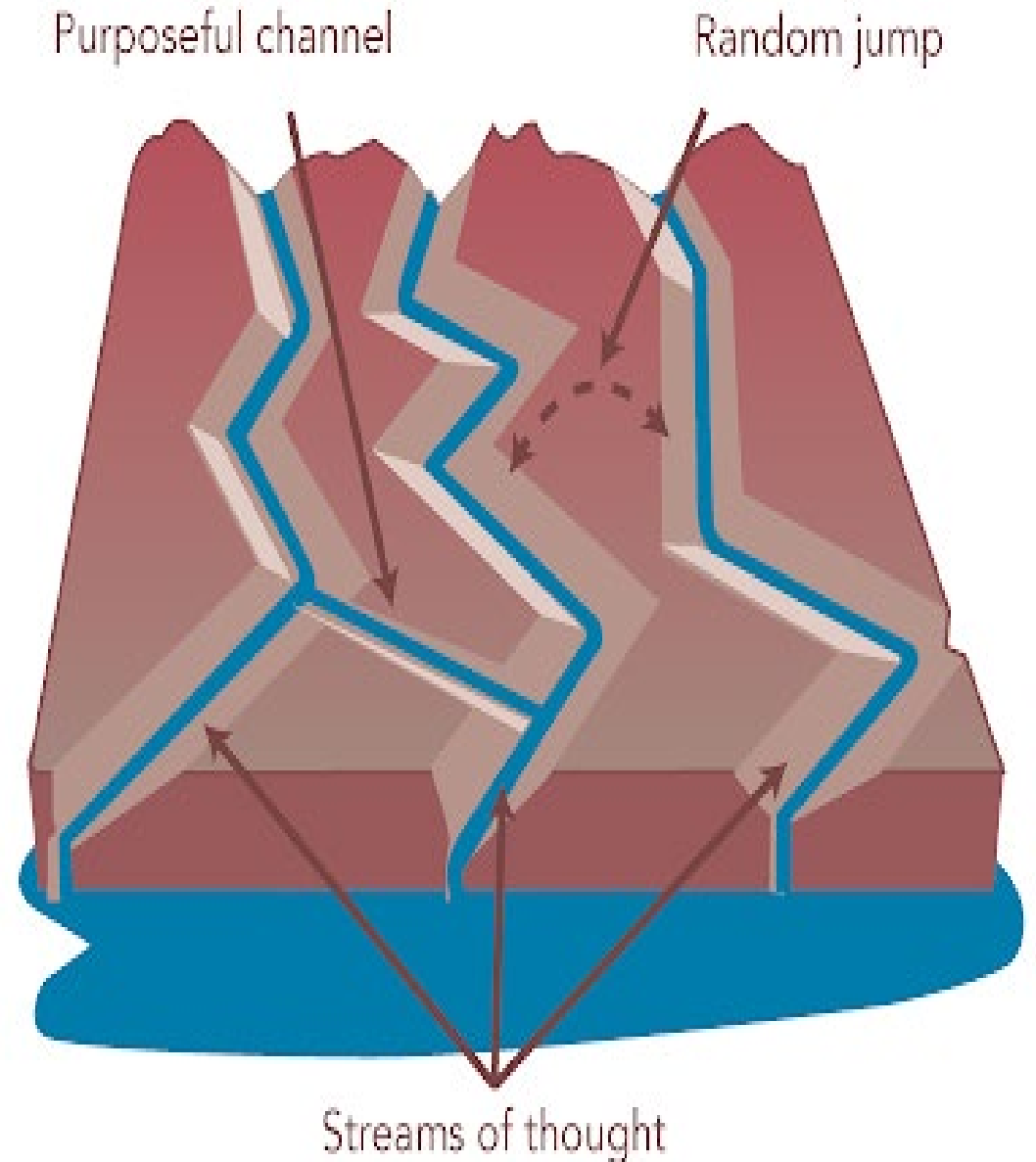
- Going around and around on a challenge with little progress
- Solution inadequate to meet the need
- Resource constraints make progress feel impossible
- Skepticism high
- Falling behind with customers or competition



What's an innovation that made a  
significant impact on your life  
(work or personal)?

# MENTAL VALLEYS

- Mental models and autopilot thinking patterns
  - Assumptions, traditional ideas, rules, patterns, relationships
- Language based
- Can be hard to recognize, imagine any other way



# MENTAL VALLEYS AREN'T NECESSARILY “BAD”

## Helpful for . . .

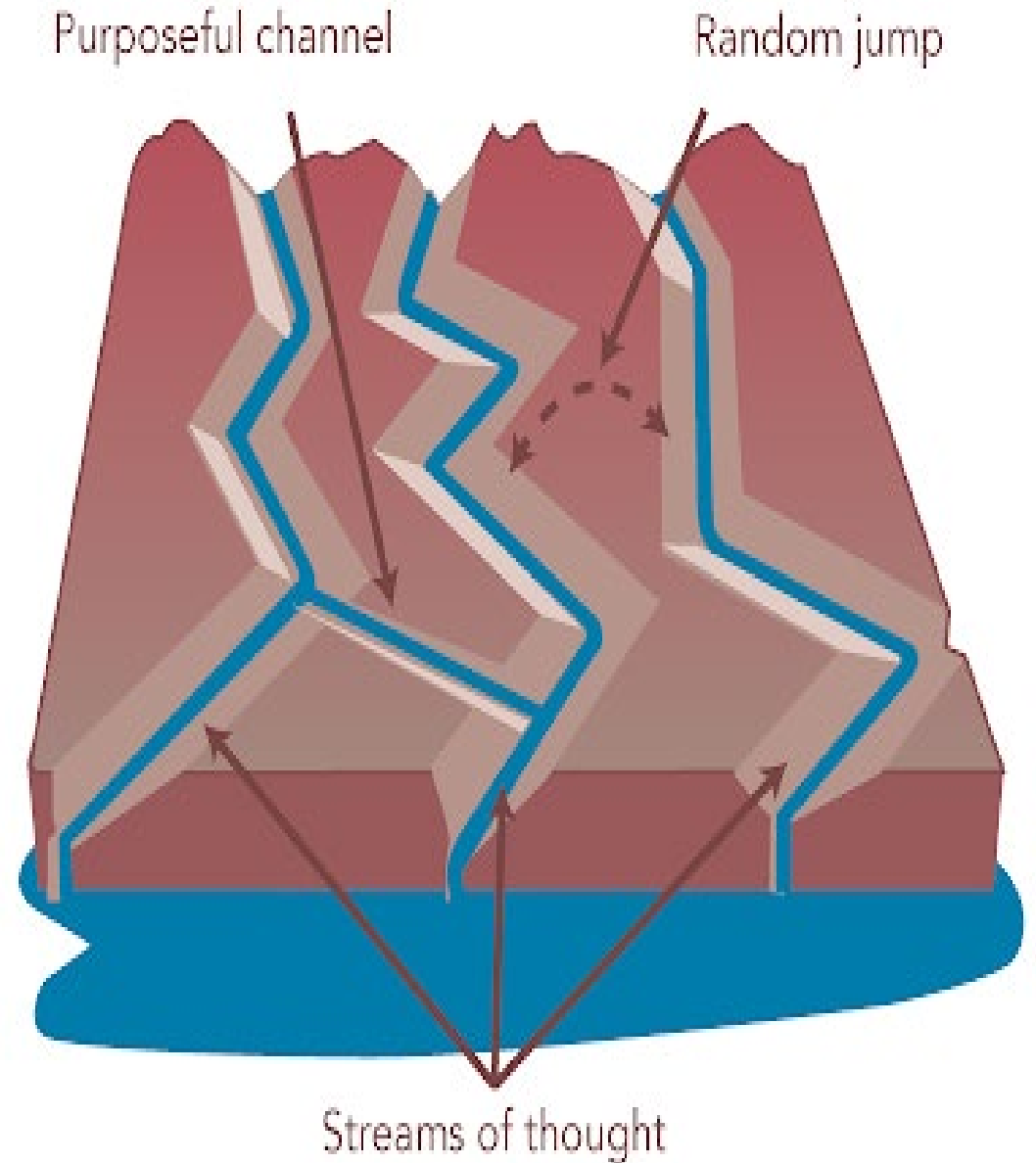
- Everyday communications
- Keeping a stable state

## Unhelpful when . . .

- Our problem-solving is stuck
- We need innovation

# MAKE LEAPS

- Look for other mental models that could spark unexpected ideas
- Can be specific with your destination or be open to random discoveries





# EXAMPLE

What are some  
mental valleys  
about libraries?

Autopilot ways? Assumptions? Traditional  
approaches ? Rules? Patterns?  
Relationships?



# THESE LIBRARIES MADE LEAPS



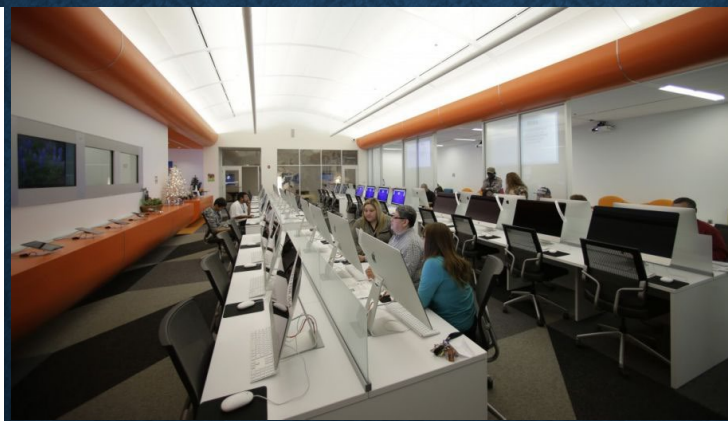
Who says a library needs a building?



Who says a library only loans books, movies & music?



Who says we go to the library vs. it comes to us (and not in a motor vehicle?)



Who says a library always has physical books? (*all-digital library in Texas*)



Who says book shelving is always the same? (*Japanese library with book covers facing out*)

# EXAMPLE

The pandemic  
challenged government  
mental valleys

Autopilot ways? Assumptions? Traditional  
approaches? Rules? Patterns?  
Relationships?



# LOTS OF LEAPS HAPPENED



Pace, how long things take



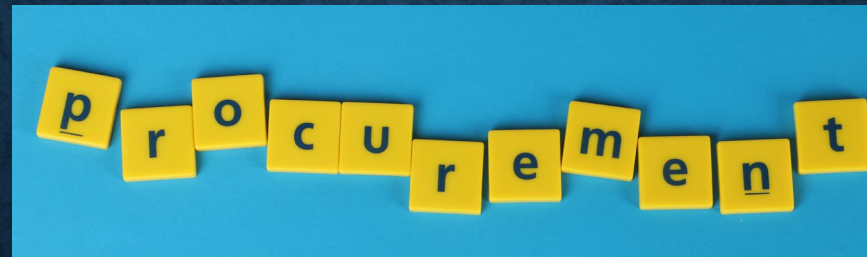
Where work occurs



How we go about being prepared



Authority levels



Supply procedures

What else?

# WAYS TO TEASE OUT MENTAL VALLEYS AND MAKE LEAPS

1. **Leverage** your lean and user design methods

2. **Role play** explaining it to someone from another planet

3. **Get analytical** with 4Ws (who, what, when, where) and H (how)

4. Play 20 **questions**

5. Go on **field trips** (physical or virtual)

# 4WS AND HOW

<b>Question</b>	<b>Currently</b>	<b>Alternative Ideas</b>
Who is typically involved?		
What is typically done or provided?		
Where is it typically located?		
When?		
How?		

# A FEW FIELD TRIP EXAMPLES

<b>Setting Ideas</b>	<b>Industry Ideas</b>	<b>Role Ideas</b>
Grocery store	Aerospace	Teacher
Park	Software	Librarian
Beach	Brick & mortar retail	Florist
Urban neighborhood	Online retail	Nurse
Rural neighborhood	Education	6-year-old child
Hotel	Hospitality	Politician
Book store	Publishing	Comedian
Museum	Waste Management	Parent
Restaurant	Banking/Financial Services	Artist

# QUESTION EXAMPLES

- When we say [word,] what does that really mean?
- Why is it this way?
- What are we ultimately trying to achieve? (e.g., convenience, safety, flow, accuracy, etc.)
- What “job” are customers actually trying to do?
- Are there multiple ways we could arrive at a solution?
- How would customers change our usual approach if they could?
- What if we didn't have [usual approach]? How would we cope?
- What if we were told to deliberately break the rules? What would we do?
- What do we really need creative thinking about?



“Citizens don’t necessarily want a fire department. They want buildings not to burn down, and there can be many ways to accomplish that.”

New models of public service delivery | Deloitte Insights  
<https://www2.deloitte.com/za/en/insights/industry/public-sector/new-technology-new-model-public-service-delivery.html>

How about those innovations  
impacting your life?

What mental valleys did they challenge?

# PRACTICE TIME

# PICK A TOPIC

- Going around and around on a challenge with little progress
- Solution inadequate to meet the need
- Resource constraints make progress feel impossible
- Skepticism high
- Falling behind with customer expectations or competition

## Example

*We need creative thinking about . . .*  
how to get stakeholder input

# UNCOVER THE MENTAL VALLEYS

Autopilot ways?

Assumptions?

Traditional ideas?

Rules?

Patterns?

Relationships?

Who?

What?

Where?

When?

How?

## Stakeholder Input Examples

- Assemble lists of people
- Create stakeholder diagrams
- Outreach communications – emails, newsletters, briefings, charters
- Invitation to participate – work team, advisory group, event, meetings, comment periods, etc.
- Don't want to leave anyone out
- We need diverse representation
- Assume much time will be needed
- Want more stakeholders than project members
- Advisory capacity, not decision makers
- Already have an idea about what we think they need

# CLARIFY: FOR THE SAKE OF WHAT?

- Go back to your end goal and design targets
- Easy to get stuck in mental valleys of how to get there

## Why of Stakeholder Input

- Feedback
- Involvement
- Partnership

## For the Sake of What?

### Examples:

- Solution is accurate
- Practical
- Easy
- Enriching
- Valuable

# GIVE YOURSELF RESEARCH SPACE

## Narrow

*We need creative thinking about . . .*  
how to identify stakeholders

## Broad

*We need creative thinking about . . .*  
how to ensure end users say our project  
solution is valuable to them

# HOW COULD YOU MAKE SOME LEAPS?

- Challenge some of the autopilot ways
- Field trips
- Fine tune user research & involvement

## Stakeholder Input Example

Mental valley challenge:

- What if we aren't allowed to make a list of stakeholders? How could we still have confidence about the level of involvement?

Field trip ideas:

- What might we learn about how a city figures out what's valuable to residents for a new park? (purposeful leap)
- How might an artist think about this topic? (random leap)



# COLLECT IDEAS TO EXPLORE

- Guard against instant rejection
- Pay attention for ideas getting reaction (most creative)

## Stakeholder Input Example

What if we (our narrow question):

- Went to points of service for observations, ad hoc interviews
- Created interactive signage/polls
- Focused on word of mouth promotion
- Worked with ad agency to break through clutter

What if we (our broad question):

- Created user maker spaces
- Ask people to design mockups, prioritize \$\$
- Better leveraged existing data with a “value” lens



**GET MOVING!**

**LET'S STAY IN TOUCH!**

**Jennifer Phillips**

**[jennifer.phillips2@dshs.wa.gov](mailto:jennifer.phillips2@dshs.wa.gov)**

**Work cell: 360-764-9049**