THREE

Getting Creative!

The Think-Outside-the-Box Method of Problem Solving

THE FOLLOWING ACCOUNT MAY SOUND like fiction, but we can assure you, it really happened, because we participated in it.

Healthy Harry Potter

"Listen up, everybody," shouted the energetic facilitator while clapping his hands loudly. "Please join your teams and start shooting off some wild ideas."

On a hot August morning in 2005, fifty selected thought leaders were gathered into a conference room. Over two days, these fifty experts—hand-selected for their varying areas of expertise and innovative problem solving—met for an exclusive workshop

showcasing different ways that creativity and design thinking could solve some of the world's biggest problems. The experts included the CEO of a large Brazilian energy company, a landscape designer from London, the brand director of a multinational fashion brand, a technical director of one of the world's largest consumer electronics brands, an investment broker from New York, a Danish medical doctor, and an advertising executive from Singapore.

What happens when you put fifty of the world's most creative thinkers in a room for two days together and ask them to solve the world's biggest problems?

The workshop organizers were convinced that the results, in whatever shape they might take, would constitute brilliance. Such was their confidence that at the end of the weekend, they scheduled a presentation for the press and a select audience of investors, government officials, business executives, and academics to hear the final results.

Facilitated by one of the world's leading experts in design thinking and business creativity, the teams were bombarded with inspiration and an impressive menu of creative exercises. "For the next two days, we are all going to think and work like designers," the workshop leader told the participants. "We will force ourselves to think outside the box, dive deep into the user's universe, open up our minds, think big, sketch hundreds of solutions, and prototype the best of the ideas so they can be realized as fast as possible."

The teams were given a designated work space decorated with mobile walls in bright colors, beanbag chairs, bar stools, flip charts, lots of sticky notes in various colors, and, on the walls, some posters giving the participants advice and encouragement. DON'T KILL IDEAS, one poster read. Another poster asked participants, HOW DO YOU FEEL? and a third encouraged the participants: BE PLAYFUL, HAVE FUN AND GET ADVENTUROUS.

With everyone sitting in an awkward semblance of a circle, the facilitator encouraged the participants to open up and accept that the next two days were going to be outside the comfort zone: "Every one of you was born a creative genius. You have been taught to tame the creative child inside you, but he is still there. Over the next two days, we are going to let him out to play."

Groups were assigned, and world problems handed out on index cards. The team was tasked with designing radical new ideas to solve the world's health-care problems. Such a task might have seemed daunting, but the team started the day with buoyant optimism. To spark their creativity, an actor had been hired to energize the troops. She did exercises to break the ice and make the participants loosen up.

"You are not going to get any crazy ideas if you hide behind your business suit and stick to your normal rational logic," she said. "As an actor, I know that to be creative, you have to shake things up. Let's start by all giving each other warm hugs."

This request, despite the high spirits of the morning, was met with less enthusiasm. Awkwardly, arms encircled arms as people did their best to avoid touching one another.

"Wasn't that a great feeling?"

Some of the participants nodded. She pointed up at the poster that read HOW DO YOU FEEL?

"Wouldn't it be great to start every day this way?" she asked. "Just going into the office in the morning and giving each other a warm hug? I am sure we would have a lot more creativity in business if that happened."

She then opened a bag and took out an object. It was a potato. She asked the group to stand in a circle and pass it around like a sacred object: "This is not a potato. It is a magic object that you can use to get new ideas. Just force a connection between the world's

health-care problems and the potato, and see what that gives you. I'll start."

The actress took the potato and considered it.

"I am thinking that the world would have far fewer sick people if we just ate more vegetables," she said.

The facilitator quickly wrote these words on a sticky note and posted it on the wall. "First idea is up!" he said. "Let's celebrate!"

He started clapping his hands, and the participants reluctantly followed. On the note, in all caps, were the words EAT MORE VEGGIES.

Now it was time for the participants. The first up—a financial investor—clearly had problems connecting the potato to the world's health-care problems. He struggled and almost faltered because the so-called creative space felt tense and fraught with consequence. He simply had to say something.

"Potato starts with P . . . Parkinson's, polio, pandemic, panic," he whispered. Then he looked up, struck by lightning. "Got it! *Patients!*" he shouted, perhaps a bit too loud, and visibly relieved. PATIENTS FIRST, read the sticky note.

After just thirty minutes, the team had produced no fewer than fifteen ideas on how to solve the world's health-care problems, all connected to the potato.

"This is just the tip of the iceberg," said the facilitator. "Now the real fun starts. The next thirty-six hours are going to be like a roller coaster ride for most of you. We are going to go through an entire creative design process that normally takes a year. It is going to be hard, but fun."

One of the participants—a family doctor famous for his work with diabetes patients—was growing increasingly uncomfortable with the situation. He had been sitting with his arms crossed, eyes askance every time a gem of "potato logic" was uttered.

"I am not sure I follow the logic here," he finally interjected. "As far as I can see, I am the only person in this group with any background in the health-care profession. And I am by no means an expert. It is not because I don't respect the other members of the team here. But I just don't see how this group can come up with ideas to solve the world's health-care problems, when none of us has real expertise in the medical profession. I mean, we haven't even defined what the world's health-care problems are."

A shadow of disappointment and worry fell over the facilitator's face for the first time all day. "I hear what you are saying," he cooed. "Your worries are good worries. Let's write them up on a flip chart and see if we can turn them into some new ideas later today. Maybe there is a breakthrough hidden in your thoughts."

He stopped to write more words in all caps before turning around again to speak to the doctor. "By the way, don't worry about the diversity of the group. All people are creative, and the more angles we have on the problem the more ideas we can create."

The workshop continued. The team was taken to a hospital and given a tour.

"Take lots of pictures, and document everything you see," the facilitator encouraged. "Act like you are flies on the wall, and immerse yourselves into the world of the users."

The fifteen members of the group were invited to observe a patient in her bed. All fifteen of them stood in her cramped space, some surrounding her bed and others practically sitting on her windowsill, a few spilling over into her bathroom. They obediently took notes and snapped photos, all the while making their best efforts to remain unobtrusive. Flies on the wall . . .

Back at the workshop, yet another exercise was waiting for them. On the wall were two big posters displaying vague flower shapes.

"This is the flower of insight," said the facilitator.

The team was supposed to fill in each of the six petals of the flower with insights from their hospital trip. One flower poster read HEALTH CARE TODAY, while the other was labeled HEALTH CARE TOMORROW. The team members started discussing what they really saw in the hospital, trying to boil down their insights to fit on a petal.

The CEO from the energy company was quick to begin: "I think it is pretty clear. The health-care system is simply not customer focused. I bet you that a hotel has ten times lower costs per guest than in a hospital, and yet the service is ten times better in a hotel."

A number of the participants nodded, and the CEO, encouraged, walked up to the flower and wrote LACK OF CUSTOMER FOCUS on the first petal.

In forty-five minutes, the flowers were full. The health-care system of tomorrow was "patient focused" and "wired and connected." It involved "holistic health care" and reminded us that "prevention matters."

The doctor furrowed his brow when the last petal was complete. "What do these words have to do with what we saw in the hospital?" he asked.

"Good comment," said one of the other participants. "Let's write it on the flip chart."

Time for the brainstorm.

The participants went through a range of exercises called things like Saucy Thinking, Random Words, and Angel and Devil. After three hours of exhaustive, creative brainstorming, the team had produced no fewer than three hundred sticky notes with ideas. The wall was covered in a veritable rainbow of creativity.

"This is incredible," said the CEO from the energy company. "We have never had that many ideas in the entire history of my company."

But when the team was asked to vote on the best ideas and find the big picture amid the jumble of paper, the sense of accomplishment quickly turned to frustration. There seemed to be no clear pattern in the ideas, many of which were too abstract when taken out of context.

The facilitator encouraged them to write down three to five big-picture headlines coming out of the three hundred sticky notes. "It's just like solving one of those puzzles where you have to connect the dots," he said.

The first big theme to emerge was the problem of child health.

"If we can just teach our kids to eat healthy foods, exercise daily, and avoid smoking and alcohol, we will have solved a big part of the world's health-care problems," the CEO from the energy company said. The doctor finally agreed. Indeed cigarettes, alcohol, and lack of exercise could explain a lot about why people get diabetes. Other possible themes included clean water for the poor, patient-centric health care, affordable medicine to the developing world, and wired health care.

But it was eight o'clock at night, and the team was getting tired.

"Let's just choose that children idea," one of the participants suggested. Everybody agreed so they could go home.

The next afternoon, hundreds of people started to gather in the creative workshop space to hear the final results. The room looked like a veritable tornado of creativity had blown through it, with sticky notes pasted here and there, early sketches and designs on tables, beanbags—still marked with the imprints of bodies—scattered in seemingly endless piles, and quirky musical instruments and children's toys dotting the room. Everyone was waiting with anticipation to hear how the world's most creative minds would solve the seemingly intractable challenges of world health.

Over the course of the day, the health-care team had worked hard on its presentation, but had encountered difficulty coming up with any cohesive strategy. As the hour for the presentation grew closer and closer, the team members all feared they would have to stand up and give up a jumbled mess of suggestions with no real structure. Fortunately, as if by magic, one of the participants brought up Harry Potter. Suddenly, all of the seemingly random bits of material snapped together into one brilliant framing device.

How could Harry Potter help children live healthier lives?

The team enlisted some design students to help visualize the idea, and only ten minutes before the presentation was set to begin, everything came together. The solution was called Healthy Harry Potter.

The presentation was scheduled to take thirty minutes, but the team couldn't stop talking. The members were energized and excited by all of the possibilities of their design solution. One by one, people in the audience started to sneak out of the room.

There was a sigh of relief when the facilitator cut the team off. No questions. No comments. After the presentation, the remaining audience emptied the room in less than fifteen seconds. The team was standing at the front of the empty rows of chairs looking at each other with a mixture of adrenaline and confusion. What had just happened?

Nobody in the press picked up the Healthy Harry Potter concept, and as a result, the idea was born and then died in that same hour. In fact, not one of the ideas ever materialized into something that could even slightly change the world's health-care problems. Not even a thought.

But the team and facilitator agreed that it had not been a waste of time. The process was great and the ideas were new, but changing the world's health-care system needed new ideas. It was akin to

asking a tanker to do a 180. In the hands of the right people at the right time and with the right resources, things could change, the team agreed.

Everyone on the team except for the doctor, that is. He had left hours earlier. He had a patient to see.

How Thinking Outside the Box Works

The case of Healthy Harry Potter seems like something on the fringes of creativity sessions in business, but it is a true story based on our own experience as participants in the health-care team.

And even more interesting, it is a totally normal way to address creativity these days. Through hundreds of interactions with some of the world's biggest companies, we have observed a clear pattern in how companies think about creativity. This same pattern is easily validated if you read the literature on business creativity, go to any seminar that has the words *design thinking*, *creativity*, or *innovation* in its title, or simply join in an ideation session anywhere in the world as a fly on the wall.

This pattern forms the dominant mental model for what creativity is, how it evolves, how you encourage it, and, in certain cases, how you manage it. Notice that we are not talking about the practice of creation in companies, or how companies actually create stuff. We are talking about the fundamental assumptions about creativity in business. At the core of this understanding, there is always the dialogue with default thinking. If we are rational and linear during our normal workdays, so goes the thinking of today's business leaders, then we should be, by turns, strange, mystical, unexpected, foreign, random, and radical during our creative "retreats." Let's explore five

of these fundamental assumptions in more depth and look at why they are so problematic for a business in a fog.

Assumption 1: Creativity Is Strange

When someone says, "Let's think outside the box," most people instantly know what it means. Thinking outside the box has become the most popular metaphor for creativity. It is defined as looking at problems in unconventional ways and coming up with ideas that are new, fresh, and unexpected. But is it so obvious that thinking outside the box means being creative? What box? What thinking? What does it mean that something is outside?

Originally, the phrase comes from solving a very specific puzzle where you have to draw four straight lines through all nine dots that are arranged in a three-row square, without lifting your pencil from the paper. The only solution is to draw a line that goes outside the square—hence outside the box. To solve the puzzle, you need to look beyond all the obvious solutions.

In business discourse, the box no longer refers to the square formed by nine dots, but refers to the conventional frame, the normal way of thinking, including the firm's organizational routines, processes, practices, and existing ideas. Somehow the metaphor reveals a very dichotomous idea about creativity in business. There is an inside and an outside of a business. The inside is based on routines, conventions and existing ideas and is not regarded as creative. The outside means breaking the routine, ignoring conventions, fostering creative leaps, and generating wild ideas. In other words, creativity is abnormal. It is strange.

Assumption 2: Creativity Is a Process

Another very popular and common concept is brainstorming. You will often hear people using this phrase to describe a specific process of group activity where a team creates ideas in a free environment

without the constraints of judgment and critique. The word *brainstorming* is used for all sorts of activities that have no real logic or structure to the conversation. For example, you can say, "Let's brainstorm a list" to indicate that you will work together and that any idea you have will get written down. Or you could say, "Is this a brainstorm or is this a meeting?" indicating that the brainstorm doesn't have a deadline and a fixed structure, while a meeting has both.

Alex F. Osborn, an advertising executive, popularized the term *brainstorming* in the 1950s. He was frustrated with the lack of imagination in his employees' ideas for ad campaigns. In experimenting with creating ideas in groups rather than relying on individual ideas, he found that group creativity dramatically increased both the quantity and the quality of advertising ideas. He used his discovery to develop a generic process for creative thinking—a process that he claimed could be used in any type of problem-solving situation. In several books he wrote in the 1950s and 1960s, he applied creative thinking to a variety of areas: children, hobbies, marital problems, jobs, health, and happiness.

Osborn was a firm believer in the idea that every single person is creative and that personal creativity can be brought out in any person through the use of a procedure. It clearly worked in the advertising industry, whose key product was creative ideas. He saw it as his call in life: to take his discovery from Madison Avenue and bring it to Western civilization: "Each of us does have an Aladdin's lamp, and if we rub it hard enough, it can light our way to better living—just as that same lamp lit up the march of civilization."

In his 1953 book, *Your Creative Power*, he coined the term *brainstorming* and introduced it as a technique that produced new ideas on command: "Brainstorming means using the brain to storm

a creative problem and to do so in commando fashion, each stormer audaciously attacking the same objective."

Osborn devised a very detailed procedure on how a brainstorm session was to be conducted. His most important rule was that the problem be clearly defined before beginning: "You can't solve two problems in one session."

Once the problem is clearly defined, a brainstorming session should follow four rules:

1. Criticism is not allowed. Avoid passing judgment on ideas.
2. Produce as wild a group of ideas as possible. It is acceptable and even desirable to share really unusual ideas.
3. Quantity breeds quality. The greater the volume of ideas, the greater the likelihood of useful ideas.
4. Combine and improve ideas. Participants should improve each other's ideas and deliberately try to combine each other's ideas in interesting and surprising ways.

The promise of a technique guaranteed to produce ideas landed on a soft spot in American industry, and brainstorming quickly became known as a sensational new approach that could be used to solve all sorts of business problems; it was a new panacea. Even though Osborn clearly stated that brainstorming was only designed for a very specific purpose—group sessions with *one* narrowly defined problem—over time, brainstorming became the most popular metaphor for the creative process in business. A lot of variants have been developed—lateral thinking, design thinking, TRIZ, electronic brainstorming, etc.—but they all carry the same basic idea that creativity is primarily a matter of having the right processes and steps, allowing a group to manufacture ideas as if they were

parts on an assembly line. Following this logic, it is assumed that because the process is somehow more important than the content itself, experts need never even be present. In fact, expertise and deep knowledge are seen as a potential creativity blocker in certain sessions. Robert Sutton, the author of *Weird Ideas That Work*, tells his readers: "In the creative process, ignorance is bliss."

Note the way this discourse argues for defining ideas as singular objects that can easily be noted on a list, counted like beans, or put together in new ways like LEGO bricks. Ideas are seen as modular pieces, completely separate from the person having the idea and the context in which that idea was created. These types of ideas—atomized and modular—are not painful to change or explain, as they carry a low bandwidth of information. Having an idea is free, and killing an idea carries no risk.

And because ideas in this discourse are seen as objects detached from their context, anyone can have an idea, and ideas can come from anywhere. Randomness and chance play a big part in this understanding of ideas. If ideas are just particles without any inherent meaning, why not throw some of these random chemical substances into the test tube and give it a shake?

Assumption 3: Ideas Come from out of the Blue

"Even if you're not a genius, you can use the same strategies as Aristotle and Einstein to harness the power of your creative mind and better manage your future," writes Michael Michalko in "Thinking Like a Genius." We are often seduced by the romantic notion that everyone is creative, that you need only to control the creative process and remove the straightjacket of critique and judgment for genius to be revealed.

Design the right circumstances for the lightning to strike, and like alchemy, it will. Our common language around creativity does

nothing but affirm this. We say, "I had an idea," or "Let's get some ideas," as if these ideas are falling down to us out of the blue sky. An executive in one of the world's largest pharmaceutical companies decided that his management team should have such an ideation session every Friday at six o'clock, at which time they could think big and visionary thoughts. He called it, unsurprisingly, the "blue sky meeting."

The thought that ideas will come to us under the right circumstances is supported by the common myths and popular stories told about the history of ideas and inventions. It is commonly believed that Einstein discovered his theory of special relativity while driving his car home one night passing the town clock and that Darwin was hit by a sudden insight during his journeys with the *Beagle*. In more contemporary times, it is cocktail party chitchat that eBay was invented because the founder had an idea about how his fiancée could trade PEZ dispensers. Of course, detailed historical accounts of what actually happened almost always show that these common stories are myths and wishful thinking, a theme we will revisit when we discuss abductive reasoning in depth in chapter 4.

Assumption 4: Creativity Is about Radical Change

While Osborn and his followers were primarily talking about how to use creative techniques to solve relatively narrow problems like ideas for product names, we are now using words like *breakthrough*, *game changing*, *disruptive*, and even *revolutionary* to describe good ideas. This change in discourse started in the early 1990s as management gurus, business scholars, management consultancies, the business press, and even governments argued that we were standing on the threshold of a new age, poised to inherit an entirely new economy—the transition from a physical-based economy to a new, net-based one. An important part of this transition,

many argued, was to change the whole framework of business from an incremental mind-set to a radical mind-set.

"For the first time in history, we can work backward from our imagination rather than forward from our past," management guru Gary Hamel writes in his best-seller *Leading the Revolution*. Hamel argues that dreaming, creating, exploring, inventing, pioneering, and imagining should make up the bulk of the manager's day. And if they do not, "you are already irrelevant and your organization is probably becoming so along with you." In other words, either you have radical ideas or you die. To succeed, you need to become a revolutionary. Hamel asks his readers to give an oath:

> I am no longer a captive to history.
> Whatever I can imagine, I can accomplish.
>
> I am no longer a vassal in a faceless bureaucracy.
> I am an activist, not a drone.
>
> I am no longer a foot soldier
> in the march of progress.
>
> I am a Revolutionary.

Companies like Enron became the epitome of this type of thinking. And though the revolutionary jargon has dampened a bit over the years, the basic idea that creativity is about radical *newness* remains with us to this day. As one of our executive clients put it, "I don't care about small, incremental ideas. I want ideas that are crazy, weird, and never ever seen before. Ideas have to be really, really new. That's creativity."

Assumption 5: Creativity Is Playful and Fun

A final assumption about business creativity is the belief that creativity can only happen in a fun and playful environment. This idea is expressed through the symbols and artifacts of creativity that you often see in connection with stories about creative companies. These same symbols and artifacts automatically appear when a company is attempting to change its image and appear more creative to its clients and customers.

If the icon of default thinking is the stopwatch, thinking outside the box is a celebration of the colored sticky note. Like ancient walls of cave paintings, the whiteboards filled with sticky notes telegraph to all observers that "something creative happened here." The sticky note detritus is so emblematic that companies often take photographs of employees surrounded by such notes, seemingly deep in creative thought. Note that you can never read what is actually written on the notes. This is because it doesn't really matter. The sticky notes themselves are the message—not their content. You would never take a picture of people working on their spreadsheets to document a company's analytical prowess. But creativity needs to be loud, colorful, and, preferably, captured in neon.

Sticky notes, of course, are only the beginning of the fun. Creative companies have Nerf guns, open offices, flip charts, beanbag chairs, bikes hanging down from the ceiling, soccer tables, ubiquitous scooters, and lots and lots of laughter. "It's now time to party," writes Chris Baréz-Brown, author of *How to Have Kick-Ass Ideas*, as he draws a direct connection between playfulness and creative genius. "So the message is, if in doubt, say '*Na na na-na na*' and laugh at the world."

Baréz-Brown's book—representative of the creative-thinking body of literature—is full of language you would find in a storybook for preschool children. The enemy of playfulness, in the author's

view, is the collection of experts and people who claim to know a lot. He calls them "clever clever thinky thinky" people.

Such language subtly, and not so subtly, connotes playfulness with liberation. It plays on a sense that work is enslaving our thoughts: the office is a place where we are treated like faceless bureaucrats while our expertise and knowledge is blinding us. To be creative, we need to free ourselves from the bonds of corporate bureaucracy, expertise, and rational analysis. True liberation exists in the world of a child: open, playful, curious and spontaneous.

Lest such thinking unleash a company culture that resembles *Lord of the Flies*, most creativity literature makes it clear that organizations don't want people to be like children *all the time*. Employees should behave like children on command. Thus, creative sessions that open with a series of icebreakers, energizers, and team building exercises signaling fun and play. Such playful fun can take an almost infinite variety of forms: in one creative workshop, we were instructed to "find our inner Elvis"; in another, we were asked to be "idea rappers"; and in a third, we were asked to "body-storm," meaning "don't talk at all, just play in free-form."

The discourse of business creativity, although often absurd in its most extreme cases, clearly addresses a growing and legitimate concern with the limitations of conventional management logic. And to be fair, many elements of thinking outside the box do deliver results for companies. Brainstorming, for example, is a great tool for generating a large variety of ideas on problems that are clearly defined and have a low bandwidth—ideas for product variations, product names, company or product slogans, alternative ways to solve a practical problem, lists of user attributes, and so on. The whole setup of the creative off-site workshop—complete with icebreakers,

fast idea development, and energetic teamwork—has a big impact on team performance, knowledge sharing, the sense of involvement, and just plain fun at work. But it is not useful for helping executives understand why a series of product launches failed, say, or what is to be done when an entire business is hemorrhaging money quarter after quarter, or how to understand and then bet on the future.

The problem with the thinking-outside-the-box approach is neither its intention nor its tools and processes. The essential fallacy of the approach is its promise to deliver idea generation that is fast, efficient, repeatable, simple, and risk-free. Getting people right requires a deeper investigation into human behavior as well as a longer gestation period for creative ideas. It often requires training and background knowledge or experience. And unlike the tidiness of a thinking-outside-the-box off-site workshop, it is messy. Breakthrough insights aren't manufactured like widgets in a factory. They dawn on us in nascent form, like the sight of a vague shape on the horizon. They are first present in our mind and bodies in a preverbal state, an inkling, a feeling. Some refer to this as the "slow hunch." Einstein wasn't satisfied with the relativity theory handed down to him by Galileo, for example. He couldn't articulate why. He just had a hunch that the holes in the theory might prove interesting if he pursued them. He created a series of mind riddles for himself: imagine man could fly through the air at the speed of light, arms out in front of him in flight while holding up a mirror. What image does the glass reflect? Is it an image of the flying man's face? Does it look normal or does flying at the speed of light change his image in some way? When someone is moving at the speed of light, what happens to the light reflecting off his retina? And what about the people watching from below? Does the light reaching their retinas change the image of the flying man as well?

For years, Einstein pondered this riddle, mulling it over day after day, discussing it with friends, trying to unravel its mysteries. After ten full years, his once-vague feeling began to take a more concrete shape, a clear form attached to language. *I have a feeling that the speed of light is constant.*

When this dawning becomes a recognizable insight, we achieve the moment of clarity.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's famous studies on highly creative people observed that deep, quiet periods spent doing unrelated things often helped new ideas to surface within them: "Cognitive accounts of what happens during incubation assume . . . that some kind of information processing keeps going on in the mind even when we are not aware of it, even when we are asleep." Einstein's theory of relativity was occurring to him not in a flash but very slowly while he was making a sandwich, in the bath, during his morning walks, and most certainly while he was dreaming at night. In part 2 of this book, we will look more carefully at the experience of an insight dawning and the moment of clarity that follows. It's time to start getting people right.