Instant CREATIVITY

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WHAT IS IT?

It is possible to know you really need something without being sure what it is – creativity is a bit like that. The problem with creativity is that it's a blanket term for several related things. There's artistic creativity – the production of a book or painting or piece of music – that is in some way original. There's the creativity of discovery, whether it's Archimedes leaping out of his bath shouting 'Eureka!' or a new product concept. And there's the creativity of humour. There is something special about humour, because it involves seeing the world in a different way, and that is an essential for creativity.

It is true that much business creativity revolves around the second of those types. We are looking for the solution to a business problem, or an idea to come up with a new product or service. Yet in reality, almost every act of creativity merges the three. To be really innovative, the chances are there will be elements of artistic creativity present – whether it's in the elegance of a business plan or the style of a design. And to be creative effectively usually demands the presence of humour. If this is a problem, ask yourself what you've got against people enjoying themselves, just because they're working. Does it really make sense?

WHAT STOPS IT?

It is often easier to stop people being creative than to enhance their creativity. We do it all the time. We have already referred to the restraints of social and educational conditioning. It's not surprising that there are social restraints on creativity. Young children have a very creative view of the world. They aren't constrained by habit and teaching. But they are also at risk from hazards they aren't prepared for. Some of our creativity is pushed aside to keep us safe. Yet when using creativity to solve a business problem we are in a safe, cushioned environment. We can afford to take more virtual risks; in fact we need to if something new and wonderful is to emerge.

In education creativity is frowned upon because it runs counter to the desired output. Like it or not, our education system is largely designed to get young people through exams. This means getting them to give the answers the examiners want. Not the most original answer, not the creative answer, but the single right answer that is on the answer sheet. Real life isn't like that. Any problem, any requirement is likely to have many right answers. When we need to get creative it is because the obvious answer isn't good enough. Someone else has already done it. It has already been tried. We need something new and different.

If being creative means taking risks, appearing silly (most great ideas sound crazy initially) and failing more frequently, we've another problem. These traits are not popular. As individuals, we don't like them. Corporate culture is generally very heavy on failure. 'You only get one chance to make a mistake here.' Even very constructive

measures like total quality management (TQM) have their downside, because the implication is that failure is always bad. Yet there's only one way to be really original. To throw off restraint, and go for it. There will be lots of failure, but it shouldn't matter because failure is the best basis for learning – and it is only by sticking your neck out that you will also achieve real creativity. One of the best ways to improve creativity quickly is to prevent the fresh green shoots of new ideas from being trampled on by practicality. Until everyone is prepared to come up with something they think will sound silly, knowing it won't be laughed at or frowned on, you won't have a truly creative team.

As if that isn't enough, there is yet another danger. The expert syndrome. We are increasingly developing a culture of experts. Expertise is one of the prime commodities we have to sell. Yet expertise can be dangerous when it comes to creativity. Expertise depends on knowing a lot about how things have been before. While the best experts can then flexibly interpret a different situation, all too often expertise means tunnel vision when faced with the new. We should be looking for creative input beyond those who are very closely involved in a project or business if we want real innovation. Don't throw your experts away, but take your input more widely.

WHY TECHNIQUES?

The main enemies of creativity are tunnel vision and lack of inspiration. Either we know too much about the past to do anything but continue trudging down the same path, or we haven't got the vision to see a new destination. The idea of a creativity technique – of pretty well all the techniques in Chapters 4 and 5 – is to push you away from that well-trodden path. To get a different viewpoint, by forcing you to do something you wouldn't normally do. This can be uncomfortable, but it is the only way to make something happen.

This explains why something as mechanical and often irrelevant seeming as a technique can have such stunning results. Creativity techniques aren't creative; you are. What they are superb at, though, is pushing you to a different starting point, providing you with an opportunity to make new associations, helping you to take a fresh view and come up with something completely different.

ASSOCIATIONS TO IDEAS

Many of the techniques we describe require you to make associations with something and then relate these associations back to the problem or requirement. Rather than take up space within each of the techniques to explain this process we have tried to give an overview here that will serve for all of them.

In some ways this is the hardest part of the creativity process, although even this isn't as hard as some would have you believe. This is the point where you take a mechanical technique and apply genuine creativity to it. This aspect of the process is highly dependent on experience. The more you do it, the easier it will become. Because of this, we strongly advise regular practice using the exercises in this book, even if you don't have a specific problem to solve. This is particularly important when you are new to the field of creativity.

Let us assume that you are trying to develop a new confectionery product and that you have used a creativity technique that has generated the following associations:

> whiskers, collar, fur, fleas, paws, hunter, after dark, mice, killer, cuddly, fun, warm, friendly, aloof, independent, lazy, active, angry, spitting, hissing, claws, teeth

In case it isn't obvious, we used the *Random word* technique (5.7) with the word *cat*.

With product development, more than with most problem solving or idea generation, you have the option of inserting an intermediate phrase into the translation process from the association to the idea. This is to describe your non-existent product in terms of the association. In this case we are looking for 'The <something> confectionery' or 'The confectionery with <something>'. For instance:

> The cuddly confectionery
> The killer confectionery
> The furry confectionery
> The confectionery with whiskers
> The active confectionery

Sometimes, when reading such a list, immediate ideas will pop into your mind as to what this phrase might mean. The second stage is to write a more detailed description of this. For instance, 'The confectionery with whiskers' rather oddly made us think of old-aged confectionery. This made us think of more mature confectionery. We saw this going in two directions, either confectionery for the more mature palette or confectionery that is matured for a fuller flavour.

On reading that through, you may have seen some ideas of your own. You may have thought that the ideas we have generated are not all that great. That doesn't really matter. What matters is that the process is clear. This two-stage process can be used wherever you can describe the problem in terms of a sentence in which you can insert a range of words.

Where this is not the case, you must move more directly from the association words to ideas. To show an example of this let's assume that we have the same words as above, but that we are trying to solve the problem of poor attendance in a factory. This is harder to create sentences for so we must move more directly.

Looking at the list, 'killer' made us think of killing off poor attendees. Not immediately practical, but this could be developed as an idea where an attendance monitoring scheme is implemented that ultimately results in the dismissal of those with poor attendance records. 'Collar' made us think of control and this led to the idea of high levels of follow up and checking of attendance problems – talking to everyone after they have missed a day and finding out why, insisting on doctors' notes, etc. 'Fun'

made us think of making the workplace more fun so that people don't feel the need to stay away. 'Independent' made us think of making small groups of staff responsible for their own results regardless of attendance. You can see how this works. These ideas are half-baked. This is always true at this stage of the process. Treat them like tender green shoots that need love and attention. If you trample on them too early in their lives (by evaluating them), you will kill them.

THE LONGER VIEW

We emphasized the need for the 'instant' approach in the first chapter. However, to get the most out of creativity you will need to take a longer view, too. If (or rather, when) the techniques in this book prove effective, consider the opportunities for making more of creativity. See Chapter 6 for suggestions on reading, information technology and more to widen your creative armoury.

3

THE TECHNIQUES

4.1 Compass

Preparation A basic statement of your problem or requirement.
Running time Five minutes.
Resources None.
Teams Individual/team.

The *Compass* is a direction setting technique that is used to find the real problems that underlie the problem statement as presented. In order to make it work, you need to have developed a problem statement, ideally one that is owned by somebody within the group – try to put it in the form 'how to…'. You then merely ask 'why' a great deal.

Given the initial problem statement ask 'why'. In other words, 'why is this a problem?' or, 'why do you see it like that?' Whatever is the answer to this question, write it down and then probe the answer itself by asking 'why' again. Repeat this process on the next answer. This continues until you feel you have hit a dead end or until it all becomes terminally dull. For instance, if my problem is how to write this book faster. Why? Because I don't want to spend so much time on it. Why? Because I want to spend more time with my family. This can continue for some time from here.

You will find that each response to each question can be rephrased to form a 'how to' problem statement. Some of these will be much more fruitful areas of exploration than the original problem.

Feedback It sounds simple and it is. That is not to say that it isn't useful. We've seen a problem entirely solved by merely rephrasing the problem statement, so don't underestimate the benefit of spending time doing this.

Outcome This is a very effective way of getting new questions and new directions from which to tackle a problem. You will find that the more you use this technique, the better you get at asking subtly different why questions that don't sound so repetitive.

Variations This activity can be run as a full group session or as a number of team sessions.

Expertise	✪
Direction setting	✪✪✪✪
Idea generation	✪
Problem solving	✪
Fun	✪✪

4.10 Up and down

Preparation None.
Running time 10 minutes.
Resources None.
Teams Individual/team.

When formulating the problem, it is natural to take your own point of view. In this exercise, you will spend a few minutes looking up and down from your position. If you are at the very top of the company, try looking to the middle, then even further down to the bottom.

First look up. Put yourself in the position of the chief executive. What would he or she see as the underlying problem, the obstacle to success, or the new product direction? First, try directly formulating the question from their viewpoint, then spend a minute thinking through the influences and requirements of this particular person, and try again. Then look down. What would the lowliest worker in the company see as the problem? How would they see the problem affecting them and their world? Use these two insights to formulate different 'how to' statements.

Feedback Looking in these diverging directions can produce very different views of the problem. Try to think like real people, not caricatures. The top person isn't just concerned about company profitability (although this is important). The lowly worker isn't just worried about wage packets and working conditions. Take a broader view.

Outcome This technique can be used as a variant on *Someone else's view* (5.5) when looking for solutions, but it is particularly suited to finding the right questions, because these different views are just as important as your own when coming to a picture of the desired direction. The very different circumstances and needs underlying the viewpoints will combine to produce a much rounder, fuller picture of the problem.

Variations It is possible to talk to the real people involved, but the person at the top may not have time, and the person at the bottom may find it difficult to give you the required information. Try splitting a team in two. Each half takes one of the standpoints, spending a few minutes developing their ideas. Then let them share the ideas in a mock meeting, being prepared, if necessary, to stand up for their position and knock down anything that seems unreasonable.

Expertise	✪✪
Direction setting	✪✪✪✪
Idea generation	✪✪
Problem solving	✪✪
Fun	✪✪

4.11 Time slices

Preparation None.
Running time 10 minutes.
Resources None.
Teams Individual/team.

Look at your problem area. Consider each of the following timescales: one minute, one day, one week, one month, one year. What is critical in each of these timescales? How will the problem change? What has to be considered in the different timings? What influences come into play? Would you state the problem differently if each of these timings was an imposed deadline (for completion of the entire requirement)? Would the 'how to' statement come out differently? If there isn't an imposed deadline, what considerations are likely to impact your problem on these timescales?

Feedback It is easy to make assumptions about timings that may not be valid, or at least may not be necessary. This technique forces you to examine your timing assumptions and how they impact the direction you are likely to take. The deadlines may not really be imposed, but trying out the assumptions of those deadlines can result in a considerable improvement in understanding. Often the significant 80 per cent solution is achieved in a fraction of the overall time, while the remaining time is spent on fining up the last details. Sometimes (for example, when looking at nuclear power plant safety), those details are critical – often they are irrelevant.

Outcome This technique will not produce solutions, or even precise 'how to' statements. Instead, it produces a better broad understanding of just what the problem area is, which is essential (particularly with a complex problem) to coming to a sensible statement of the problem and a practical, creative solution.

Variations You may need to modify the timescales considered to fit a problem where there is already a reasonably clear end point in time, even if the destination is not clear. Make sure, though, that there are several very different timescales involved. A group can split up and take one timescale per team – this reduces the monotony of repetition and makes a debate on the importance of different timescales a more effective contributor to the process.

Expertise	✪✪
Direction setting	✪✪✪
Idea generation	✪
Problem solving	✪✪
Fun	✪✪

5.1 Challenging assumptions

Preparation None.
Running time 15 minutes.
Resources None.
Teams Individual/team.

Creativity is all about breaking unwarranted assumptions. This technique, one of the oldest in the creativity armoury, does so directly. Consider your problem or requirement. What is the prime assumption in it? What is absolutely essential, absolutely key to the requirement? Now, consider what would happen if this assumption wasn't true. For example, if you were trying to improve the profitability of an accountancy firm, how would you do it if the company didn't employ any accountants? If you were trying to come up with a new wall covering, what would you do if you weren't allowed to use any colours? Or attach it to walls?

Once you have assessed the implications of your switch of assumption, feed the results back into your problem. Okay, you can actually have colours in your wall coverings, but what did you discover by looking at the possibilities without colouring? How could you apply these possibilities (with or without colours)? How could you modify them to fit your market? How could you combine them with existing approaches to come up with something different?

Feedback Like many techniques, the hardest part here is the leap back from the implications of the broken assumption to the real problem. This gets much easier with practice – in fact, we recommend that you practise these techniques whether or not you have a specific problem, just to make the associations easier. See page 8 in Chapter 2 for more detail on making associations.

Outcome It isn't always possible to identify a key assumption, but it is amazing how often that the result of relaxing one is to open up totally the problem, making solutions plentiful – and with an easy link back to the real world.

Variations Only work on one assumption at a time, but try another if you hit a brick wall. Most problems will actually have several key assumptions. Make the assumptions specific rather than woolly.

Expertise	✪✪
Direction setting	✪✪
Idea generation	✪✪✪✪
Problem solving	✪✪✪✪
Fun	✪✪

5.2 Distortion

Preparation None.
Running time 15 minutes.
Resources None.
Teams Individual/team.

Most problems have clear dimensions. They might be spatial, numerical or time oriented. For example, if we wanted to improve a supermarket's checkouts, dimensions might include number of counters, number of staff, number of customers, size of checkout and times the checkout was open.

In this exercise, you will take a key dimension of your problem and distort it. Make it much bigger, or much smaller, than it currently is. In the checkout example, you might look at the implications of having one checkout or 1000. Having one customer or a million. Having checkouts the size of a matchbox or the size of a warehouse. Opening a checkout for one second or one year at a time. Don't try to cover everything – choose one dimension and stick with it.

When you have noted down the implications of the distortion, look back at the real world. For example, if you had chosen a matchbox checkout, you could use a direct output from the distortion – smaller checkouts just for baskets, making more space. Or you can look at an implication like having tiny staff. In the real world, tiny staff would mean lots of room behind the checkout. Is the space given to the employee getting in the way of giving good service? Could a change in space improve things? And so on.

Feedback With some problems, usually the very people-oriented, it is difficult to find an appropriate dimension. If so, try another technique. It is also possible that the dimension chosen doesn't work very well. Choose another, but make sure you have really examined the possibilities first – don't skip around just because the distortion seems uncomfortable; it is supposed to.

Outcome When this technique works well, it works very well, because the dimension selected was a major restraint in your thinking.

Variations Resist the inclination to handle multiple distortions in a single group, but with multiple teams it is well worth parcelling out the distortions to get a wider range of suggestions.

Expertise	✪✪
Direction setting	✪✪
Idea generation	✪✪✪✪
Problem solving	✪✪✪
Fun	✪✪

5.3 Reversal

Preparation None.
Running time 15 minutes.
Resources None.
Teams Individual/team.

Reversal is the extreme case of *Distortion* (5.2). Here, instead of taking an aspect of the problem and distorting it, we turn the problem inside out to reverse actually what we are trying to do. For example, if the requirement were to improve the company's position in a published league table, reversal would be to think 'what could we do to make our position in the league table worse'.

Spend five minutes brainstorming ideas to actively negate your 'how to' statement. Then look at the implications of the ideas you have generated. Worryingly often, these will be practices that are actually undertaken in your company. A classic example is the problem 'how to improve communications within our company'. Many of the suggestions for 'how to make communications fail in our company' seem already to be underway in many large companies. One outcome, therefore, is to modify or stop these existing practices. Other deductions will be more indirect, looking at the implications of the negative suggestions. For example, fitting a muzzle (to stop communications) may make you think of someone holding a mobile phone to their face.

Feedback Make sure that you are prepared to go beyond the obvious, both in the negative suggestions and how these are applied back to the real problem. It's easy to simply list the obvious positive ideas in reverse, then turn them around again. But you are looking for something more than the obvious when using creativity techniques.

Outcome This is not a good technique for new product development, but it is great for overcoming obstacles and other aspects of dealing with general problems.

Variations With a group you can split the team into 'bad guys', looking to make the proposition fail, and 'good guys' looking to reverse the bad guys' ideas and convert them into something useful. This can be made into a challenge – try to find something so negative that the 'good guys' can't use it.

Expertise	✪✪
Direction setting	✪✪
Idea generation	✪
Problem solving	✪✪✪✪
Fun	✪✪✪

5.6 Metaphor

Preparation None.
Running time 10 to 15 minutes.
Resources None.
Teams Individual/team.

At the heart of all of creativity techniques is the notion that you need to be taken away from your problem to generate creative solutions. Otherwise, you could do so from a standing start without the aid of techniques. *Metaphor* is powerful because it can be the basis of a whole range of ways for tackling your issues, and because we all use metaphors in our understanding of the world.

At its simplest, all you need to do is to generate a metaphor or an analogy for your problem and then work on it. Say the problem is 'how to overtake our main competitor in sales', an obvious metaphor might be 'our problem is like a Grand Prix race'. You could then look at why this is the case, deriving associations from the metaphor. Equally, you could use a more obscure metaphor – 'our problem is like a bowl of porridge'. Now the initial task is constructing a set of justifications as to why the metaphor is valid. These can (and should) be as wild and tenuous as you like. Then use these justifications and the metaphor itself to generate associations.

Feedback It is often tough to find a metaphor that really represents a problem. This shouldn't be an issue. If an obvious metaphor occurs to you, and it is sufficiently different from your problem that it will take you away from it, use it. If one does not occur, use any metaphor and force-fit a relationship. We have often used a list of topics (the random word list in Appendix 2, for example) and selected one at random.

Outcome *Metaphor* is at the heart of the creative process. We have frequently run entire sessions based around a single metaphor. These sessions can then use additional techniques within the overall session, but the theme remains intact.

Variations If working with a group, you can split into teams and challenge teams to find metaphors that other teams will be unable to use to generate ideas and then get them to do just that. This is one way of ensuring genuinely creative solutions.

Expertise	✪✪✪
Direction setting	✪✪
Idea generation	✪✪✪✪
Problem solving	✪✪✪✪
Fun	✪✪

5.7 Random word

Preparation None.
Running time 10 to 15 minutes.
Resources None.
Teams Individual/team.

This technique is many people's favourite. It often becomes the only creativity technique used because it is straightforward and effective. There is a real danger in developing a reliance on a single technique. Our whole thrust is to get you to move out of your regular tunnel of thinking. The last thing we want to do is to create a new tunnel. The selectors in Appendix 1 will help to ensure that you use a wide range of techniques.

Random word involves choosing a word at random, making as many associations with that word as you are able to and then relating these back to your problem. The word that you choose will usually be a noun, but need not be. It will usually be emotive, but need not be. It will certainly bring to mind a range of images and associations. To choose the word, you can use a book or a dictionary and allow them to fall open at random. We prefer using a pre-selected list of suitable words and choosing at random from that. To get you started, there is a list in Appendix 2 (page 116).

Feedback *Random word* becomes a favourite for a reason. It works, and works well. It is easy to explain to others, and we would almost always use it as an early demonstrator of a creativity technique. Some people want to choose a word that is relevant to their problem. Don't do this. Use a random word – it will turn out to be appropriate.

Outcome You will find that alone, or in groups, you have no trouble engaging with this technique. It will produce results.

Variations If working with a group, you can make a show of the randomness by getting someone else to choose the word or call out a number to select from the list in Appendix 2. An alternative source of a random word is to input word-like nonsense into a PC spell checker, then see what emerges. For a similar technique with quite different results, see *Two words* (5.45).

Expertise	✪✪
Direction setting	✪✪
Idea generation	✪✪✪✪
Problem solving	✪✪✪✪
Fun	✪✪