

CC:YOU

Create, Yourself

How to tap into your creativity to achieve business results.

By Bill Brooks

In the business world, I define creativity as the relating of normally unrelated elements. Lawyers who win multi-million dollar personal injury suits (and investment bankers acting as middlemen in corporate mergers or acquisitions) receive huge salaries because they make connections other people wouldn't see.

If you can solve the problems of your company creatively, your value to the firm will skyrocket. But just how can you tap into your creativity to achieve

business results? First, make sure you have the following crucial ingredients that will help you think creatively and generate imaginative solutions to any business problem.

A clear calendar. It's hard to be creative when you're pressed for time. Set aside part of each day to concentrate on problems. If you feel rushed, you'll focus on what's urgent rather than what's important. Time is the best gift you can give yourself.

Creativity Do's

- Think outside of the box.
- Consider every idea, no matter how crazy it might sound.
- Remember that creativity often comes from relatively unrelated concepts or ideas.
- Remember that creativity must sometimes be spontaneous.
- Look for results from your creativity activity; work towards closure, and don't get bogged down in the process.
- Be patient: Let ideas percolate on their own and in their own good time.
- Be gracious and flexible when your idea isn't embraced or implemented or when it's tweaked.
- Try, try again. If one idea doesn't work, another will.

The ability to concentrate. Concentration is the ability to direct your attention to a specific activity for an extended period of time. That's done most easily when you think the activity is important and you're committed to working on it.

Input. Creativity requires raw material to work with—stimuli of various types. In general, the greater the quantity of input, the greater the quantity of output. And the more ideas you have to choose from, the better decisions you'll make. If you only have one idea, it will be impossible to judge its relative merit.

Where do you get material to input? Try listening rather than talking, consult with people who hold views that are different from yours, and read as much as possible. Our minds are conditioned to be in automatic-reject mode most of the time, but creative people are able to override that immediate reaction. If everyone said, "No, we can't do it that way," we would still be traveling by horse and buggy, reading handwritten

books by candlelight, and using carbon paper in typewriters.

No either/or thinking. You thwart creativity with either/or thinking that refuses to recognize the complexity of problems. Rigid thinkers reduce everything to its lowest common denominator. Though they call it "getting to the bottom line," what they're actually doing is stereotyping ideas and possible solutions based on their beliefs about how the world works.

Open yourself to several options at a time. Recognize that no one answer may be perfect, but that an amalgam of several solutions may be ideal. View every idea as a maybe instead of judging it as right or wrong. The more flexible your attitude is toward any problem, the more creative your solution will be.

An appetite for the unusual. Imagine what Christopher Columbus's contemporaries thought when he said the world was round. Think about how Marco Polo's contemporaries responded when he told them about his travels in China. It seems people have always limited their creativity by convening their own private, idea-killing inquisitions.

Although Christopher Columbus and Marco Polo probably didn't see themselves as innovative, they were. They allowed their imaginations to dictate their goals, and their behavior helped attain those goals. Those same options are available to you.

You can do it!

If you're not sure that you can be creative, these six creativity-building tips may help assure you that you can.

Combine work and play. Being creative involves viewing situations in a new context. One way to practice that is to play chess, Scrabble, or backgammon—activities that are pleasant diversions and great ways to sharpen your analytical thinking skills. Those games force you to choose

among multiple alternatives, requiring strategy and clear analysis.

Or, set aside a few minutes every day to work on a puzzle. Keep a difficult jigsaw puzzle laid out on a corner table and add a few pieces when you want to clear your mind. Or, tuck a crossword puzzle in your briefcase for down times, such as when you're waiting to meet with someone. You'll soon notice an increase in your creativity.

Brainstorm. The objective of private or group brainstorming sessions is to generate as many ideas as possible about a particular object or problem within a defined period of time. Phase one of a brainstorming session should be non-judgmental. The emphasis is entirely on quantity of ideas instead of quality. This is the time to be as outrageous as possible. No idea is out of bounds; no rules apply. In phase two, discuss the individual ideas and choose the best for further consideration.

Brain-write. Brain-writing is always a group activity, deriving its effectiveness from tapping into participants' collective brainpower. In its most basic form, brain-writing builds on the ideas generated in the brainstorming session with these three major differences:

- Each idea is written on a separate piece of paper.
- The paper is passed around, and each person adds comments anonymously.
- Collectively, the group makes additions or modifications to the now fully formed idea.

The anonymity allows a participant to agree or disagree with the idea without fear of reprisal, but this isn't the time to pour water on creative fires. Sometimes, the best solutions arise from modifying what seemed at first to be a silly suggestion.

Make creative evaluation a habit. Each year, more than 1,000 so-called new food and beverage products are introduced in the United States, but

many are just extensions of an existing product line—such as a new flavor of dessert gelatin, a low-fat version of a rich cookie, or a sugar-free spin-off of a popular beverage. Each shows the creative-evaluation principle at work in the marketplace.

To use creative evaluations, prepare a list outlining different ways to approach a problem or an idea. The list can be a complete account of methods you've used before to solve a problem successfully, or it can be just these trigger words: *extend*, *reduce*, *maximize*, *minimize*, *substitute*, *combine*, and *other uses*. Apply each trigger word to the question or problem at hand. For instance, in reference to this article, I could ask myself, How could I *extend* it? How could I *reduce* it? How could I *maximize* it? How could I *minimize* it? What are its *other uses*? And so forth.

Use "five sensing" when possible. In this age of technological gadgetry, we often ignore our most obvious and readily available problem-solving mechanism: our five senses.

"Five sensing" is responsible for the development of scented magazine inserts that advertise perfume or cologne (smell), carefully designed product logos that appeal to the eye (sight), bathroom tissue ads that taunt us not to squeeze the product (touch), jingles that instantly identify and promote sales (hearing), and food samples that are distributed in supermarkets (taste).

To use five sensing, ask, "What can I do with this product that can be enhanced or improved by the sense of _____?"

Temporarily shelve traditional thinking, policies, and guidelines. In *Creating Excellence*, Craig Hickman and Michael Silva tell us that we can break out of

the mold by reducing our reliance on rigid rules and policies, which stifle creativity instead of encourage imaginative thinking. The authors suggest you turn your life upside down for one day—or even a week—to escape the tyranny of routine.

For instance, instead of returning from lunch on Wednesday, take the afternoon off and go to the racetrack. Or skip lunch and get a massage on your lunch hour. Take Tai Chi lessons instead of going to the gym. Developing your creative abilities is a slow, cumulative process that flourishes when you expose yourself to diverse experiences. When you stretch your experience to new areas, you trigger new and exciting ideas.

We often become mired in creativity quicksand because we think our way is the only way to accomplish something. That attitude is reinforced in various subtle degrees

by our day-to-day environment, which tends to bog us down in run-of-the-mill thinking.

Your challenge is to bring your creativity to the forefront. Think about old problems in new ways and in new places and you'll find solutions that will increase your value to the company and vault you to the top.

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For an in-depth look at an enterprise that helps businesses and individuals maximize their creativity in order to "win more, lose less, and make more money,"



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