

A company sold fish-tanks to domestic customers. They distributed their product through a major delivery postal service. Too many of the tanks broke en route to their customers, and this was costing too much money. They tried a number of ideas to improve the situation. Better packaging, writing: "Fragile – glass" on the side of the package... Nothing worked well enough. Eventually, they worked with a team of consultants who specialized in creative problem-solving.

Their idea: remove the packaging. That way, the distributor will see the glass. Furthermore, they'll have to clean up if it breaks. They tried it – it worked.



What do you do with your Brilliant Ideas?

In his second article in a series of three, **Rob Sheffield** looks at generating ideas.

More ideas. Is it worth it?

One way that the more innovative organisations get more ideas is by training their people in techniques for generating ideas. In their survey and report on practices of innovation, PwC, the consultants, looked at 477 organisations from 7 countries (USA, Australia, Germany, Spain, UK, France and Japan).

They found that:

"...idea richness is the critical success factor in successful innovation. Having many ideas is the route to having quality ideas that will differentiate you in any marketplace. Linus Pauling, the Nobel Prize winning chemist said succinctly nearly 60 years ago, "If you want to have a great idea, have lots of ideas". For example, DaimlerChrysler harvested 25,000 ideas for improvement from a single exercise with their suppliers in early 1999." ⁽¹⁾ Here are 3 techniques for generating ideas in your school or at a team meeting:

A. Reverse brainstorming ⁽²⁾

This can be an energetic and useful way of gener-

ating ideas from new angles on an old topic. It reverses the traditional brainstorming technique, and usually gets some laughter in doing so.

Stages of process:

1. Somewhere visible, write a statement that captures the opposite of what you want to do. Make sure it contains a verb. E.g. imagine that you want to prepare the school for a visit from your local MP! You'd write something like: "How could we make a mess of preparing for this visit?"
2. Write everyone's ideas on flip-chart. Give yourself a time limit for this. 20 minutes will usually be enough.
3. Once time is up, go through the list and reverse each idea. "Don't speak to the MP before s/he arrives" becomes: "Carol is responsible for speaking to the MP at least twice before the visit."
4. Select the ones that appeal to you most. You should have some that wouldn't have come from a typical discussion.

“There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home.”

(KEN OLSON, PRESIDENT,
CHAIRMAN AND FOUNDER OF
DIGITAL EQUIPMENT CORP, 1977)

“If you always do what you’ve always done, you’ll always get what you’ve always got.”

ED FOREMAN, US POLITICIAN,
ENTREPRENEUR (B.1933)

“Conventional people are roused to fury by departure from convention largely because they regard such departure as criticism of themselves.”

BERTRAND RUSSELL,
BRITISH PHILOSOPHER,
MATHEMATICIAN (1872-1970)

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The next article will cover the more thorny social and political issues of implementing improved approaches.

B. Analogies⁽³⁾

An analogy can be an excellent way of generating fresh thinking on an old problem. Often, the greatest changes in thinking can come from words or analogies seemingly unrelated to the problem.

Stages of process

1. Write a verb phrase of what you want the ideas for: “How can we achieve...?” “How to speed up...” “How to become better at...?”
2. For the verb phrase, generate analogies that are like it in some way. E.g. to make product Y: having a baby, making a cake, genesis creation story, a robot car factory...
3. Pick one analogy that seems interesting.
4. Describe the analogy, including active (how it works, what it does, effects it has, how it is used) and passive aspects (size, position...) write these on a flip-chart, so that the ideas are captured for all to see.
5. Use this description to generate ideas relevant to the problem. How much do the differences suggest new ways of looking at your problem?

As a variation, pick two analogies, one similar to the problem and one very different.

C. Disney⁽⁴⁾

This technique forces people to consider the problem from different perspectives. It uses three modes of thinking: the dreamer, critic and the realist.

- The Dreamer feels every expression, and has lots of enthusiasm. The Dreamer is child-like and says “It would be great if...”
- The Critic challenges ideas and tests them out. The critic is not trying to demolish, but to make ideas more rigorous.
- The Realist is more detailed and pragmatic. S/he may develop an action plan, take the best of the previous comments, and think about how to get it to work in practice.

Stages of process

1. Place three paper labels marked Dreamer, Critic and Realist on the floor or on chairs at least a metre apart (facing each other if using chairs). Explain the meanings of the three modes.
2. Invite a volunteer to go through the process. Ask someone else to take notes
3. The volunteer starts at the **Dreamer position**. S/he says what they’d really like to happen. No constraints, anything can happen
4. When they’ve finished give the person a few seconds before asking them to move to...
5. The **Critic position**, where they think about things like: risks of it going wrong, how others will react to it...
6. When they’ve finished give the person a few

seconds before asking them to move to...

7. The **Realist position**. Here they think through evidence, tasks to be performed, (not very emotional), works out practicalities. Then, after a few seconds to free their mind...
8. Ask the person to finish by standing or sitting in a neutral place and summarising their thoughts. Ask the note-taker to summarise what they noticed that seemed important.
9. Ask for a further volunteer and repeat the process, until you’ve exhausted your time and volunteers! Each person will probably take around 5 minutes to go through the 3 states.

Some principles are helpful when using techniques for generating ideas. Defer your judgement and give the technique a proper tryout. Ensure that everyone involved knows who’s accountable for the problem. It’s their role to choose the ideas they like the most. Finally, aim for a good quantity of ideas. It’s the single best predictor of quality.

We’ve all been in the meeting where we choose to censor our own ideas:

“No, it’s not right here and now... maybe I’ve missed some of what we’ve talked about... it’s stupid... perhaps next time...”

Training people in techniques to generate ideas can have a significant impact. It can raise people’s confidence and willingness to suggest ideas. It can help make tasks more interesting, and can make us more aware of our colleagues’ skills. However, techniques are not everything. The atmosphere in which we work makes a huge difference to our creativity. This is sometimes called the work climate. Think for a moment about where you have your best ideas. In the bath? Asleep? On holiday? When exercising? At work? People rarely answer with the latter. How far does your school or workplace actively support more innovative approaches to the work you have to do? “If you have nothing better to do, take a tall glass and fill it with fleas. Place a piece of paper over the top. Soon the fleas get tired of banging their heads on the paper and learn not to jump so high. What happens when you take the paper away...?”⁽⁵⁾

References:

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3. Analogies: Van Gundy A.B. (1988) *techniques of structured problem solving*
4. Disney: E. Berne (1970) *Games people play*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books
6. Valerie Stewart, UKHRD forum, December 2003