

# Boosting Creativity

Many people believe they aren't creative, but they just might need some help in changing or expanding their way of thinking. Here are some guidelines that might help.

Creativity is rare. Needlessly. It's rare in *individuals* because of the way the mind works. It's rare in *groups* because of the way groups respond to new ideas. But by using techniques to get around the mind's limitations and ground rules for responding to others' ideas, any group can boost its creativity dramatically.

## Creativity Techniques

Our mind is a pattern-recognition machine with a large store of standard patterns it uses to interpret the many different situations we face. The mind's great strength is its ability to instantaneously fit a standard pattern to any situation. Unfortunately, patterns are hard to change, and thinking gets channeled by the first pattern selected. Here are three techniques from creative-thinking expert Edward de Bono that can help us break out of that initial, comfortable, standard pattern:

**1. Quota**—Set a quota (a number from 3 through 10). Come up with alternative ways of thinking about the problem until you fill

your quota. Example: The checking account doesn't reconcile with the general ledger. The first pattern: You haven't properly accounted for which items have cleared and which haven't. Here are two alternatives: (1) The bank fees on the statement haven't yet been entered into the general ledger. (2) An item has cleared for a different amount than the amount on the check.

**2. Random Word**—Flip open a dictionary, and pick the first concrete noun you come to. Then try to relate that word to the problem you're trying to solve. Example: The problem is that check requests sometimes come in without a valid cost center to charge. The random word is "soft shell crab." A crab usually has a hard shell, but it sheds its shell occasionally as it outgrows it, just as check requests usually have a cost center number. The crab's missing shell is like the missing cost center number. The soft shell is temporary, however, because the soft shell hardens into the new shell. That means the shell isn't really missing. It's already in place when the old shell goes missing. Idea: Each person with approval authority has a default cost center already in place. If no cost center is listed on a check

request, the default center is charged.

**3. Reversal**—Some element of the situation is negated, or two elements are swapped, and the implications are explored. Example: The problem is that we suspect our overhead allocation method is giving us an inaccurate picture of our product-line profitability. Reversal: Our product lines are giving us an inaccurate picture of our overhead. Implication: The real problem isn't how to allocate overhead—it's how to know how much value the work we call overhead is contributing to profitability. If we disperse the people in most of the centralized support functions into lean companies-within-the-company organized by product line, we'll understand product-line profitability without allocating overhead at all.

## Ground Rules

The previous techniques help surmount the limitations of the mind, but what about social limitations? In most groups, new ideas don't get a very warm welcome: "That'll never work." "We tried that." "Yes, but..." According to George M. Prince, inventor and retired cofounder of Synectics®, a company that conducted extensive

research into the creative process, there are four ways groups kill creativity. To prevent this from happening, each requires ground rules so that promising ideas are protected until they can stand on their own. The killers?

**1. Responding with evaluation:** “Great idea!” or “It stinks.” This creates a hostile environment that discourages people from sharing anything remotely creative. Ground rule: Suspend evaluation. Instead, either seek or provide additional information: “How did you get to that?” “Where do you see that leading?” “I know another company that tried something similar to that.”

**2. Responding in either/or terms:** Good/bad, will/won’t work. This prevents us from seeing the remaining flaws in ideas we believe will work and masks the potential in what has been labeled a bad idea. Ground rule: Break ideas into elements. Treat all ideas as a mixture of positive features worth keeping and missing pieces we haven’t yet found. Instead of “That’ll never work. You’ll ruin quality,” say “I see how the bonus part would incent people to produce more. I wonder how we would keep them from sacrificing quality to earn more.”

**3. Focusing on the negative:** The flaws in the idea, the obstacles that must be overcome. Valuable and promising ideas get thrown away because they aren’t complete solutions. Ground rules: Require group members to “buy” permission to raise flaws and obstacles by giving two or three positive elements of the idea for each negative. Get the positives first. Treat negatives as “missing pieces,” not

strikes against the idea. Instead of “The cost makes that a non-starter,” say “Okay, it directly addresses the problem, is easy to explain and understand, and will be wildly popular with the troops. How can we afford it?”

**4. Arguing against or withdrawing from ideas.** This prevents teamwork, and one individual must come up with the complete solution. Ground rule: Build on others’ ideas by identifying an additional benefit of the idea, providing a missing piece, or using it as a springboard to an even more exciting possibility. “If we did that, we could also collect and mine the data to learn where else we’re falling down on the job with customers,” or “Maybe we could get the costs to an acceptable level and still get the information we want by limiting it to a sample instead of putting everyone through it.”

Practice creativity-enhancing techniques with discipline, and establish creativity-enhancing ground rules—you’ll soon find that creativity isn’t rare anymore. **SF**

*Kennard T. Wing, CMA, is Director, Operational Effectiveness at PHH Mortgage in Mt. Laurel N.J. He is also Affiliated Faculty in Organizational Dynamics at the University of Pennsylvania. You can reach him at [kennarwing@aol.com](mailto:kennarwing@aol.com).*