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Harnessing Creativity to Make Powerful Decisions

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Introduction

Creativity is the “due diligence” of effective problem analysis. It is through creativity that the best possible solution for a problem is discovered. Without creativity, decisions are often one-dimensional, superficial, and near-sighted.

But what is “creativity”? In the context of decision making, it means *imaginative approaches to problem analysis*. This approach leads to innovative solutions.

This definition of creativity in the context of decision making, of course, requires us to ask what it means to be “imaginative” in the first place. In short, it means thinking outside the norm. To be imaginative is to think beyond the boundaries of reasonableness that limit how we think. It is to break standard thinking practices and to go where no problem solver has gone before... (Cue the theme song from “Star Trek.”)

A person is considered to be creative if they do not follow conventional thinking patterns. To avoid conventional thinking is to be open minded. To be open minded comes from being non-judgmental. To be non-judgmental is to be receptive to new ideas and perceptions. Ultimately, being open to new ideas and perceptions is how creativity contributes to better decisions.

The Discussion So Far

In the first paper of the decision-making series, we defined a “good” decision. The best decision in a given situation is the solution that has the highest probability of the most desirable outcome. A good decision is one in which the decision maker understands the imperfection in their knowledge. They are therefore able to make a fully informed decision about the risks they are taking. A high-quality decision is made when decision makers are fully informed about the implications of their choice relative to other choices.

Identifying the best possible solution requires all possible alternatives be identified and then evaluated carefully and objectively. You cannot choose the best solution if it has not been identified first. Ultimately, creativity drives the search for your options by identifying multiple solutions.

The next paper of the series, we described how restrictive mindsets undermine our ability to be objective. Bias, mental laziness, and stereotyping subvert our ability to be objective.

People instinctively make quick decisions following practiced patterns. Problem analysis is superficial. People muddle through problem solving in a haphazard way. Most are content with occasional success and assume that no one else could do any better. Creativity, however, fights the tendency toward standardized thinking. Creativity is the alternative to following familiar patterns of option generations, comparison, and selection.

We next introduced critical thinking as the cure for shallow and superficial thinking in the third paper of this series. Critical thinkers pursue reason and logic as the foundation for effective decision making. They embrace “thinking hard” rather than thinking quickly. All that hard thinking actually contributes to creativity as well as to

more rational decisions. Asking questions unavoidably opens the mind to new options. In short, critical thinking supports creativity.

In the fourth paper of the series, we described a ten-step process to achieving more effective decision making. The steps suggest a pathway toward objective, balanced decisions. Among the steps was a reference to creativity. This paper elaborates on how creativity contributes to better decision making.

Creativity is Imagination

The creative process is driven by imagination. The more imaginative one is, the greater one's potential for creativity. George Bernard Shaw said, "Imagination is the beginning of creation. We imagine what we desire; we will what we imagine; and at last we create what we will." Imagination is the internal process that drives the external expression which is perceived as creativity.

Unfortunately, the problem is that too few of us are imaginative. In his seminal study on creativity, *Why Didn't I Think of That?*, Charles W. McCoy Jr. reports children lose one-half of their creativity between the ages of five and seven, and adults over forty retain less than two percent of what they had as children.

The implication is that the average working age person is not very creative. If problem analysis is to be imaginative, then it must therefore be imposed on the decision-making process. This is where creativity tools come into play. These tools are simple techniques that help ensure the analysis of a problem has greater breadth and depth than it might otherwise.

Judgments are the Problem

It is judgmental thinking that the tools of creativity are helping to overcome. Judgments are limits that hold back our thinking. People become increasingly judgmental as they age, and we presume to understand and "know" things. Over time, we become more opinionated and increasingly rigid in our perceptions of ourselves, others, and everything around us.

Being judgmental is the basis of bigotry and preconceived notions about anyone or anything. It is the reason so many decision makers are narrow minded in their perspective or analysis of a problem and its solutions.

Judgments are what keep us all "in a box." They are why one person will consider a particular act "reasonable" while another would label it "outrageous." Judgments are boundaries that we impose on ourselves; they are the limits on our imaginations and, therefore, our creativity.

Self-judgment stems from fear of embarrassment or a rigid mindset that does not believe the imagination should be permitted to wander. Left to atrophy, the imagination eventually becomes unable to be spontaneous. The techniques described below are tools that help to get the creative juices flowing. Regular practice is needed in order for them to work well.

Slow Down

Imagination takes time to do its magic. If you want creative solutions, you need to allow time for the imagination to perform. The optimum solution can only be discovered if imaginative thinking is given the time and tools to conceive it.

Charles W. McCoy Jr. writes, "Imagination plays a crucial role in all genuine creative thinking, because it allows the mind to see the unseen, envision the invisible, and transform ideas into reality." The more time and technique that is applied to the creative side of problem analysis, the more likely you are to fully understand a problem before arriving at a decision.

Imagine Courageously

The key to being truly creative is the ability and willingness to recognize the assumptions and beliefs that underlie perceptions of a problem and to think beyond them. Questioning the “norm” is an act of courage. To imagine courageously is to question tradition, to defy logic, and to refuse to conform.

Imagining courageously is about openly questioning what we, as well as others, believe to be true about a situation or issue. It is about suggesting the outrageous. Being courageous can be controversial and even dangerous. It takes courage to recognize what is conventional wisdom and to then think beyond it in a creative and productive way.

According to Charles W. McCoy Jr., “Genuine creativity requires raw courage; never flees from adversity, frustration or even failure; challenges conventional wisdom; and vigorously explores beyond the first workable answer to find the very best solution imaginable.”

Imagining courageously is all about suspending judgment. Do not let “group think” control your thought processes. Actively and openly look for the boundaries of colleagues’ mental boxes as well as your own, and then cast your imagination outside those boundaries—even if doing so might offend.

Question Everything and Everyone

A very simple but effective tool to spur the imagination is to systematically question everything that is known about a problem or a chosen solution.

A partial list of questions would include the following:

- Is our analysis biased? Who might disagree with it? Are there complexities that were oversimplified?
- Are any issues being avoided that should be discussed?
- Have the faults and flaws of our reasoning been recognized?
- What do we know for sure and what do we think we know?
- What future events would change our perspective today?

Questions like these, asked of oneself and others, force a reassessment of the problem and its solution. Questioning helps to ensure that the path of least (mental) resistance is not taken to reach a conclusion. It changes one’s mental focus from inward to outward thinking (convergent to divergent) and helps to ensure that the problem is thoroughly dissected before being resolved.

Imagine Backward From the Ideal

Imagining backward from the ideal is about asking the question, “What would be the perfect solution?” It changes the focus of analysis from being near sighted to being far sighted. Rather than looking at your feet, you start looking at the horizon. Ask yourself these questions:

- What is the most optimistic outcome possible—even if it does not seem realistic?
- What would be the ideal solution?
- If I could make one wish, what would it be?
- What outcome seems too good to be true but would be great if it could be realized?

By thinking in terms of desires rather than expectations, we overcome the self-imposed judgments that hold back our imaginations. Forcing our minds to think backward from the ideal solution is a simple way of getting the imagination to think outside of our mental box of reasonableness.

Dismantle the Problem

Any technique that encourages a more thorough analysis of a problem will ultimately improve the quality of the decisions we generate. Dismantling the problem is a method for revealing what is known and what is not known about a problem.

The process is simple. The major issues, components, or knowledge areas that underlie a problem are listed. Each of these is then broken down into questions that need to be asked and answered about that issue.

Knowing what you do not know about a situation is key to arriving at high-quality decisions. Dismantling a problem highlights areas of uncertainty and provides a vivid illustration of the quality of information being used in the analysis.

Devil's Advocacy

The term "devil's advocate" is believed to have developed in the Catholic Church. When a candidate (usually long deceased) was proposed for sainthood by a relative or parish, a panel was set up in the Vatican to judge the candidate's qualifications. The panel was led by a "devil's advocate" who was charged with proving the candidate unsuitable for sainthood. The devil's advocate argues against the popular view and is expected to seek out information that proves the opposing case.

A common practice is to set up separate teams that each has as its mission the objective of championing a particular solution. Each team advocates for its choice or cause and in doing so, helps to balance the analysis overall.

Devil's advocacy takes advantage of people's instinctive inclination to fixate on a position but does so in a way that encourages balance. The impact on problem analysis is greater objectivity overall and an increase in the imaginative questioning of assumptions and biases.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a structuring technique that supports creative thinking. It is a method for encouraging divergent thinking—that is, thinking with a wide focus. The principal behind brainstorming is to pose a question and then encourage an unrestricted stream of possible solutions (ideas) to flow. One idea follows another in a steady storm of interconnected possibilities. Brainstorming is not about evaluating ideas; it is, rather, about generating them. Just let them flow; one idea spawns a network of other possibilities.

The difficulty with brainstorming is that there isn't typically a storm of ideas. Judgements hold us back. People instinctively evaluate (or judge) ideas as they think of them. We filter ideas for "reasonableness" even when we are specifically told not to. Sadly, the storm of ideas never exceeds a drizzle.

Brainstorming 101

Telling people to be creative is not enough; you must foster an environment that induces creativity. Only brainstorming sessions that are appropriately structured will actually help people to suspend judgment long enough to be even a little imaginative.

Brainstorming sessions are structured by a combination of creativity tools and simple guidelines. Together, they help to liberate people's imaginations by encouraging them to suspend judgment.

The main rule of brainstorming is no criticism. Without this rule, the process is guaranteed to be unsuccessful. Imagine this scenario. Some bold participant comes up with a new idea. Then someone else says, "It's dumb," or "We tried that already," or "It won't work." After that, no one will suggest anything. The glaring light of judgment has been turned on in everyone's head, and as a result, their imaginations turned off.

In order for self-judgment to be suspended, everyone involved needs to understand *and believe* that there will be no criticism. There are no “boundaries of reasonableness” for the duration of the brainstorming session. Everything goes.

The main rule of no criticism is then combined with creativity tools:

- What is the perfect solution?
- How might we imagine courageously?
- Can the problem be dismantled?

After generating a number of possible solutions, consider setting up teams to act as devil’s advocates to argue for and against one possible solution over another.

Conclusion

The injection of creativity into problem analysis broadens the base of information and ideas that are ultimately incorporated into the selection of a solution. Actively introducing creativity is necessary because many adults lack active imaginations.

Creativity must be encouraged. From there, creativity tools stimulate the flow of creative juice. They can be used together, separately, or in any combination.

- Utilizing creativity ensures that you:
- understand before you judge,
- imagine before you decide, and
- diagnose before you cure.

All solutions are not created equal. In order to discover the best solution it is necessary to put energy into truly creative analysis. This means not just following tried and true thinking pathways but instead encouraging wild and crazy thinking; this thinking has the specific objective of seeking out obscure alternatives and unconventional options—many of which will not be obvious and may even be counterintuitive. Only by having access to a complete list of options can the decision making process be optimized.

Learn More

Learn more about creativity and decision making through training.

[Critical Thinking, Problem Solving & Decision Making](#)

Visit www.globalknowledge.com or call **1-800-COURSES (1-800-268-7737)** to speak with a Global Knowledge training advisor.

Those looking for an additional resource should refer to:

McCoy, Charles W., Jr. 2002. *Why Didn't I Think of That? Think the Unthinkable and Achieve Creative Greatness*. Paramus, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Related White Papers

This paper is part of a series of related papers on critical thinking and decision making.

[What Is a “Good” Decision? How Is Quality Judged?](#)

[How to Overcome Analytical Bias to Become a Stronger Decision Maker](#)

[The Role of Critical Thinking in Problem Analysis](#)

[A Guide for Making High-Quality Decisions](#)

About the Author

Brian has been a contract instructor for Global Knowledge since 1999. He divides his time between management consulting, project management, technical writing, and professional development training.

Brian is a "serial entrepreneur." He has started companies in such diverse fields as fish farming, woodwork, gift manufacturing, and catering. He is the author of numerous training courses relating to professional skills, project management, and decision making.