



i4 STUDIO
BUFFALO'S IDEA LAB

A Conversation with Vic Nole and Roger Firestien, co-directors of i4 Studio, Buffalo's First Idea Lab

i4 Studio, Buffalo's first Idea Lab, is a collaboration between the Innovation Center, powered by the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus and the International Center for Studies in Creativity (ICSC) located at SUNY Buffalo State. Located at the Innovation Center, i4 Studio will apply creative thinking tools and processes to generate breakthroughs in idea generation, creative problem solving, strategic planning, and business modeling. Vic Nole is Director of Business Development at the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus and Roger Firestien is Senior Faculty at the International Center for Studies in Creativity at SUNY Buffalo State.

Is Buffalo really the Center of the Creativity Universe?

Roger: It is! Buffalo's focus on creativity really started back in the 1940's with Alex Osborn, who was the "O" in one of the world's largest advertising agencies, BBDO. Based in Buffalo, he had a particular interest in creativity and imagination and is credited with developing the brainstorming technique. He built principles of the creative process that he used in his advertising work and that were the basis for his bestselling book *Applied Imagination*.

His real dream, however, was to apply creativity to education which was the beginning of what is now the International Center for Studies in Creativity at Buffalo State. Today, Buffalo State is the largest and longest running university to offer a Master of Science Degree in Creative Studies. There are others that offer a course or two in creativity and even a few master's degrees that have a concentration in creativity. The ICSC has been doing this since 1967 and we have close to 600 people who have earned their Master of Science Degree in Creative Studies. It is an international program but the highest concentration of people extensively trained in Creative Problem Solving are in Western New York and Southern Ontario region.

How did ICSC and the Innovation Center come together to develop i4 Studio?

Vic: In our work at the Innovation Center on the Medical Campus, we found that entrepreneurs tend to focus on an original idea or product and then work on it exclusively without considering a broader set of ideas or approaches. When the customer then gets involved and provides feedback on design, the entrepreneurs typically go back to the beginning of the design process and start over. By using creative ideation processes, entrepreneurs are encouraged to



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consider lots of ideas and to integrate customer feedback earlier in the design process.

Not only does this approach yield more and better ideas, it teaches people that it is ok – and encouraged – to pivot, leading to better business models and better products. This is particularly helpful for engineers and scientists who are typically taught to focus on or perfect a specific solution rather than be open to new, perhaps unexpected ideas or approaches during the product development or business modeling process. So understanding that start-ups could benefit from applying creativity, we began to look for partners and were lucky to find the best possible partner in our own backyard with the ICSC.

Roger: At the same time, we recognized at the ICSC that while lots of people could benefit from learning the creative process, not everyone has the time, interest or need to earn a Master's degree in Creativity Studies. Collaborating with the BNMC allows us to offer shorter, more immediate programming that can be applied to business or personal challenges immediately. We are really excited to be able to extend our offerings and to have the opportunity to assist with companies at the Innovation Center or any other individuals or businesses in the area who can benefit from more creativity. And, given that we are really the only one offering this type of program in creativity locally, we expect to have a lot of interest.

What can participants expect from i4 Studio programs?

Roger: As the name suggests, we will focus on the 4i's – Imagination, Inspiration, Ideation and Innovation and how to put these in practice.

Vic: The cool thing about i4 Studio is that you can go very deep into the creative thinking process, or just come in to focus on one specific challenge. We offer very specific workshops that are customized. We will always start with an assessment of your challenge or opportunity, and then tailor a solution specifically for you – there are no “canned” or “cookie cutter” solutions.

Roger: Einstein was once asked if some imminent disaster threatened the world and he had one hour in which he knew he could save it, how would he spend his time? Einstein replied, “I would spend the first fifty- five minutes identifying the problem and the last five minutes solving it. For the formulation of a problem is often far more essential than its solution, which may be merely a matter of mathematical or experimental skill.”



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I often see people and organizations trying to solve the wrong problem, or what they later discover is a symptom of the problem. Then they wonder why the ideas they have generated don't work. Before we generate any ideas, we first extensively explore the problem space so that when we do generate ideas we know we are solving the right problem. This is true with technical challenges, business challenges, personal challenges or social challenges.

Vic: Creativity is a skill that can be learned. We will teach you the fundamentals of the creative problem solving process and how to apply it to your particular challenge. We also use “trained brains” – educators and business people who are trained in the creativity process – who come into our sessions to assist with ideation and facilitation.

Who should consider working with i4 Studio?

Vic: While we see the programs offered at i4 Studio as a valuable amenity for the many organizations located on the Medical Campus, the training in creative problem solving is open to any individual, and can be beneficial for any type of business – large or small, young or established. In fact, we are hoping to attract people and companies from beyond the Campus to take advantage of our programs. Establishing Buffalo's first Idea Lab will be a great benefit for the community, and we encourage anyone who wants to improve their ability to generate ideas and to develop creative solutions to challenges or opportunities to consider working with us at i4 Studio.

Roger: Many people think creativity is something you are born with but the reality is that creativity can be taught. The creative problem solving process can be applied to just about any type of challenge so our workshops are beneficial for businesses, non-profits as well as individuals who would like some help working through any type of challenge.

What's it like working together?

Roger: Given that my field is creativity, I tend to want to really load people up with lots of information about creativity. Vic is great at distilling things down so what we deliver at i4 Studio is just the right amount of information so participants can apply this information effectively to make a difference in their business and lives.



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Vic: Adding Roger's capabilities in creative problem solving is a natural progression for the work we do with companies at the Innovation Center in helping to build better business models. We always start with the end state vision and then build the strategies to get there. But having these creativity tools also helps to open people up to new ideas, and new ways of thinking about things that can ultimately lead to better solutions for many personal, business, or social challenges.