

In essence, creativity is about bringing into existence something that was not there before. This 'something' is often in the form of an idea, and the use of creative thinking principles and techniques is how we bring it into being. We all use creativity in our daily lives whether trying to find a solution to a thorny work issue or simply deciding how to celebrate a loved one's birthday. As interpreters, creativity is central to our work.

Creativity and the quest for ideas

Creativity can be thought of as the quest for ideas—a quest that, like the ideas it generates, forms part of our everyday life.

"The ideas that take hold in our minds today will shape the world we live in tomorrow. Some ideas liberate, others enslave. Some will fill us with hope and optimism, others strike us as abhorrent. We may cherish or loathe these ideas, but the one thing we can't afford to do is ignore them. So we invite you to join us everyday – to be a participant in our unfolding world. To consider carefully the ideas which shape our future and ask: what kind of tomorrow do you want?" Advertisement for *The Sydney Morning Herald* (Fairfax Review, Concise Report, 2000).

So what do you need to make your quest for ideas successful and effective? By the end of this article you will be armed with some of the fundamental tools to help you answer this question.

First, challenge the misconceptions!

Before you begin your quest, let's dispel some of the more popular myths about creative thinking.

Myth: Creative thinking is only for the select few, for the gifted.

The ability to be creative is within all of us, and not just in stereotyped professions. For example, is the artist any more creative than a single parent who has to continually think of new ways to juggle kids, career and a social life?

Myth: People are born creative.

In the same way we can learn the skills of reading and writing, we can also learn skills that enhance and enrich our creative thinking abilities.

Myth: Creative thinking 'spontaneously' creates the one brilliant idea.

There is usually quite a bit of effort that goes into generating the spontaneously brilliant idea, the stand-out 'Eureka' moment. Often a seemingly useless idea needs to be worked and reworked before becoming brilliant.

Myth: Creative thinking does not need the logical abilities of our brains.

Creativity requires a holistic approach to the thinking process: logic has its role too.

Describing Creative Thinking: the Principles

Your imagination is one of the more significant tools you will need in your quest: engaging and empowering your imagination relies on the principles and techniques of creative thinking.

Humans have always been creative. Yet the formal concept of creative thinking, or lateral thinking as it may also be called, has been examined only in the past few decades. In the 1950s, Alex Osborn first coined the phrase 'brainstorming' to describe one approach to creative thinking, and this has remained a standard process used by people seeking to generate ideas. In the late 1960s, Edward de Bono brought the term 'lateral thinking' into our vocabulary and this too is now a common way of understanding the process of creating ideas.

Some more recent terms used to bring focus to the creative process include 'innovation' and 'improvisation'. But regardless of the label, there are some universal principles that drive an effective creative thinking process and which will form essential companions on your quest for ideas.

1. There is no right and no wrong

The initial focus for your creative effort should be on generating many ideas rather than simply looking for the 'right' idea. Evaluation (judgement) and choosing the 'right' idea only comes after an initial generation phase. If the two steps of generation and evaluation are not kept separate, people become critical too soon, which adversely affects the quality of creative thinking processes.

To overcome the spirit of criticism and negative thinking look at things as not good or bad – but as different or interesting. Edward de Bono

2. Have a positive and playful attitude

Imagine yourself as an excitable young child about to set off on a quest; on an adventure to explore and discover the wonders that lie beyond your backyard. This same attitude is what you should take with you on your quest for ideas. Give yourself permission to have fun with the process.

As you generate ideas, it is important that you take the time to play with and nurture them so that their worth and value can be realised. For example many of the major publishers in Australia rejected the 'Blue Day Book' before it was finally accepted. The author, Bradley Trevor Grieve, kept the idea alive. Do the same with your ideas – keep them alive, keep playing with them, and keep tossing them around.

Don't be afraid to start your journey of exploring this attitude with 'little steps'—such as that promoted by the Japanese philosophy of improvement, Kaizen. Each day try something different—jiggle a tea bag with your non-dominant hand, wash with your non-dominant hand, imagine a 'weird' invention and see how many uses you can imagine for it.

The qualities that complement such an attitude include:

- Openness
- Optimism
- Curiosity
- The willingness to daydream and fantasise
- Being adventurous and a risk taker
- Just simply giving it a go.

3. Positive and encouraging language

The quest for ideas requires you to focus on language that will allow you to make the most of your travels through the creative thinking landscape.

- **“Yes and ...”**
When we are presented with ideas a typical response is 'Great idea, but ...' followed by a list of reasons as to what is not good about the idea. With the phrase '**Yes, and ...**' you acknowledge the idea and give it development momentum by specifically looking for how it can work and be of value.
- **“Yes, let's ...”**

When first responding to a creative idea, try using the phrase 'Yes, let's ...'.

For example, suppose you wanted to improve administrative efficiencies and a colleague says 'We might as well try to fly to the moon.' You say, '**Yes, let's ...** fly to the moon.'

You then imagine flying to the moon and landing on its surface. You begin to play with the notion of reduced gravity, and the effects of gravity here on Earth, and make a connection with the thought that perhaps the administrative processes are getting bogged down of late, possibly causing inefficiencies. Thus one idea you can now explore is how to reduce the 'gravity' of existing processes.

- **Reversals**

Positive language also comes from using the concept of reversals. For example, if someone starts blaming an organisation's inefficiencies as the cause of a negative situation, you respond with '**Reversal**' and look for a reversal word. In this example, the word might be 'solve'. So the positive phrase becomes 'Don't blame, Solve'.

Or suppose someone is becoming lethargic and losing motivation—the positive phrase could be 'Don't procrastinate, Move.' You would then aim to generate ideas on how to best re-energise that person.

To see how this phrasing works, reflect on the everyday process of reminding someone to do something—reminding a family member to buy milk, for example. Asking them to 'Remember to buy the milk' is more of a positive and focused action than 'Don't forget to buy the milk'. Reversals work in the same way—rather than blocks, discover ways to move.

- **Three-up**

This is the creative equivalent of the good old diggers' game of two-up. Rather than looking at yes or no, right or wrong, black or white—introduce the phrase '**Three-Up**' to encourage yourself to explore a third perspective. For example; what's good about the idea, what's limiting, what's interesting. What's the grey between the black and white?

4. Give yourself permission to try

Within the arena of creative thinking, mistakes are seen as treasured learning opportunities. So much so that you actually give yourself permission to make mistakes, to write down silly ideas and weird concepts, to seek again and again to look beyond the bounds of what is typical, expected, acceptable, normal or standard.

5. Questioning Attitude

You gain knowledge through questioning and by always seeking to find out 'why things happen as they do', Questions that can help in our quest for ideas include:

- *What's tempting about this idea?*

By asking this question, you are encouraged to explore the idea rather than dismiss it.

- *How can we make this idea work?*
By trying to make it work you might be able to move through 'blocks' which are either irrational or have existed for reasons that are no longer valid.

6. The belief that an idea has a journey

This is one of the core principles that you need to acknowledge, and work with, in your quest for ideas.

It is rare to come up with an idea and immediately find an application for it. Instead, you often have to work and rework ideas. You have to edit, apply and test them. Creativity takes effort in much the same way as all worthwhile pursuits, which is why a positive and playful attitude is a great asset. Consider:

- A tennis player does not reach world status the first time she picks up a racquet. She practices. She has to hit the ball into the net or out of the court hundreds, if not thousands, of times before she manages consistent winning shots.
- Golfers lose many balls and spend just about as much time looking for them as they do playing the game before they reach the level of being able to hit a ball directly towards that little flag on a distant green.
- Authors and playwrights rarely produce publishable work at their first attempts.

So if we need to practice, re-work and re-shape your activities in other fields why should the world of generating ideas be any different? Simply having this mindset will go a long way towards you being more creative, and towards maintaining your confidence that you are travelling toward your creative destination.

And don't forget: patience is often required for this task of working and re-working ideas. As Einstein once said:

"I think and think, for months, for years"

Where does this leave you with your quest?

Next time you are in need of an idea, simply apply the principles discussed here and you will find yourself being more creative. If you want specific techniques, contact either:

John Pastorelli at john@ochrelearning.com.au or

Claire Savage at claire@savagelycreative.com.au

Creativity in Practice

Follow through with this example and see how applying the principles of creativity can work in the real world.

As members of a working party, we've been challenged to suggest ways of improving staff morale. Paul and Sarah start the conversation:

Paul: *We need to develop some new ideas on how we can increase staff motivation.*

Sarah: *What about taking Friday afternoons off?*

Paul: *Are you kidding! Who's going to run the office on Friday afternoons?*

What we have just witnessed is called a **block**. If we are following the creativity principles, a block like this leaves us with no room to nurture and consider the initial idea. Despite the fact that we were excited about the prospect for adventure, our quest has been cut short.

How then do we apply our principles? Firstly, we acknowledge the concerns raised and then 'park' them to one side. One of our principles is to see potential and value in all that is presented and discussed. Therefore, needing people to run the office on Friday is one concern. We capture this concern and continue with our quest.

Let's go into free-falland get a few ideas running

(Now it's time to use the **Yes, and ..** and **Yes, let's ..** language. That is, we are saying 'Yes, let's take Friday afternoon off and in return can we'. Remember that, at the end of this process, we need to pull back to our primary goal of 'increasing staff motivation'.)

Some possible ideas from this initial idea are:

- *Can people come in to work on another day of the week?*
- *Can they come in at different times of the same day?*
- *Can they have the option to take Friday off in lieu of pay?*
- *Can they take Friday off from their normal work location to work somewhere else?*

Just these few questions have generated an initial list of 4 ideas relating to taking Friday afternoons off.

Now, moving beyond the obvious, we explore the notion of 'taking things off.' Let's say clothes. How does this concept relate to the initial need of increasing staff motivation?

Taking clothes off leads to the idea of beaches, hot dancing, showering, and going to bed. (We now have another 4 ideas)

We have generated 8 ideas to consider as options for increasing staff morale: 4 related to flexibility with regards to working on Friday afternoon and 4 relating to taking clothes off.

Whether there is any merit in these ideas will have to be teased out with further thought and investigation, but at least we now have 8 new ideas to consider and play with rather than the zero ideas following Paul's initial

'block' response). What's more, we came up with these 8 ideas in less than 30 seconds.

Let's now play with the idea of a beach and think of a beach destination. What about initiating a monthly Friday afternoon outing to a beach? Part of the time could be spent on work-related issues and the rest on individual benefit and enjoyment. If there is no beach available, then what about another destination such as visiting a local tourism attraction, or local cinema, or even sitting on lush grass in a local park. Perhaps it could be experiencing the service and offerings of another organisation.

Let's explore ideas around 'showering' and how this might lead to ideas for increasing staff motivation.

What are some elements associated with showering? Cleanliness; soap; being able to adjust temperature of water; it's a luxury unheard of for people in many parts of the world. Let's now go with the last idea about disadvantaged communities, countries and people. Why not investigate creating a relationship with a local volunteer-based organisation? If your organisation is already doing this, then perhaps you could work with a different organisation each month?

Such involvement in positive social programs would lead to improving staff morale.

So in a period of less than a few minutes we have generated a variety of possible ideas and we now have much more to work with in searching for a decision about ways to increase staff morale.

Farewell!

We hope you enjoy the travels and destinations your quest for creativity will lead you to.

Some Travel Aids

Alex Osborn – Your Creative Power (1948)
Alex Osborn – Applied Imagination (1953)
Edward De Bono – The Use of Lateral Thinking (1967)
Edward De Bono - Lateral Thinking (1970)
Edward De Bono – The Six Thinking Hats (1985)
Michael Morgan – Creating Workforce Innovation (1993)
Keith Sawyer – Group Genius (the creative power of collaboration) 2007
Betty Edwards – Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain (1999)
Michael J. Gelb and Tony Buzan – Lessons from the Art of Juggling (1994)
Glenn Capelli and Sean Brealey – The Thinking Learning Classroom (2000)
Tony Buzan – Many books on Mind Mapping and Memory Techniques.