

Sophisticated Brainstorming

Creativity important to licensing executive; authors tell how to get right brain in gear

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Creativity has become a very popular subject. There are a staggering number of books, articles, seminars, workshops, video and audio tapes dealing with creativity. Further, there are over a hundred "creativity consultants" specializing in teaching *anyone* how to be creative. What was once the private preserve of artists and musicians, is now eagerly sought after by major business corporations as a means of getting a leg up on the competition and improving corporate profits.

With all of this feverish interest, just exactly what is creativity? The definition we like best is that creativity is the ability to *see* things a new way. From this insight we produce a new product, or a solution to a problem, or a work of art that didn't exist before.

Since the goal of creative thought is almost always beyond present knowledge into the unknown, we must rely on feelings and intuition for guidance. This is the right brain territory. This shifting to right brain function taps into the subconscious, which is the real source of creativity. Such a concept of creative thought may be represented by a wide zigzag path of progression toward a mental implosion or explosive leap.

Linear thought is the opposite of creative thinking. It is characterized by left brain predictability, stability, efficiency, and orderly progression from beginning to end that can be represented by theorems, postulates and formulae and justified by logic. Both types of thinking are needed to successfully complete a creative process.

Our experiences have convinced us that all people are creative. Granted, some to a greater degree than others, but by and large people are much more creative than they perceive themselves to be. However, many things inhibit a greater utilization of this marvelous gift.

The majority of the creativity "Gurus" today advocate teaching you "how to be creative." We don't believe this. Instead, we concentrate on teaching *techniques* that unlock the creative force inherent in all of us. Within United States Gypsum, we have effectively utilized two techniques — Brainstorming in our Quality Circle Activity and Synectics in our Problem Solving Teams. Before we explain these techniques, a few words on why we need them are in order:

The reason we need techniques to unleash the creativity inherent in all of us is that our culture, school system, and business environment all conspire to suppress creativity. Drummed into us from an early age is, "Don't make mistakes, don't make a fool of yourself, don't question the rules, and don't make waves." Play it safe, and soon that flickering spark of creativity burns low.

So, the left brain assumes the dominant role in our thinking and monitors our actions with self censoring to assure compliance with acceptable norms. Therefore, we need a passport, a fiat if you will, that gives us permission to take leave of these conventional constraints, *at least temporarily*, and fan that creative spark back into life. The techniques we use give us that permission and allow the imagination to soar.

All techniques employed in Creative Problem Solving have the same common denominators. Whether we're dealing with Brainstorming in our Quality Circle activity or with Synectics in our Problem Solving, essentially the concepts are the same. They include:

1. A definition of the Problem Statement.
2. Speculative exploration of Possible Solutions.
3. Idea Selections.
4. Evaluation of Next Steps.
5. Possible Solutions.

The basis of *any* creative technique is to *defer judgment* of the ideas generated. Every idea has merit — if not in itself, then in what it might suggest to another participant.

In Synectics, we attempt to duplicate the thought patterns and processes utilized by many of the world's great thinkers and inventors, i.e. tap the vast reservoir of knowledge and experiences buried in the subconscious of all individuals. We access the subconscious by word play and metaphor to relax our self-censors and draw out appropriate analogies, frequently from far removed disciplines.

By piecing together (or grafting) two or more of these seemingly dissimilar ideas or concepts, a totally new concept, product or solution to a problem emerges.

Three roles are clearly defined in a Synectic meeting:

1. Client — owns the problem and has responsibility for follow-up and implementation.
2. Facilitator — Establishes the creative climate and leads the group through the meeting process.
3. Resources — a total of six to eight people with a diversity of backgrounds and experience.

Steps in the Synectic process are:

1. Client and facilitator have a pre-planning meeting. The purpose is to explain the process and develop a clear problem statement.
2. The facilitator sets the ground rules for the meeting and establishes a positive climate — nonjudgmental,

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building and crediting, listening. Free exchange of ideas without the need to defend them.

3. Define and understand the problem. Facilitator asks client for a brief headline statement of the problem with the following question:

Why is it a problem?

What have you tried?

What would you like to get from this meeting?

What is your fantasy or ideal solution to the problem?

4. Develop concepts, ideas and viewpoints. Ideas are expressed as goals or wishes to encourage speculation. Facilitator probes each response for further understanding and meaning and encourages building and expanding the idea by the group.

5. Client selects the best ideas.

6. Selected ideas are evaluated with an itemized response. This includes at least three advantages or reasons why it's a good idea. Then the concerns are listed and the group suggests ways of overcoming them.

7. List next steps and develop a program for implementation.

8. Excursions. At appropriate times during the meeting the facilitator asks the group to participate in mental exercises that are seemingly unrelated to the immediate problem. These are "excursions," and are designed to develop analogies and paradoxes.

Excursions often produce the most creative ideas and solutions.

George Prince, the founder of Synectics Inc. explains it this way, "It is useful to think about ourselves as though there were two of us. One part of ourselves is devoted to keeping us safe, not making mistakes. Another part of ourselves is experimental and curious. My experimental self has lots of feelings, likes surprises and imagines things. My safe-keeping self analyzes, is logical, careful and suspicious. You can see how these two would rule.

My impulsive self wants to do something and my safe-keeping self says, 'No, it will get you into trouble.' So I begin to learn there are a lot of things I must not do to stay out of trouble. Pretty soon I'm censoring ideas before I even consider them in my conscious mind."

Excursions are strategies to overcome and relax the self-censor. They give us permission to dream, try new things and to say "I wonder what would happen if . . ." There are many types of excursions to choose from — analogies, word associations, fantasy trips, music, sounds, smells and visualization.

IMPLEMENTATION

Does this process work to generate new ideas? The answer is an unqualified YES. Excellent ideas and concepts have been generated at every session I have ever attended. The real question is, "Have those ideas all been implemented?" The answer is NO.

New ideas are easy to generate. It's implementation that's tough.

A new idea is a fragile thing. As a result of the Synectic session where the idea was born, can you expect anything to really change in the weeks or months ahead? Interestingly, the answer has little to do with how good the idea is. It actually depends primarily on the pre-planning and follow-up activities that are

necessary to implement the idea. So let's take a look at those factors that can make such a difference in the fate of the new idea.

First, the client who presents the problem has to "own" it. That is, he has to have not only responsibility in the problem area, but he must have enough authority to initiate the necessary changes. So in selecting a client, it is crucial to choose carefully to begin with. It may be necessary to go to the next higher level to find the client to present — and own — the problem. He should be prepared to take next-steps — setting the priorities and budgeting.

Second, the Synectic process will ideally be an integral part of new product development, not an isolated exercise. It is a valuable tool to solve problems and to help achieve growth. But it's not a quick-fix that works with little or no effort being expended. In other words, helpful as it is, all participants need to approach it with realistic expectations.

Third, the issue of commitment. Is there an urgency in finding a solution to the problem? Is corporate time, effort and money ready and waiting to promote and facilitate the new idea? Is management actively seeking a solution to this problem? (If any discussion of the problem elicits a big yawn from "upstairs" the time may not be right to pursue it.)

Let's consider the issue of personal commitment. How much is enough? I read an interview with Marilyn King, who against heavy odds was on two Olympic teams as a pentathlete. In 1980, just nine months before the Olympics, she suffered a serious back injury. It required four months of rest to heal. During this time when she could easily have given up, she watched films of top athletes in the penthalon events by the hour. Then she closed her eyes and visualized herself doing those same events, step by step and move by move. When she was able to resume limited physical activities, her timing and concentration were ready. And when she went to the Olympic tryouts, she placed second! This is Marilyn's advice:

Select a long-term goal (qualifying for the Olympics).

Visualize daily going through the steps necessary to reach that goal. Visualize it in minute detail.

Select a specific strategy and a coach to guide you.

Do you remember Roger Bannister? He's the runner who broke the four-minute mile. It was almost universally believed that this was an impossible feat. But in the first year after Roger broke that barrier, 52 other runners did the same thing! Clearly, the four-minute mile was a psychological barrier rather than a physical one.

How can we apply some of that kind of drive that breaks athletic records to implementing new ideas? It appears that a key step to unusual achievement is, like Marilyn, to have a strong belief that it can be done and that you and your team are just the ones to do it! We, too, need to select a long-term goal and visualize with all of our senses, in minute detail, what that future product or technology is like. And instead of a coach to keep the project on track, we need to find a champion for our cause, someone besides us who will go to bat for it.

If we *know* something can't be done we are not likely to waste much time or energy on it. So the bottom line is that we need to start inside our own heads, examining our belief system, opening ourselves to new information

and possibilities.

The status quo is always tough to change. Regardless of how dissatisfied we are with it, or what the problems may be, the truth is that there is a certain comfort and security in not making waves. So we have to be willing to let go of that security and embrace change. Technology won't wait. The ideas of tomorrow are surfacing today — while you and I are still trying to understand what happened yesterday!

Many of us tend to feel that having avante garde ideas is the business of only a few futurists or dreamers. Not so. Everyone can learn to shut off his/her self-censor, to visualize things in a new and different way. And if we want to change the vision into something tangible, we commit ourselves, our energy and our resources, to nurturing the fragile idea into reality.

READING LIST

Historical Perspective on Brainstorming

1. *Applied Imagination* — Alex Osborn.
2. *Creative Thinking* — S. Parnes.
3. *The Magic of Your Mind* — S. Parnes.

Historical Perspective on Synectics

1. *Synectics* — William J.J. Gordon.
2. *The Practice of Creativity* — George Prince.

Recent Perspectives on Creativity

1. *The Aquarian Conspiracy* — Marilyn Ferguson.
2. *Higher Creativity* — W. Harmon & H. Rheingold.
3. *Using Both Sides of Your Brain* — Tony Buzoo.
4. *Drawing on the Artist Within* — Betty Edwards.

Achieving in Athletics (Visualization)

1. *The Psychology of Winning* — Dennis Waitley.
2. *Seeds of Greatness* — Dennis Waitley.
3. *The Winners Edge* — Dennis Waitley.

Interesting Creative Reading

1. *The Lives of a Cell* — Lewis Thomas.
2. *Medusa and the Snail* — Lewis Thomas.
3. *Thinking Visually* — Robert McKim.