

Fulcrum Search Science Inc.

If You Can Think, You Can Be Creative

by Inge Christensen



Creativity. First of all, what exactly is it? Second, how does it fit with the world of business? Thirdly, can anyone do it, or is it a gift assigned at birth to "Creative People" (artists and the like)? Before we explore these questions, let's take a peek at a few pages of creativity history...

- Consultants for this potato chip company were faced with this challenge: how to pack and ship chips to avoid breakage. They found inspiration in autumn leaves. When dry leaves are shoved into a bag, they break. But when the leaves are wet, they are pliable and pack easily and tightly. Wetting and drying potato flour during packing became the solution - as well as a brilliant marketing hook.
- A father who was taking pictures of his daughter was deeply affected by her earnest wish to see the photographs at the very moment they were snapped. He was inspired to make photographic history with this invention.
- In 1978, engineers for an electronics company tried to build a mini tape recorder, but only got as far as a mini tape player. The project was killed. The chairman heard about the so-called failure and combined the mini tape player with tiny headphones invented for another project, and this, the world's best-selling electronic device, was born.
- In an unforgettable ad campaign for this home furnishings retailer, teams of men in coveralls invade subway cars, operating rooms and bowling alleys and transform them within minutes into cozy, functional spaces. The ad breaks the rule "home furnishings belong in the home."

If you said Pringles, Polaroid Lane Camera, Sony Walkman, and Ikea, you scored. So did these products: they generated huge profits. More to the point, each of the examples cited above is the result of specific creativity techniques - used either consciously or unconsciously - by people in business. Mystical talents bestowed at birth had nothing to do with it. Neither did art.

Creativity is a process. It is accessible to anyone willing to learn specific techniques and then practice them - the same way you would nurture any other ability. Therefore: If you can think, you can be creative - wherever and whenever you trip over challenges which cannot and should not be solved with existing solutions. In the workplace you must add management support to this equation because creativity involves risk-taking, and risk often brings failure before it brings success. Consider the Sony Walkman.

Managers who ask how creativity benefits their agenda should instead ask how their agenda can survive without it. Recently, the Globe and Mail reported: "In a survey of top U.S. corporations...innovative products introductions accounted for an astounding 30 percent of revenue and 61 percent of overall company profits." Companies cannot keep pace (or set the pace) in today's changing markets by doing what they have always done. As they say, "innovate or die."

Like trying to build a fire in the rain, even the best techniques are useless if introduced into a non-conductive environment. Natural human reactions can act as barriers to the creative process. For example, have you ever been...

- Unable to escape patterned thinking (assumptions, arbitrary limitations and boilerplate solutions)?
- Afraid your idea will be criticized?
- Stuck in a single paradigm or perspective?
- Unmotivated to produce more than a few ideas?
- Closed to new stimulus (on autopilot)?

Proactively dealing with barriers such as these will prevent the creative flame from flickering and dying out.

Now, onto the fire. There are several basic creativity techniques. Most are based on lateral thinking, a process which sidetracks patterned thinking and is either deliberate (for people who are trained in it) or accidental (for everyone else). A telltale sign that you have just slipped into lateral thinking is an idea which suddenly "pops" into

your head. Here are just a few basic techniques...

- Connect related and unrelated data to your challenge to trigger new ideas. Pringles used a nature analogy to connect leaves to potato chips.
- Let go of preconceived ideas and limitations; open the gateway to an active subconscious where ideas are constantly evolving. Mr. Land used the simplicity of a child's wish to open up his thinking.
- Cross-pollinate various aspects of your challenge with each other and with new data. Masara Ibuka of Sony combined parts of two failed projects and made a winner.
- Purposely disregard conventional rules and limitations to trigger new ideas. Ikea's ad agency got our attention by throwing out the "home" in "home furnishings."

Of course, the exercises which support these techniques must be as simple as a game of tic-tac-toe in order to be truly user-friendly. A professional creativity trainer can help you and your colleagues deal with the barriers to the creative process and lead you in exercises which stretch and flex your thinking muscles. Think of it this way: if you can walk, you can run. And if you can think, you can be creative. Your business success may very well depend on it.

Inge Christensen is the force behind Creative Expeditions™, a branded methodology for generating a large quantity of ideas in a limited time frame, on any topic. It is offered in two ways: in workshops where people can learn the techniques for their own use, and during brainstorming sessions where a Creative Catalyst (Inge) uses the techniques with a group to produce ideas for a specific project. In either case, the session is customized to suit the group and the project.