Getting Creative: Finding Great Ideas When You Need One!

Rarely have I visited an organization that effectively uses the "brainstorming" process. What is often happening could more likely be described as an analytical debate. Once debate enters, a need to prove or defend an idea, all creativity stops. So, if what people are using isn't working, what's the alternative.

Tom Peter's once said that virtually no new idea in the last fifty years has been the result of the formal planning process. That suggests that the more formal the approach to a problem, the less likely a creative solution will evolve. It also suggests that the primary barrier to creativity is thinking. Once a group of people locks into analytical thinking on an issue, creativity has stopped.

Creativity simply means putting two novel ideas together and finding that they are useful. Novel ideas are any that fall outside the normal way of thinking. When analyzing, debating, criticizing and evaluating an idea, we are involved in the "normal" way of looking at things. The risk is that in that normal analytical view, we don't see anything on the outside.

Anyone who has ever had an "ah ha" knows what this means. First, something clicks and a solution or possibility instantly becomes clear. Immediately after that comes the "of course" phase. "Of Course! It is so clear, why didn't I see it before?" It was always right there but outside the range of "normal" thinking you were locked on.

So, how do we get creative ideas? Where do they come from and what can we do to foster them?

Mind Set Shift

There are two mind set shifts that significantly help people get creative. The first has to do with the "I'm not a creative person" focus. If you believe you are not creative, you will ignore the times you are creative and reinforce the times you are not. Get a group of 5-year-olds together. Give them a card board box that held a refrigerator, some foam padding, crayons and they go to work. The box can become anything from an operating room to a space ship. Instantly, it can change from one thing to another. 5-year-olds are really good at this. You were a 5-year-old once. Somewhere inside you, that ability still exists! You ARE creative.

Second, Jonas Salk once said that the solution to any problem pre-exists. That means that the solution exists in the same exact conditions that are creating the "problem". In any situation you are working with, the solution is right there. If you aren't seeing it, change the way you are thinking about it!

If you have ever had an "ah ha" and experienced the immediate "of course" that follows, you know the solution was right there. Where was the solution before you saw it? Right there! Where is the solution to any challenge you are working with? Right there!

Perspective and Patience

Leonardo da Vinci believed that to gain knowledge about the form of a problem, it was vital to restructure it to see it in many different ways. He felt like the first way he thought about anything was too biased toward the usual way he thought about everything. So, he would challenge himself to come up with five or six different perspectives on an issue.

Who and what else is involved here: employees, customers, family members, training programs, recruiting, retention and company reputation. What would the challenge look like viewed through the eyes of everyone else involved? Pick several to work with. I once had a group looking at ways to improve the quality of meetings who decided to discuss meetings from the perspective of the agenda. That provided some useful insights.

Often, people leap at the first suggestion offered and begin debating it. The more perspectives you develop, the more likely you are to find one that will lead you in the direction you want to go. When you have only one plan or perspective, your chances are not nearly as good. Patience is required at the beginning of a brainstorming process to identify several different perspectives on how to approach the challenge. Patience pays!

Creative tools to help generate ideas

First, set aside analysis and criticism. They will be important later. Analytical thinking causes a creativity to stop. Once analysis and criticism enter the picture, people censor their thoughts and share only what they feel will be acceptable or what they can defend. Criticism in any form is the fastest way to kill creativity. Next, generate some good ideas to work with. Step back and look at the challenges you are dealing with from a distance. Force yourself to look at several different perspectives. Here are some tools that will help you do that.

Associate

The place where people most often describe getting creative ideas is the bathroom. Those ideas are not the result of an analytical process but are the result of a random association. Association can be formally used. Instead of focusing, associate. What are things that weigh less than a pound, what are possible uses for baking powder, uses for paper clips, items with numbers on them. One idea leads to another. One idea triggers connections or associations to a new train of thought. In training programs, I use non-business examples to get people to loosen up. Once they are associating freely, they can take that form of thinking and apply it to a work issue. Associate all the things you can think of that effect morale (or effectiveness of meetings, employee retention, customer service, etc.)

Context

All ideas are the result of context. If you have ever lost your car keys, the first thing you probably did was mentally go back to the "context" of the last place where you remember having them. That context might be at the front door or in the car or you remember having the keys in your hand with the groceries. Change context and you get different ideas.

The same principle applies to creativity. If you want to improve morale, what contexts relate to that issue? Possible context might include: training, evaluations, leadership style, involvement, variety of work, positive feedback, focus of the work team, snacks available, bonus plan, etc. Making a list of possible contexts causes a group to step back and generate an overview of the situation. Every issue has many potential contexts and each context opens new perspectives to view the issue from.

What's working

Whether you are concerned about morale, retention, customer service, project management, leadership, or effective facilitation of meetings, some aspect of your current challenge is working. Or, they have worked in the past. Identifying what's worked holds great clues to continuing success. Use association to identify what has worked. When a meeting has been effectively facilitated, what caused it?

Reversal

A reversal is looking at the opposite of the current challenge, and also one of the fastest ways to get a group unstuck and creative. If customer service is the issue, forget it for a moment. Instead of improving customer service, make a list of things you could do to make it worse. If you wanted really lousy customer service, what could you do?

I had a conversation once with a man who was deeply concerned that his company would lose its competitive edge in the Natural Gas industry with de-regulation. His concern was obvious. I asked him, "If you wanted to lose your competitive edge, what could you do?" His first reaction was confusion. Why would he want to think about that? His next reaction was a smile. He was so concerned about losing his competitive edge, he hadn't looked at the things he had the ability to work with.

When you use a reversal to look at an issue, some of the things on the list are actually happening right now. Identify them so you can work with them.

Put it together

Use the tools. Associate to loosen up. Apply association to the issue you are working with. Generate a list of things related or associated with the issue. Create a context list including different contexts that have an impact. Look at what's working when the issue is working smoothly. Make a list of things you could do to make the situation worse. In a short time, you can come up with a lot of perspectives.

Once you have done this, it is time to bring in analytical thinking. Debate, analyze, and decide what to do next. The better you have done in generating perspectives on the issue, the better your solution will be.