

Priming and Promoting a Creative Approach

Patrick Forsyth



PATRICK FORSYTH

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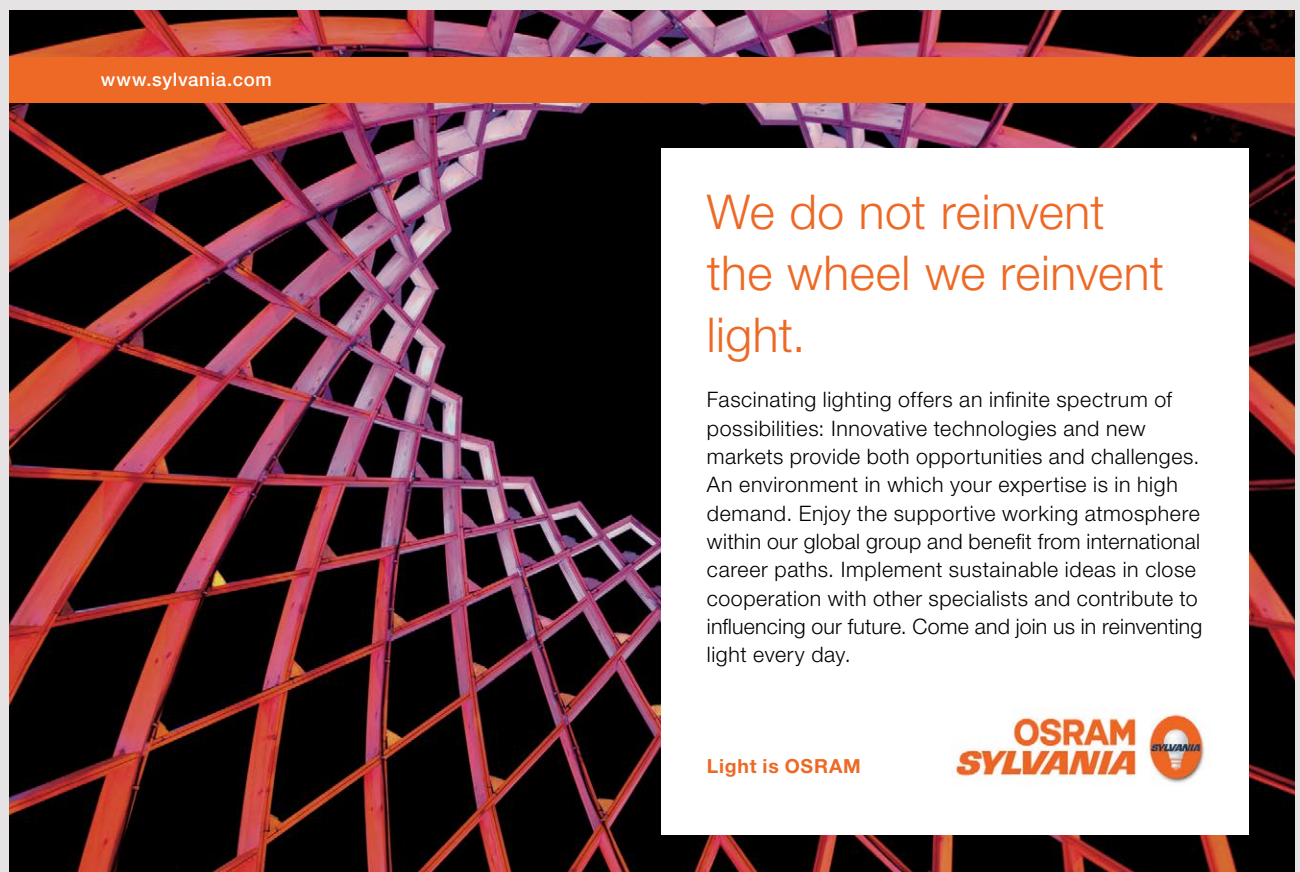
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patrick Forsyth is a consultant, trainer and writer. He has worked with organisations large and small and in many different parts of the world. He is the author of many successful books on management, business and careers and prides himself on having a clear how-to style.

One reviewer (“Professional Marketing”) commented: *Patrick has a lucid and elegant style of writing which allows him to present information in a way that is organised, focused and easy to apply.*

In this series he is also the author of several titles including “[Your boss: sorted!](#)” and “[How to get a pay rise](#)”. His writing extends beyond business. He has had published humorous books (e.g. *Empty when half full*) and light-hearted travel writing: *First class at last!*, about a journey through South East Asia, and *Smile because it happened* about Thailand. His novel, *Long Overdue*, was published recently.

He can be contacted via www.patrickforsyth.com

1 INTRODUCTION

A stand can be made against invasion by an Army; no stand can be made against an idea.

– Victor Hugo

The success of any enterprise depends on many things, but overall on both the ongoing processes that make the organisation function being kept running effectively and on change: on developing new ways of doing things and new things to do to keep pace with a dynamic and changing environment.

Both depend on people, and the latter particularly depends on people being creative and on there being an ongoing supply of ideas, large and small, to fuel the process. Ideas solve problems, create opportunities and make things happen. They also make or break reputations and assist organisation achieve the results (including profits) they want. All this does not mean that there should be one creative person or department in the organisation; though some functions of the business, like marketing, need perhaps to be inherently more creative than others. It means that many people around the organisation need to demonstrate creativity. It is said that the nice thing about good ideas is that they don't care who has them. Everybody can be involved.

What is more idea generation is, for many, a career skill. Being creative helps you meet your objectives and creates the impression of your being a good operator.

The scale here is wide. If the founder of Sony had not had a brainwave music on the move might have been a long time coming. The Walkman was launched on a hunch, and with no research to test the idea, and it would be kind of true to say it changed the world leading to a chain of products and affecting the way of life of many millions of people.

It is not always that easy. First many new products fail, but even if the idea is sound it may need selling or clout to get something new adopted. The Walkman came from the president of the company, but I do not think that whoever thought up the gillet (the kind of winter waistcoat sometimes also called a "puffer" jacket) is recorded. However once upon a time someone perhaps went to their boss and said something like "I've got this great idea for a winter jacket... with no sleeves". It couldn't have been something that instantly seemed right and I wonder what the initial reaction was. Similarly, I wonder what was said the first time a really long brand name was suggested: whatever prompted someone to suggest *I can't believe it's not butter* when competitors all had short names like *Stork*?

Ideas are needed not just for products and services but also for every aspect of the many processes involved in an organisation: administration, production, marketing and the rest, and all this involves not just things to do, but also things not to do (for example in the area of cost saving).

None of this is difficult to imagine. Without new ideas organisations, or aspects of their operation, would stagnate and die. In today's dynamic markets and workplaces the need for creative approaches and new ideas has never been greater. And this will remain the norm in the foreseeable future.

Change is the norm

Why is this so important? It is not just because of the competitive nature of the modern work environment, but also because every aspect of the work place can become more volatile following any particular economic upheaval or technical or market change. Let us be clear about this right at the start: change is the norm. We can expect change to continue and for the pace of change to continue to increase. As Steve Case, Chairman, AOL Time Warner once said, "There will be more confusion in the business world in the next decade than in any decade in history. And the current pace of change will only accelerate." This comment will remain relevant for a good while and such a situation affects everything that follows here.

Change may seem a fairly benign word, but it can be almost normal for disaster to stalk the land. Certain industries, like banking or retail, once seemed stable, but they are as subject to difficulties and staff lay-offs as any other sector. Whenever jobs are in jeopardy and when any kind of cull happens a choice is usually made. Management does not usually decide to lose the best people, and those who are performing poorly, are thought less of or are simply more of an unknown quantity may quickly find themselves in the firing line. This book is not particularly concerned with when disaster strikes, but has a more positive purpose: helping you make both your career, work and organisation go well.

The very nature of the modern organisational environment means that success is always to be laid primarily at the door of individuals; so too is failure. You have to get things right, and you may get no second chances. And this is as true of your career as it is of your job.

Whatever your expertise at present, it is a fact that its nature and level will need to change. This may mean major extension if you are a newcomer to your chosen field, or it may mean what is better described as fine-tuning – though this may still be of considerable significance and influence ultimate success very much. Whatever it may necessitate, you must ensure that you are always "career-fit" now and at any time in the future. Developing and maintaining a creative thread to the way you operate may be an essential and invaluable part of this. And that is what we address here.

While there is a category of job in which those involved do not need to come up with ideas, most in executive and management positions do to at least some extent and many of those might well like to do so more and more effectively. Even in this category there are those that say: “I am not an ideas person”. So let me address that before we go on.

The source of ideas

Writing, certainly many kinds of writing, is rightly regarded as a creative activity (even writing this kind of material dare I say). Although I wrote the article I reproduce next about writing (it appeared in *Writing Magazine* where it was titled “Good idea”) having spotted a piece of text from a well-known writer: the late Iain Banks, it is such a striking statement that I believe it can make a much wider point.

Note: I have abbreviated the introduction and conclusion to some extent as it focussed exclusively on the task of writing.

“Every writer needs to be inspired however, and how this happens stands some analysis. Writers who produce endless articles or a book every year must be doing something right. One successful, and productive writer is Iain Banks. Since his first novel *The Wasp Factory* was published he has produced a steady stream of them. His only non-fiction book – which I would certainly recommend - is *Raw Spirit*. A travel book, it records journeys around Scotland in search of the perfect dram, but it is as amusing as it is informative and has more than a touch of biography about it. It contains occasional digressions about his writing that would fascinate any writer.

At one point he touches so dramatically on the question of where writers get their ideas that he is worth quoting at some length. He says people regularly ask him where his ideas come from. He continues:

Leaving aside the obvious “Class A drugs, actually”, or “A wee man in Auchtermuchty”, I’ve sometimes wondered what sort of answer people really expect to this. What class of possible reply are people anticipating, or are they completely in the dark about the creative process?

The answer, by the way, is startlingly simple; writers get their ideas from the same place as everyone else. When asked The Question by an individual, it’s perfectly okay to look them in the eye and say, “Well, the same place as you do”. This usually leads to people saying they do not have ideas.

*But everyone does. Everybody has ideas. If you've ever had a sexual fantasy that wasn't a perfect copy of somebody else's – you've had an idea. If you've ever thought about what you'd do if you won the Lottery – you've had an idea. If you've ever passed some time pondering the exact form of words you would use – having heard from your bank that the Lottery cheque has cleared – to tell your boss or colleagues how much you have enjoyed working with them over the years – you've had an idea. If you've ever read a book or watched a film and thought, But what if **this** happened instead of **that** – you've had an idea. If you've ever been walking down the road with lurid red kebab sauce dripping onto your good shoes when you suddenly think of the stingingly witty reply you should have come out with half an hour earlier in the pub, when somebody insulted you or said something you wanted to take issue with but couldn't quite work out what it was you wanted to say at the time – you've had an idea.*

*Some of these ideas would qualify as rudimentary plots, some as lines of dialogue, but they are all ideas and everybody has them. If there is some benighted, possibly genetically deficient part of humanity that doesn't ever have an idea of this nature, ever ever **ever**, then surely they constitute a vanishingly tiny minority of our species, and as far as I know I've never met one of them.*

The difference is simply that writers do this idea-generating sort of stuff more frequently and more consistently than the sort of person who doesn't realise that they even have ideas of their own, and – perhaps more to the point – we do it deliberately. We mostly start doing it quite young and it becomes a habit; we're always on the lookout for ideas, whether they're generated by our own lives, by the lives of people we know – via reports in news media – or by the works of other writers – non-fiction works as well as fiction.

As well as being a wonderful piece of writing, the sentiments here are surely so true. Moaning about our lack of ideas, or just hoping the muse will strike, will not get our creative juices going. Idea generation is a process; it is one that can become a habit, and one that luckily has its roots in day-to-day life and experience ... if you stimulate your idea generating process then you may be surprised by how it begins to motor.”

(This extract from RAW SPIRIT by Iain Banks published by Century. Used with permission of The Random House Group Limited.)

It is not just writers who can stimulate their idea generating process, it is everyone; so can you.

The first thing to recognise and work with is the fact that idea generation needs to be given some time and it is to the various ways that can be done that we turn next.

2 IDEA GENERATION

Of course, we don't know what we are doing. If we knew what we were doing, it would not be research.

– Albert Einstein

It is a simple little word – ideas – but it encompasses a great deal. New things and ways of doing things are needed on an ongoing basis in many areas, including:

- Products and services
- Administration
- The management and motivation of staff
- Marketing, particularly the promotional aspect of it
- Production
- Finance (across the span of both costs and pricing).

This is a list you could doubtless expand and also personalise (what sort of ideas are needed in your job or your part of the organisation?). Sometimes ideas are major, radical and can change a great deal. Consider an example (one I wrote about in my Bookboon title about change):

Imagine a company, let us call them Scaffolding R' Us, where the business was the rental of scaffolding; they defined their business very simply and directly as the provision of scaffolding to the building trade. Just rethinking this – seeking ideas that help develop the business - took them through three stages, each of which resulted in distinct changes which had a positive effect on their business growth:

- 1. First, they replaced the description building trade with construction industry. This broadened the market at which they directed their marketing efforts, taking them into selling to companies constructing, for instance, motorway flyovers, or to oil rigs (where there is copious amounts of scaffolding used) – effectively a different market and one of potentially larger order size. A learning curve may have been necessary to deal with a different type of customer, but the business grew*
- 2. Secondly, they moved on and described their business less in terms of what they did, and more in terms of what it provided, in turn, for customers. This they said was to – provide temporary access and support. This took them into the leisure market, providing scaffolding to support seating at sports events and parades. Again new customers needed new approaches, but business expanded in this substantial sector*

3. *Thirdly, they again refined the description, this time with more confidence, stressing their skill and expertise in providing temporary access and support. This, in turn, prompted them enter export markets. Not erecting their scaffolding overseas (clearly shipping heavy steel poles is prohibitively costly), but running training schools for local organisations and their staff in new markets, including the Middle East, where building was a rapid growth industry. This was a change that would never even have been guessed at early in the process.*

Here people intentionally sought ideas to prompt change as an inherent part of an organisation's ongoing strategic planning. Such thinking can be very productive, and it is sometimes surprising how the status quo acts to blind an organisation to new opportunities when it only needs a fresh look and an open mind to spot some, and then to create significant and positive change. In this case change that drove the organisation forward.

What perhaps made this successful was that specific meetings were called to focus on idea generation. This was done with a clear eye on the organisation's whole potential market rather than what they were doing at the time, thus avoiding a common problem – considering matters without broad focus and blinkered by the status quo.

The example above is clearly major, and the fact of stages – one idea leading to another is often sound (and perhaps more manageable), which reminds me of the story of early man inventing the wheel. The first one was square (and sort of worked), then someone had the idea of making it triangular (one less bump), but of course the final version was best and truly changed the world. All this does not mean to say that little ideas cannot be significant.

They very much can.

Whoever thought of the simple premise of putting wheels on suitcases changed the face of travel (and why did so many ideas like that, which seem so obvious with hindsight, not occur earlier? It shows the possibilities.). An idea may be as simple as just a word or two yet still have huge impact. Who does not recognise phrases like: Beans Meanz Heinz, Snap! Crackle! Pop!, Finger Lickin' Good; some even go into the language like: *It does what it says on the tin*. Something some people refer to as “just a slogan” may create millions of sales.

The foundation of idea generation

Like so much else in the workplace ideas don't usually just pop into your head, certainly not every day. Even when they seem to do so their arrival may be caused by other matters (more of this anon). Real inspirational moments are rare, though as one wag said: Thomas Edison once had a great idea, noticed the light bulb appear above his head and decided that was a much better idea!

But what really creates the circumstances for idea generation? I would mention four things that are certainly key:

- *Time*: creative people recognise that idea generation doesn't just happen and put some time into it, sometimes quite a lot of time (we look at some of the things this can be deployed against in the next chapter). Doing this may require some real discipline and – a warning here – is most difficult to do at any time of pressure. When staff are short, the budget is insufficient and competition are pressing the focus tends naturally to go on the immediate rather than perhaps academic sounding “ideas sessions”. Yet both are important and current distractions leading to a lack of ideas can be disastrous. *Note*: this really is a fundamental point and I add this note to emphasise it
- *Doing the right things*: while there is no magic formula, no one thing that can be easily done to guarantee a flow of good ideas, there are numbers of proven approaches that make idea generation more likely (and, as has been said, they need some time). It's an active process and things need to be done
- *The right attitude*: if you start by saying you are “not an ideas person” then nothing much will change that. Idea generation is a process where results – good and useful ideas – can motivate you towards more of the same
- *An ideas-positive culture*: some organisations seem to accept the need for all this more readily than others. They make the time for it and make it happen with a greater degree of certainty and success than others. They work at it, though it must be said that such attitudes tend to come from the top.

All these factors work best when there are clear objectives. Without objectives, it is impossible to focus and idea generation can deteriorate into unbounded flights of fancy.

Let us be specific: Objectives are not about what you decide to do, they are about what you, or an organisation, wish to *achieve*. Put simply, the task is not to spark ideas, say, “about the new policy”. Rather it is to seek novel yet practical solutions perhaps to an identified problem (maybe a current system taking too long). This in turn is designed to ensure that processes are speeded up and thus that costs are lowered or customer satisfaction increased.

With this clear in mind generating ideas is already likely to be easier. With a more specific situation in mind objectives can be formed precisely if, as the much-quoted acronym has it, they are SMART. That is:

- **S**pecific
- **M**easurable
- **A**chievable
- **R**ealistic, and
- **T**imed.

The focus produced by clear objectives rules out inappropriate directions for thought and discussion, for instance: say you are trying to create ideas that will help you expand your market. The main options available in forming marketing objectives are limited, there are perhaps six:

- **To increase market share:** *In a static market this can be done by ‘conquest selling’ or winning business from competitors.*
- **To expand existing markets:** *This objective will focus on selling the fullest range of products/services to existing customers and markets. It also presumes very close co-operation between those who are involved in different aspects of the business.*
- **To develop new products/services for existing markets:** *This marketing objective can involve simply the revision of existing products/services or else the introduction of the radically new.*
- **To develop new markets for existing products/services:** *This is more attractive and lower risk than some options, but is finite; especially so in some service areas where demand is already met.*
- **To develop new products/services in new markets:** *This is an example of true diversification. This usually carries the highest risk of all marketing objectives. Many companies do not even consider such objectives. Future pressures, however, for the growth necessary to keep good staff, may force a reassessment.*
- **To improve the profitability of existing operations:** *When growth opportunities are limited, many companies must in the short term seek higher returns from higher productivity and greater cost-effectiveness of their operations. As an example, technology has prompted change here with online selling aiming to be more profitable than older methods (though more modern does not always mean more profitable).*

A decision to focus on one of these (or one by one progressively) might make this particular idea generation process more productive simply because of the concentration it produces.

Such an approach is a sound principle. That said let’s turn to some specific topics about idea generation and, despite what has been said, start at the most random end.

Creating opportunity for ideas to flow

Sometimes you get a real light bulb moment – one that has you uttering “Ah-ha”. It may be that you have an idea: one complete, ready formed and ripe for implementation. Or, almost as useful, you can suddenly see your way to something and the rest of the thinking process becomes straightforward; which reminds me of the useful saying about scientific discovery – that it is heralded not by the cliché “Eureka!” but by someone noticing something and saying “That’s funny.” They suddenly know they are on the right track. All of us probably experience this and in such circumstances may also wonder where on Earth that came from.

Note: just asking why things are done the way they are is a proven technique (much used in consultancy) to unearth ideas and opportunities.

Can you encourage these ah-ha moments? Having more would be good. And the science says yes you can. They seem, we are told, to occur through the way the subconscious and conscious mind works in relationship to each other. Sometimes (often?) given, let's say, a problem, you worry away at it for a while and get nowhere. You leave it (perhaps in despair) and yet when you turn to it again the following morning you find you have the solution. Scientists suggest that unknown to us consideration has continued in some way unconsciously, and that when our conscious thought is applied again it completes the process.

So the old expedient of "sleeping on" something (or at least putting it aside and taking a break from it) is genuinely something to actively use.

Similarly mulling something over while doing something else (something unrelated) is said to help the idea generation process. The something else needs to be well chosen. I read something about this in *New Scientist* magazine and an example given was mowing a lawn: it needs some thought (you don't want to cut your foot off) but not so much thought that your mind can't roam free and consider a good deal more. Deciding on something to ponder



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as you get the mower out may be very sensible. It seems that a pleasant environment is also conducive to thoughts that generate ideas, examples include mountain scenery, beaches and the like, but I somehow think this is unlikely to persuade the CEO towards a major office redesign. Research in this area does seem to justify to a degree the fun-oriented facilities favoured by some companies, especially the IT giants. Again these facts can be actively used.

One example of this sort of thing working well was used in a consulting firm. Every couple of weeks, a regular free sandwich lunch was provided in a meeting room. Staff spent much time out of the office with clients so varying combinations of people signed up for this in the morning of the scheduled days (the right number of sandwiches had to be sourced). In return for a free lunch the rule was that people could only talk shop and a topic was designated each time for discussion. People found it interesting – fun even – and it worked well, creating an ongoing number of useful ideas that improved the operation of the firm.

Using feedback

In the way that rain drops form around dust in the atmosphere, ideas may need a trigger or starting point. These may come from outside of yourself. One source of such prompts is feedback of which there may be a good deal about, either on a one-off basis or as a regular thing. For example:

- *Customer feedback:* this may be volunteered or requested and the requesting can happen in numbers of ways. Such include: information on product packaging, individual conversations and formal research. Ultimately customers pay the bills so they are always worth listening to; sometimes an idea may come up from this that is “ready to use”, alternatively (and also useful) an initial comment may prompt your thinking and lead on somewhere useful
- *Activity specific feedback:* by this I mean such things as reactions to your making a presentation. Whilst criticism may be unwelcome in some senses, comments made can be true and offer practical advice which you can simply adopt or use as food for thought enabling you to produce ideas that lead to improvements. All that is necessary here is to set it up and ask for feedback
- *Ready-made ideas:* there are some sources of ideas ready to be picked and used or perhaps used after some adaptation. Perhaps here I may mention my book “100 Great Sales Ideas” (Marshall Cavendish) as an example. This, and other titles in the series on different topics, offer ideas, based on the proven experience of others and presented in a form designed to help others. Such may come from a number of sources from magazines to websites, so it is worth keeping an eye open

- *Specialist advice:* another source of ideas may be people around the organisation (or indeed outside it – creating a good network of potential sources of ideas is itself a good idea). Someone like a Training Manager or someone with more specialist knowledge and experience of a technical area (say IT), may be happy to spend a few minutes with you and such a conversation can spark ideas.

Note: given that formal and informal dialogue between different members of staff can be useful as a source of ideas, management should keep an eye on the increasing tendency towards less and less personal interaction. Sending an email to someone working a few steps away from you is much less likely to lead to creativity than an actual conversation.

Next let's take an example of how time can be focussed on idea generation just in the ongoing round of work activities.

Prompting idea generation in staff

For any manager thinking generally of time management skills this may be useful in that respect. But it is a creative thinking prompter too. Consider: there is a scene that is played out in offices all over the world and which must waste untold hours every single day. Imagine a manager is busy at their desk when a head comes round the door and a member of staff comes in. "What is it?" they ask. And the reply is something like: "I'm not sure how to handle so and so and wondered if you would just check it with me". The manager thinks for a second – they are busy, in the middle of a job and not wanting to lose concentration – but the interruption has already occurred. Typically their first thought is to minimise the interruption and get back to work fast. So, if the matter allows, they spend a minute or two explaining, as succinctly as possible, what to do and then tell the other person to let them get on and the brief impromptu meeting is over. This may be done kindly or abruptly, the effect is much the same, and the scene may be played out repeatedly for an individual manager.

But suppose the same manager is away from the office for a couple of days. While they are away people will face similar situations. If the manager was there they would go and ask. Because that's not possible, they simply get on with the job, they think, they make a decision, they take action, and life goes on. When the manager returns to the office what do they find? A chain of disasters? A plethora of wrong decisions and misjudged actions? Rarely is this the case. The things that might have been checked have been done, and not only is no harm done, everything has probably gone perfectly well.

Think about it. I suspect this picture will ring bells with many, if not most, managers. Why does it happen? It is a classic case of thinking that it is quicker to do things for people, most often in this case providing the answer or the decision, rather than to take any other action. I believe this is wrong. It's a lost opportunity.

You have to take a longer term view, and this is where the most time saving phrase in the language comes in. Next time you are interrupted in the way I have described, try responding by saying: *What do you think you should do?* They may not know, but you can press the point, prompt them to make some suggestions, and when they do, then ask which solution they think is best. This takes a few minutes of talking things through, certainly it takes longer than the response described earlier, but if they are coping when you are not there to ask, then you will find that when you prompt them they most often come up with a good answer or idea (there is often no one right way). At that point you can say something like: "That's fine", and away they go to carry on, leaving you to get back to your own work.

Now this is not just a better way of dealing with this situation from a time management point of view – indeed at this stage you may say it is worse as it prolongs the interruption. But it is also doing something else of very real value: it is teaching people not to interrupt, but rather to have the confidence to think matters through unaided. You have to be insistent about this. It will not work if you only make people think it through when you have more time, and still provide a quick answer when you are busy. Every time – every single time – someone comes through the door with a question about something with which you believe they should be able to deal unaided, you say: "What do you think you should do?" It must become a catch phrase. And as this practice continues the message will get home to people, so that if they even start to think of asking you they can hear your likely response in their mind. You will find such questions coming less and less often. You will find that, if they do ask, people move straight to the second stage, and come in with two or three thought out options just wanting you to say which is best. Resist. Ask *them*. The message will stick and, surprise, surprise, you will find you are saving time. What is more, your people will almost certainly get to like it more also, especially if you comment favourably on how well they are doing on the decisions they are making unaided. You make people think, think effectively and there is no reason why you cannot give an emphasis on thinking creatively. This is a key way of not only prompting ideas, but creating the habit of this sort of thinking.

All this process needs is some persistence and determination. Early on you may think it is taking too much time, but the investment formula will surely pay off. There are considerable amounts of time to be saved here, linked in fact to the number of people who report to you. Do not be faint hearted about this, it is very easy to break your resolve in a busy moment and send someone on their way with an instant dictated solution. Exceptions to your consistency will just make the lesson take longer to get over. But this idea really does work in the longer term; not to operate this way does your people a disservice and allows you to miss out on something that produces so many advantages.

Furthermore there is a learning process involved here. A manager can prompt people to think for themselves and (mostly) they find they can. On those issues where ideas are necessary you focus attention and thinking on that and may be surprised at the ideas that begin to come out. Of course, the thinking process can link to other matters mentioned here, for instance someone so prompted may go away and chat something over with a colleague and an idea may come from that. However it happens the process is immensely constructive and creative; it actually acts to set time aside for creative thinking and, what is more so doing can become a habit.

This example links use of time to the thought that much of what can be done in idea generation is not a solo activity, something we turn to in the next chapter. But first...

The creative breather

Here's a good idea. It's about ... err, making time for creativity ... and err... ...

Sorry, I had to take a break for a moment there. I went to get a cup of tea (very nice too). This took maybe three or four minutes and I do not believe it extended the time taken to put the comments on this topic together, indeed it is what prompted this thought, one which seems worth including here. After working on any intensive task for a while, most people's concentration flags somewhat; certainly mine does in writing.

Take a break: An occasional break does not reduce your productivity; it actually helps it. You return to your desk with your head clearer; you feel refreshed and revived by stretching your limbs and can get back to the task in hand with renewed fervour. It can also spark your creativity.

This is particularly true of seemingly intractable tasks or something demanding ideas. Sometimes you can sit and puzzle about things for a long time and seem to get nowhere. After a break it suddenly seems clear – or at least clearer – and time is saved as a result. Sometimes a break may be as simple as standing up and stretching, or making a cup of tea. Or it may be that something that takes a bit longer is better – you go to lunch even though you originally planned to do that an hour later, or you go for a walk. I once shared an office with someone who did this – the office was opposite a park and he had a particular circuit that took about fifteen minutes and provided useful thinking time, perhaps being applied to something else apart from the job from which he had paused. This made a real break yet was still productive. Creativity was boosted by his involving others and I became used to being asked to take a break with him.

Consider this systematically:

- Recognise that a break is often much more productive than struggling on with a job when concentration is not adequate
- Alternatively, switch tasks for a moment, rather than stop work, in order to ring the changes
- A pattern of such activity can become a useful habit if not taken to extremes
- Something to think about perhaps. Remember what Doug Kling said: *Learn to pause ... or nothing worthwhile will catch up with you.* Take a few minutes now before you read on. It will test this idea; indeed it may produce some more.

3 WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS

Many ideas grow better when transported into another mind than in the one where they sprang up.

– Oliver Wendell Holmes Jnr

As we have seen generating ideas is usually more than just sitting in a darkened room waiting for inspiration to strike. And a key factor in making it happen is the realisation that you do not have to do the job alone. All sorts of forms of collaboration can and do help. The most important thing is that ideas occur, not who has them. Let me begin here with a few principles that may involve a miscellany of people. For instance consider:

- *Conferring*: say you have a problem, you need an idea, something – a new approach – that will sort it. If just thinking about it is not producing what you want – find someone to discuss it with. Your manager, a colleague, a friend, it doesn't matter, though clearly someone with knowledge in the area concerned is ideal. State the problem, bounce thoughts to and fro, something often develops in this way, indeed it may do so in a way in which exactly whose thought an idea was is lost in the debate.
Note: do not feel conferring in this way is a failure on your part, there is little merit in struggling with something for days if it is possible to crack it in a half hour discussion. Too often pride makes us avoid doing this
- *A swap*: this links to conferring. Clearly giving up time to discuss and help with your problem or possible opportunity may not always appeal to a busy colleague. A swap, that is a “you help me, I'll help you” approach where different things are tackled in this way works well (and is fair). So too does establishing doing this as a habit with a range of different people
- *Breaks*: sometimes this sort of consultation can be done just outside work hours, for instance over lunch or by arriving half an hour early by arrangement. It may, on occasion, even be worth buying the sandwiches to encourage it
- *Using something else as a prompt*: for example in training on the subject of business writing I have sometimes used an exercise getting people to write something – a sales letter, say – and make it *humorous*. Doing it that way not only makes it fun, but frees the mind often resulting in a much more original take on the final version when that is returned to afterwards

- *Rehearsal*: say you have a presentation to make. It needs to be clear and it needs to impress and that means it should be striking and different. Thinking about it is one thing, a trial run is another (again you need collaborators – an audience) – you will find that as you actually run through your first draft of it ideas will come to you more easily. Pause and make notes if necessary, hearing how it goes over stimulates the thinking, not only giving evidence of any awkwardness, but prompting thoughts about better ways too. Feedback from others can be useful here too
Note: this approach works for written material too; read a draft document out to someone and see
- *Mix expertise*: this provides another view. Take IT and computers. Technical people are often taken up with possibilities: the technology will do all sorts of things and the temptation is to include them all. A more specific (and manageable) approach may be better and an idea of what that is might best come from someone less technical.

So far so good, let's now focus on more specific people; the first combination contains a number of possibilities.

Management and staff

This has already been approached in the last chapter with one example. No manager should believe they are responsible for having all the ideas that keep the organisation, or the part of it they head up, running, running effectively and keeping up and ahead. But they should certainly take it that they *are* responsible for making sure there are *sufficient* ideas so to do. Prompting others to have ideas is very much part of the manager's role (it follows that your being one of those who reliably contributes in this way creates a favourable impression of someone both with your manager and perhaps more widely too).

There are various activities indicated here, but something else comes first.

Killing ideas

A manager can all too easily prevent a good flow of ideas in various way and, while some of this could occur unwittingly, the effect is always negative. For example they can:

- *Exert bias*: this happens in many a meeting, something is up for discussion and the manager leads in by in effect saying "I've got a great idea about this", explaining then adding "What do you think?" Many people will simply confirm the boss's idea and discussion and creativity are stifled. Avoid

- *Give credit:* nothing will switch staff off from volunteering ideas more than a boss that fails to give them credit for when they do so. The only thing worse is if a boss effectively highjacks someone's idea and takes the credit for themselves when describing new developments to others. Understandably this is very much resented. The boss may prompt, they may contribute to the idea (for instance in a discussion in a group where it becomes difficult to work out who contributed what), but ongoing commitment will only be achieved to the idea generating process if credit is given to others
- *Ignoring specific suggestions:* some organisations have suggestion schemes. Sometimes an incentive may be involved (and be regarded as worthwhile expenditure). But if they collect ideas then these must be acknowledged, if only to explain why something would not work or work effectively. And, of course, if good ideas come in then they must be acknowledged, made use of and their praises sung. Such schemes are worthwhile; properly managed they can pay dividends
- *Skimping on time:* many people complain that it is difficult to get time with a boss, and it is equally bad if time spent over matters needing some debate, discussion and creative thought is skimped. Idea generation must be given time
- *Provide training:* courses (or other forms of training) that focus on issues of creativity are available and may be useful, as may activities such as brainstorming sessions (see later)
- *Create an idea-welcoming culture:* managers should make it clear they want people to volunteer ideas, take positive action to encourage them and welcome ideas when they get them, making it an ongoing process. The example that follows is significant.

Example: It is too easy for a lack of encouragement to stifle any flow of ideas and for things that could be very useful to be missed. This can happen in the simplest way and it is important to maintain an atmosphere that promotes suggestion from everyone at every level. For example: a medical company developed a new treatment for mouth ulcers. As for any medicine this had to be tested. Clinical trials were set up and, as usual, a panel of doctors was briefed to prescribe the gel and report back. Reports were few and far between and deadlines for the launch process drew nearer with no prospect of the trial concluding in time. It was the department's secretary that suggested that patients were surely much more likely to mention their problem to a dentist rather than a doctor. A new trial was quickly instigated with dentists and results came in promptly and provided sufficient positive evidence for the product to be launched (on time). This story was told to me by the secretary who had considered for a while before saying anything: the solution seemed so obvious and she felt that "surely they would have thought of it", and she did not want to look silly. In the event, the day was saved, but a quick solution to the problem was very nearly missed. Surely every organisation wants management to encourage every kind of suggestion in such circumstances and show equal gratitude for all those who respond, whether their suggestions prove useful or not.

A key formal way in which managers can create idea generating opportunities is through brainstorming.

Brainstorming

This technique is specific. It is designed to prompt ideas and does so through a tried and tested approach that majors on the initial idea generating stage of creativity. It should be noted that, while brainstorming may not immediately seem to be a training technique, it does have training ramifications. Many managers bemoan how uncreative their people are, yet are uncertain how to prompt them to be otherwise. Brainstorming not only formalises the process of creativity, it can have an effect outside the specific sessions involved – it alerts people to the possibilities and shows them how to be more creative (and if it does that then it is helping them to learn).

As such it is a good example of using techniques, valuable in their own right, to swell the overall weight of training and development in the widest sense. Doing so makes good, and productive, sense.

Some brief guidelines for successful brainstorming is now given as its success is dependent on a degree of formality and on a systematic approach.

Brainstorming: guidelines for success

Brainstorming is a group activity and can be used to provide an almost instant burst of idea generation. Working with a group of people (maybe three or four up to a dozen works most easily) it needs a prescribed approach, thus the manager or facilitator should:

- Gather people around and explain the objectives (what exactly are ideas required about and why - this must be clear and focused)
- Explain that there are to be *no comments* on ideas at the first stage
- Allow a little time for thought (singly or, say, in pairs) ahead of group work
- Start taking contributions – comments and ideas - from the group and noting them down (publicly on say a flipchart)
- Prompt an analytical discussion when a good sized list is established and recorded
- Group similar ideas together as this can make the list more manageable
- Allow open-minded discussion to then review the list
- Identify ideas that can be taken forward (some of these will be variants or combinations from the original list that have been produced through discussion).

Such a session must exclude the word “impossible” from the conversation, at least initially and especially when used in senses such as *It’s impossible, we don’t do things that way* (why not?) or *It’s impossible, we tried it once and it didn’t work* (how long ago and in what form?).


By avoiding any negative or censorious first responses, by allowing one idea to spark another and variations on a theme to refine a point (perhaps taking it from something wild to something practical), a brainstorming session can produce genuinely new approaches.

It can be fun to do, satisfying in outcome and time-efficient to undertake – and a group who brainstorms regularly get better at it, and quicker and more certain in their production of good, useable, ideas. Try it, you might be surprised at the results.


Note: while what is described here is a formal meeting, there is no reason not to use informal versions of this simply amongst colleagues.

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Go away

A brief comment here linked to what has been said about brainstorming: such activities are clearly best conducted without distraction. People need to know how much time such a meeting will take and make arrangements for that. Also any interruptions must be avoided. Insist phones are turned off for example.

One way of achieving an undistracted focus is the idea of an “away day”. Holding such sessions away from the day to day distractions of the ongoing work activity by going outside the office. This can make a difference and be worthwhile – even if an outside meeting facility must be hired, indeed perhaps so doing bestows some additional importance on the event.

Note: For those whose jobs involve travel this may present opportunities to think about things undistracted. Make sure you have thought about what you will turn your mind to on your next flight; it may be the first step to your best idea for a while. Clearly this may need a little preparation, thinking in advance of how exactly you will utilise such time.

The next section describes a regular and less structured version of brainstorming.

Development circles

Some years ago the Japanese began using a technique, taken up around the world in various ways, called quality circles. The idea was that a continuous focus could be kept on quality (the focus was primarily in a factory and production context) and a flow of ideas generated, the best of which could be taken up, implemented and used to produce productivity increases. Circles, groups of people of a size to facilitate discussion, were set up. Over time they would meet regularly looking at a whole series of issues (for example something with a specific description such as reducing waste of raw materials in a particular phase of production) and essentially they brainstormed the matter. Ideas were then fed up the organisation, through a hierarchy of groups, the best and most practical being approved by management and coordinated into operations. Communication was organised to be two-way so that everyone knew what was being achieved.

The basic principle of a permanent, or semi-permanent, organisation of people focused on improvements has been copied and modified and made to work usefully in many different contexts since the idea of quality circles was first originated. Another area, amongst others, on which a similar approach has been used is that of the provision of customer service, for example.

This sort of procedure can, like brainstorming on its own, produce learning in the area of creativity. Arranged with this sort of formality it can also direct people towards a whole range of other useful skills. Someone has to chair the sessions (though an original principle of quality circles was that they often did not involve a manager), people have to listen and contribute. Matters have to be reported back up the line, reports written and presentations made. An element of competition and incentive has often been used to add to peoples' concentration (a bonus payment for the team producing the most valuable idea, perhaps).

Thus such a scheme can be used overtly or otherwise to progress a variety of development aims with some of these skills in mind. A good example of development and operational activity being progressed usefully alongside each other so that both gain.

Note: there is no reason why such schemes should not be originated more informally without being set up by management. First, two or three colleagues chat about something then it turns into something regular and more formal. Time used in this way is easily judged by what it produces, though it may need to be given a little time to see what is produced and again practice improves results.

Questioning techniques

It is not, I think, digressing to raise the question of questions. Much idea generation must take place in meetings and it is important that contributions are made by everyone present (or why are they there?). For various reasons, embarrassment, uncertainty and so on, people may be reluctant to voice their opinions and whoever is in the chair has a responsibility to draw them in. This is not always easy and, after an initial briefing explaining intentions, the prime method of doing it is through questions.

Questions must of course be clear. Remember also that there are three key kinds of question: open and closed questions, with open questions more likely to prompt discussion, and probing questions. Consider each in turn:

- *Closed questions:* these are questions that can be answered easily with a quick 'Yes' or 'No'. As such they are most useful for checking facts and leading into deeper areas of investigation. But otherwise their use may be limited, especially when a more detailed – creative – response is wanted
- *Open questions:* these cannot be answered with a simple 'Yes' or 'No'. They are designed to get people talking, to elucidate real information and detail – they typically start with the words: what, why, when, where, how and who and with phrases such as 'Tell me about (The latter may not technically be a question, but does get people talking).

The difference between these two approaches is marked. If someone asks ‘Do you have an idea about this?’ the answer may well be ‘Not really’. If the conversation then moves on, there is little or nothing that has really been discovered. However if the question is open, say, ‘Tell me something about how this might work in your department?’ then an opinion is much more likely to be expressed and the subsequent conversation may add much more.

- *Probing questions*: sometimes even an open question does not produce everything you want. Then you need to be prepared to pursue a point, asking a series of probing questions to focus on a particular area and get to the required level of detail. Phrases like ‘Tell me *more* about ?’ or ‘Can you explain that *further*?’ can make a good start.

Questions are of major significance. The chair should have good ones ready, and not be afraid to refer to them (‘There were specific questions I wanted to ask about this, let me just check’); doing so is evidence of being well prepared.

The circumstances will affect how questions are best asked. Discussion can be prompted around the meeting in numbers of ways, primarily in the following six:

1. *Overhead questions*: these are put to the meeting as a whole, left for whoever picks them up to answer and are useful for starting discussion
2. *Overhead/directed*: these are put to the whole meeting (as 1.) and either followed immediately by the same question to an individual, or after a pause as a way of overcoming lack of response: *Now, what do we all think about this? ... David?*
3. *Direct to an individual*: direct to a (named) individual without preliminaries; useful to get an individual reaction or check understanding
4. *Rhetorical*: a question demanding no answer can still be a good way to make a point or prompt thinking and the Chairperson can provide a response if they wish. *Useful!*
5. *Re-directed*: this presents a question asked of the Chair straight back to the meeting either as an overhead or direct question: *Good question. What do we all think? David?*
6. *Development question*: this really gets discussion going, it builds on the answer to an earlier question and moves it round the meeting: *So, Mary thinks it will take too long, do we see any other problems?*

Prompting contributions and debate is as important as control. It is the only way of making sure the meeting is well balanced and takes in all required points of view – remember anyone may be able to contribute useful ideas and it is a lost opportunity to miss anything. Indeed people, despite being reluctant to speak, may resent being left out and that does not help motivation.

Because of this it may sometimes be necessary to persevere to be sure to get all the desired comment the meeting needs. Ways have to found to achieve this; two examples are:

- *Asking again:* as simple as that. Rephrase the question (perhaps it was not understood originally) and ensure the point is clear and that people know a comment *is* required
- *Use silence:* the trouble is that silence can be embarrassing. But even a short silence to make it clear you will wait for an answer may be sufficient to get someone speaking. So do not rush on, after all maybe the point deserves a moment's thought before anyone says anything. Wait ... and contributions will come.

The main thing here is not to miss any contribution that could prove to contain or lead to useful ideas.

Moving on: beyond individual action or more formal schemes set up by management there is another key person from whom help may come – a mentor.

Mentoring – a powerful positive aid to creativity

Mentoring can help development and act quickly to improve performance, and thus enhance job effectiveness and personal career progress. But it can also help flex creative muscles, prompt ideas and indeed install the habit of idea generation.

There is constant pressure in any organisation to produce: productivity, quality, revenue and profitability. Despite pressure on time and other resources, including people and money, managers and executives must cope with this while finding themselves on an apparently endless learning curve; their success is dependent on obtaining and deploying many different skills. New skills must be added, existing skills upgraded or extended - and new ways found to do things.

Precisely what skills are needed varies. The dynamic change of computer and information technology seems to increase as you watch. But people need to update a whole range of matters, and becoming adept in such areas as chairing meetings, making presentations or writing reports is as important as more technical matters. And improvement in any area demands ideas that can take things forward.

Thus development is certainly a priority in many organisations. Training takes many forms: courses of all sorts are run, and other methods from simply viewing a training film to on-going computer or internet training may be used also. Here too limited resources can reduce the pace at which things progress. Work must go on and an individual cannot always be “away attending a course”, though training should be an ongoing concern.

Amongst this, one approach: low cost, practical and useful – and often fun – that can keep you updated and able to perform well whatever is demanded of you, and actively assist career development, is that of mentoring.

What is a mentor?

A mentor is someone who exercises a low key and informal developmental role – one of positive, practical value – and who enjoys the satisfaction of helping people develop and seeing them excel. They must willingly commit time to the process, but such time need not be great. Even so, finding that time may be challenging. It can help to organise mentoring on a swap basis: for a manager a colleague will make a regular input to one of their team and then the same is done for one of their people. The key thing is that anyone acting as a mentor must be willing to spend such time *regularly*. Some real continuity is clearly essential. A mentor is rarely your line manager; rather it is someone *other than* your boss. They may be from elsewhere in the organisation – or indeed from outside it.

Usually, if such relationships last, they start one way - they help you – but as time passes, they may well become more two-way; indeed perhaps the person on the mentor side rather expects this. There is no reason why you cannot have regular contact with several mentors, with each different relationship achieving different things.

An effective mentor can be a powerful force for development, not least in developing creative thinking. So how do you find one?

In some organisations this process is centralised and formalised: you are allocated or can request one, making this a regular development technique. Equally you may need to prompt matters: suggesting it to your manager, or direct to a potential candidate. What starts as an apparently one off arrangement may act as a catalyst, and lead on to a more substantial arrangement.

What makes it work?

A mentor must have authority, be capable and confident and is thus likely to be reasonably senior. They need suitable knowledge, experience and expertise, plus good counselling skills, and a degree of clout.

Mentoring demands a series of meetings, these creating a thread of review, discussion and activity within the continuity of operations. These meetings may be informal, but most do need an agenda. More important they need to be constructive. If they are, then one thing will naturally lead to another - a variety of occasions can be utilised to maintain the dialogue.

A meeting; followed by a brief encounter, say over a drink; a project and a promise to spend a moment on feedback; a few e-mails passing in different directions – all may contribute. All such activity runs in parallel with any more formal development this or other procedures initiates. What makes this process useful is the commitment and quality of the mentor. Where such relationships can be set up, and work well, they add a powerful dimension to the ongoing development cycle, one that it is difficult to imagine being bettered in any other way. The regularity and ready access involved is somewhat akin to being able to speak with a schoolteacher outside of class in a way that takes matters forward.

Topics chosen may be general. A series of things all geared, let's say, to improving presentations skills, and thus ranging from help with preparation to a critique of a rehearsal. Or they may focus very specifically: aiming to ensure that an individual report you must write is well received.

Note: the mentor is not there simply to tell you what to do, they are there to facilitate the process of your finding out what to do. The process of not only coming up with ideas but with thinking things through and deciding the best way forward is an inherent part of the process. Thus idea generation is inherent to the process and can be a focus in its own right, for instance seeking ways to negate a problem.

The power of mentoring to prompt change is considerable. Personal experience provides an example. Early in my career, as my job began to demand that I wrote reports and proposals and then articles, realistically I had to accept that this was not my greatest strength. One more senior colleague was, however, a great mentor. His influence was twofold. First he offered practical advice, critiquing my writing and encouraging me to actively learn more about how to improve it. As I understood more about how to do it, and the effect I was striving to achieve, as I became more conscious of the process and listened to his advice, my writing style improved. But secondly, and just as important, his role encouraged and motivated: he convinced me I *could* write better, and made me delight in finding a good form of words and expressing a message with appropriate precision so that I was likely to achieve my purpose. Later on, faced with writing my first management book, left alone I would probably have passed – *it's not my thing*. But he cajoled me into tackling it. His input not only improved my writing further but also led to a situation where, for many years now, articles and books have been a significant and ongoing part of my work portfolio. So much so that now, with a long list of business titles published, I have written and had published other different works from light-hearted travel writing to novels. Writing fiction – making stuff up – certainly demands a creative approach; every character, every incident starts with an idea. My progress here is a direct, dramatic and long-term outcome of good mentoring and it started with – an idea (well actually with several).

Either party, of course, can originate the topics or skills that mentoring addresses. The mentor can indicate where specific help seems necessary, or the individual can recognise and request it. Thus mentoring encounters can:

- Be planned and long term
- Link to other activity (both operational and developmental)
- Be opportunistic, scheduled at short notice to tie in with events
- Consist of one exchange or a number of linked ones
- Add positively or warn of dangers ahead
- Make idea generation a theme running through the whole process.

Yet, individual sessions may be brief, and their motivational impact as important as the advice they provide. Overall, continuity must be maintained: avoiding long gaps and with time scheduled for mutual convenience. Keeping a log of mentoring sessions, either because they are or will be linked to formal systems (such as job appraisal) or just to help prove its practical worth is sensible.

Finally, remember that many people (including your staff if you are a manager), say – *I'm motivated by working for a manager from whom I learn* – so effective development always helps both what people do and how they feel. If you are not currently using mentoring – give it a try. And make it personal - if *you* get a mentor you will quickly demonstrate to yourself the value of the process.

Another of the ongoing processes inherent in working within an organisation also has a role to play in fostering a creative approach: job appraisal.

Creating personal improvement

At its heart appraisal is simply an approach to improving personal performance in a changing world. No one is perfect, everyone's role should influence the success of the organisation in a significant way, and therefore the process of appraisal and all the benefits that stem from it are appropriate at every level within an organisation.

Here I will take the case as made: everyone (and their employer) can benefit from appraisal. It is, or should be, a constructive and powerful process – not least in generating ideas. The next question concerns implementation, allowing this to happen in a way that is acceptable and constructive. Certainly if appraisal extends, routinely, to every level this is likely to be well regarded by staff at lower levels around the firm – what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. This alone may have a useful motivational effect, not least on the attitude others take to their own appraisals.

Clear objectives

At any level the intentions of an appraisal scheme need to be clear. The detail of the results it can achieve are many, suffice to say that the key purpose is to improve *future* performance. To achieve this, and to focus the discussion at an appraisal meeting suitably, many organisations will have a documented and systematic approach. This often takes the form of a structured format that lists the areas of planned discussion, and that may include an element of evaluation to measure, objectively, past performance.

There is no reason why such documentation (provided it is good) should not act as the basis for appraisals at all levels, though some tailoring to the individual roles of people may be sensible. Though it is important that it is appropriate, so if details need amendment to make them so, then such amendment should be made and the final list of topic headings agreed as suitable for all. The intention with any appraisal system is that it should provide guidelines and prompt an effective and systematic approach, not that it should become a straightjacket and hinder a flexible approach.

If the evaluation element seems difficult, remember that any “score” inherent in the system is primarily there to quantify, prompt and direct *action*. In other words the numbers – ratings – themselves are less important than the action that follows. Take a common necessary general skill such as making effective or persuasive presentations. If someone is less practised at this than they should be, it is less important that they are marked as “Below average” or whatever (the terminology can vary enormously here) than that they take action to improve matters. The organisation can then reap the advantages of the enhanced ability. The score is only a prompt to help make such action specific and appropriate – ranging here from taking more care and working more closely with colleagues right through to attending specific skills development training. If ratings are seen in such a “means to an end” way, then there is no reason why they should cause problems. The key thing is to unearth ideas that will take things forward or at least set that process in train. Thus in this context ideas prompt action. So, say a fault in presentations is identified, ideas are needed about the nature of the change necessary to overcome it and *how* that will be achieved.

The foundation to success

The secret to successful appraisal is, in a word, preparation – for both parties: the appraiser and the appraisee. Let us consider each in turn.

- * *The appraisee* must know the agreed system and the areas of activity to be addressed. They need to be ready and able to participate in a constructive analysis and discussion. Thus preparation is much more than simply “thinking about the meeting” just ahead of it taking place. Appraisal is a pulling together of thought and analysis that goes on through the year; or which should do so. So preparation needs to be spread over the long term as well. It is useful to keep a file and make notes progressively about areas that seem to be going to be worth discussing. Often topics for discussion will, in any case, be the subject of ongoing review and action. In that case the appraisal will act as a review of progress to date and to highlight future need rather than being a starting point.

Immediate preparation is important too. The appraisal meeting, like any other, needs a considered agenda (which relates carefully to timing) and at this level this should be as much the responsibility of the appraisee as anyone else. There is a danger of feeling nothing is really necessary but to “play it by ear”, especially when colleagues involved may know each other well and instinctively opt for informality. *Note:* there is clearly a role here for the “What do you think *you* should do?” approach commended earlier.

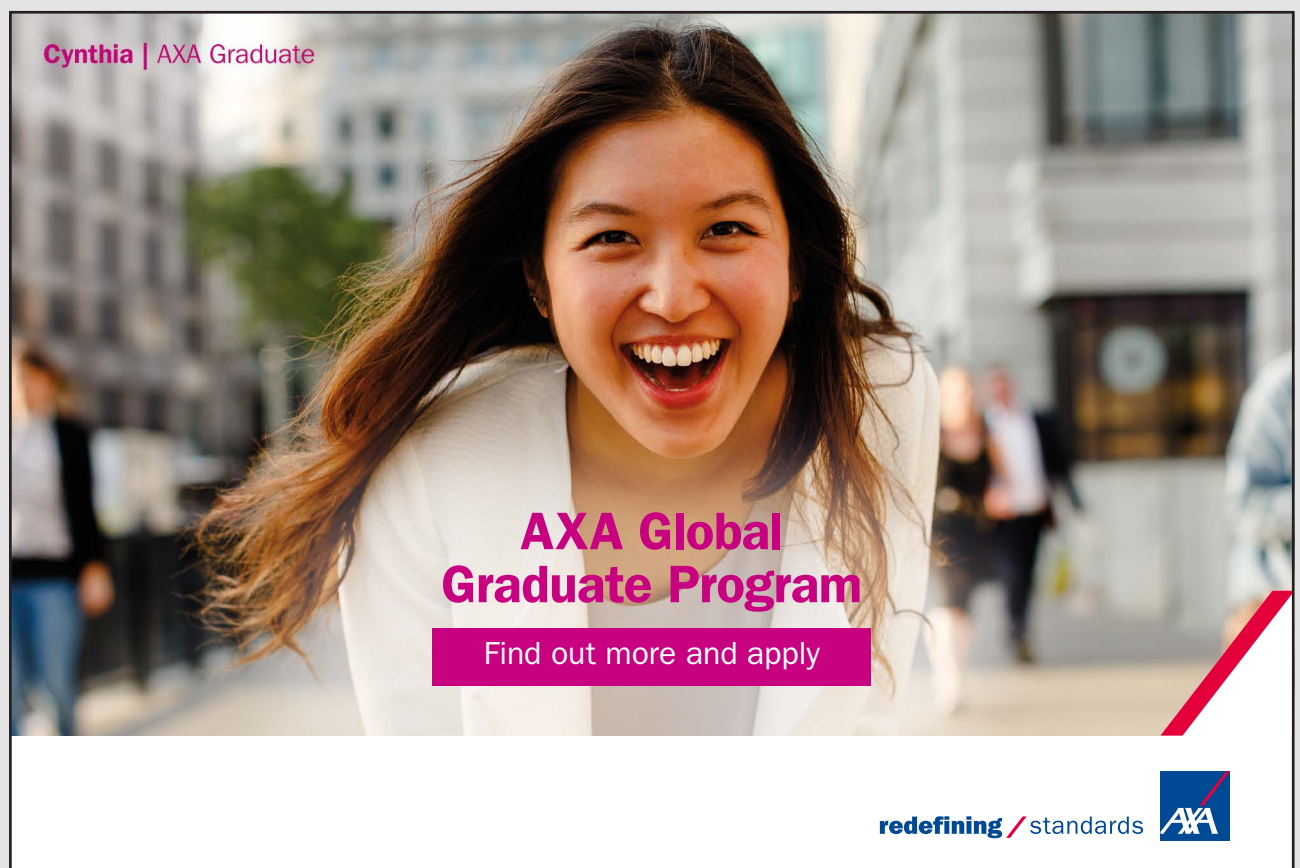
- * *The appraiser* (usually the line manager and maybe more than one person) will likewise need to think ahead about the meeting. They are likely to be familiar with the appraisal process in assessing staff so it is primarily a matter of adapting the approaches used there. The appraiser should, most likely, be responsible for taking the initiative and for directing the process and the meeting. It is important that arrangements are made regarding who will act as appraiser for whom well in advance. This is because appraisal is the culmination of a process, and it is difficult if not impossible to conduct a meeting in the absence of having monitored activity to some extent during the year (for many appraisal is unlikely to occur more often than annually). Final preparation might well take the form of appraiser and appraisee getting together to decide the final agenda, timing etc. It might also be appropriate to include any third party who will be at the appraisal meeting in this discussion.

Given this preliminary consideration the meeting, which might typically last a couple of hours or longer (the appropriate duration relates to the complexity and importance of the job), should go smoothly. Though this can only be the case provided the attitude of those involved is positive and constructive, and this in turn will tend to relate to the overall culture of the organisation in regard to such matters.

Setting up and running the right kind of meeting

The meeting itself needs some care. Most of these points are valid at any level, however it is worth stating that:


- The meeting and the agenda should be set up well in advance (and any necessary documentation read or otherwise dealt with ahead of the meeting); not least this allows for some prior attention to idea generation
- Adequate time must be allowed (on the basis that results will make it time well spent)
- Surroundings must be comfortable and interruptions must be prevented
- All must be in agreement about the format and the practicality of the proceedings
- Documentation and any element of “scoring” must be clear ahead of the meeting
- Targets and other objectives relevant to the period under review must be on the table, every aspect of the appraisal must deal with facts (no one should be making judgements on hearsay or uncertain memory)
- Discussion must be open, judgements objective and people open minded
- It should be recognised that listening is as important as talking
- Both parties should resolve to deal with sensitive issues not allow peer embarrassment to side-line them (criticism is part of appraisal, though it must be constructively given and received and lead to change if necessary).



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In addition three overriding principles are paramount. It is in the nature of a successful appraisal that:

- The appraisee does most of the talking (though the appraiser may need to do most of the chairing of the meeting)
- The focus, and weight of time and discussion, is on the future more than the past (the two go together, of course, but the end results are action for the future, albeit stemming, in part, from the experience of the period just gone)
- The session must go at a pace that allows notes to be taken; valuable ideas may – should – come up and their retention should be secure.

For senior people, who perhaps get together less often or less easily in the normal course of events than they would like, there is a larger problem of possible digression than is usual with other appraisals. Given senior responsibilities broad, indeed major, issues will be discussed at appraisals. There may be the temptation for people to range far and wide, reviewing strategic issues on the basis of a view of the organisation, rather than sticking to the role of the individual. Of course, it is good news if discussion is constructive – and better still if it sparks creativity – but the focus here is clear. It is on the individual.

Note: If other planning or brainstorming meetings are suggested by the conversation, then by all means fix them, but effort should be made to keep the appraisal itself to the matter in hand.

After the meeting

A meeting may be difficult in some respects, but the overall feeling should not be and the outcome should always be constructive. If individual weaknesses are identified they will need addressing. If ideas for change demand personal development takes place then priorities must be set and action implemented. So, to continue the example of presentations, a discussion may focus on current practice generally and ideas for improvement may need applying across a range of staff not just the individual appraisee. If new roles or responsibilities are agreed upon they will need formalising into any system to which they relate.

Above all, if action plans are affected then changes must be put in place, and ongoing operations must reflect the new situation and the decisions taken. Indeed experience shows it to be a poor, or unusual, appraisal that does not produce useful ideas and thus action for the future – and how many new ideas do you need to justify the time taken? In addition, any matters of control must lock in effectively (and this may be as simple as agreeing another meeting to explore some topic further, setting it up and sticking with the arrangement); so too must any record keeping to be done.

While accepting that everyone is busy, and that priorities always need some juggling, the worst possible outcome is for an appraisal to create good new ideas, set something useful in train and for it to be not followed through. Even the best performances can be improved. Even the most expert and competent people have new things to learn and new ways to adopt; the dynamic environment in which we all work sees to that. At the risk of repeating myself, the appraisal process is not all about criticism and highlighting past errors or faults (though realistically there may be some of that to be done). It is about using analysis and discussion to take things forward, it is about building on success, it is about sharing good experience and effective approaches and, above all, it is about making more of the future. All of that needs ideas and generating them must be a key part of appraisals.

After all, if people are not there to affect the future, what are they there for?

AFTERWORD

If at first an idea isn't totally absurd, there's hope for it.

– Albert Einstein

Two things to finish.

Some ideas are good but stillborn: for example mixer taps are surely so much better than separate hot and cold, yet so many of the latter still exist (at least in U.K.). Why?

So first an important thought: an idea may need selling.

To quote Charles Brower: *An idea is delicate. It can be killed by a sneer or a yawn.* Consider this by way of example. The television series *Star Trek* is now a legend across the globe. The original series may have started slowly, but it gained cult status, spawned several spin-off series across many years and led to a series of successful films. Financially it is one of the most successful such franchises ever. Yet it may be difficult now to remember how different it was at its inception from other programmes broadcast at the time. Gene Roddenberry had to find a way of pitching his programme idea to the networks: he thought he had a truly novel idea, and said so – but did so to a chorus of rejections. Like many an idea it was proving difficult to convince others of its merit.

Finally he had a thought – an idea – he realised that those he sought to persuade were conservative and that many programme pitches that were accepted were actually close to something already existing – the classic known quantity.

One of the most successful series at the time was the programme *Wagon Train* – a western. But the circumstances of the characters, a tight knit group, moving on to pastures new, and with each episode involving what happens to them in the new location and with the people they meet there, were essentially similar to his idea for a space odyssey. He sold *Star Trek* by describing it as: *Wagon Train* in space. At the time this proved a well-chosen analogy and people understood and, despite the risk of something so new and different, he got agreement to make the programme. And the rest, as they say, is history.

The moral is that even the best ideas may need selling and doing that – being persuasive – involves a whole body of techniques beyond the brief here, but perhaps worthy of study. I wonder how many brilliant ideas have never seen the light of day simply because they were poorly sold; another idea was needed about how best to put them across.

Secondly, clearly I have here intended to demonstrate real, practical ways of stimulating creative thinking but, just in case some readers are still feeling an inclination to say that they are not ideas people, I will end by providing an exercise; one that can be a bit of fun, but that can also make a serious and useful point as it allows experiment with idea generation.

Exercise:

As we end it is appropriate to suggest an exercise to demonstrate some of the possibilities being reviewed. This can be done individually or discussed with a small group to add the element of ideas developing through discussion.

The brief: You should read the story below, which is about the well-known story of Robin Hood. The idea is to put yourself in the shoes of Robin Hood, consider what *problems* he faces and what *action* he could sensibly take next to tackle them and take matters positively forward.

Make notes as you read and then consider ideas that tackle the difficulties, take things forward and are appropriate to the circumstances (a more detailed brief appears after the description).

ROBIN HOOD

It was early in the spring of the second year of his insurrection against the Sheriff of Nottingham and Robin Hood took a walk in Sherwood Forest. As he walked he pondered the progress of his campaign, the disposition of his forces, his opposition's moves and the options that confronted him.

The revolt against the Sheriff began as a personal crusade. It erupted out of Robin's own conflict with the Sheriff and his administration. Alone, however, he could accomplish little. He therefore sought allies, men with personal grievances, and a deep sense of justice. Later he took all who came without asking too many questions. Strength, he believed, lay in numbers.

The first year was spent forging the group into a disciplined band - a group united in enmity against the Sheriff, willing to live outside the law as long as it took to accomplish their goals. The band was simply organised. Robin ruled supreme. Scarlett was in charge of intelligence and scouting. His main job was to keep tabs on the movements of the Sheriff's men. He also collected information on the travel plans of rich merchants and abbots. Little John kept discipline among the men, and saw to it that their archery was at the high peak that their situation demanded. Scathlock took care of finances, paying shares of the take, bribing officials, converting their loot into cash, and finding suitable hiding places for surplus gains. Finally, Much, the Miller's son, had the difficult task of provisioning the band.

The increasing size of the Band was a source of satisfaction for Robin, but also a subject of much concern. The fame of his Merry Men was spreading, and new recruits were pouring in. Yet the number of men was beginning to exceed the food capacity of the forest. Game was scarce, and food had to be transported by cart from outlying villages. The band had always camped together. But now what had been a small gathering had become a major encampment that could be detected miles away. Discipline was becoming hard to enforce. “Why” Robin reflected “I don’t know half the men I meet these days”.

While the band was getting larger, their main source of revenue was in decline. Travellers, especially the richer variety, began to give the forest a wide berth. This was costly and inconvenient to them, but it was preferable to having all their goods confiscated by Robin’s men. Robin was therefore considering changing his past policy to one of a fixed transit tax.

The idea was strongly resisted by his lieutenants who were proud of the Merry Men’s famous motto: “Rob the rich and give to the poor”. The poor and the townspeople, they argued, were the main source of support and information. If they were antagonised by the transit taxes they would abandon the Merry Men to the mercy of the Sheriff.

Robin wondered how long they could go on keeping to the ways and methods of their early days. The Sheriff was growing strong. He had the money, the men and the facilities. In the long run he would wear Robin and his men down. Sooner or later he would find their weaknesses and methodically destroy them. Robin felt that he must bring the campaign to a conclusion. The question was how could this be achieved?

Robin knew that the chances of killing or capturing the Sheriff were remote. Besides, killing the Sheriff might satisfy his personal thirst for revenge, but would not change the basic problem. It was also unlikely that the Sheriff could be removed from office. He had powerful friends at court. On the other hand, Robin reflected, if the district was in a perpetual state of unrest, and the taxes went uncollected, the Sheriff might shrewdly use the unrest to obtain more reinforcements. The outcome depended on the mood of the regent Prince John. The Prince was known as vicious, volatile and unpredictable. He was obsessed by his unpopularity among the people, who wanted the imprisoned King Richard back. He also lived in constant fear of the Barons who were growing daily more hostile to his power. Several of the Barons had set out to collect the ransom that would release King Richard from his jail in Austria. Robin had been discreetly asked to join, in return for future amnesty. Prince John was known for his vindictiveness. If the gamble failed he would personally see to it that all involved were crushed.

The sound of the supper horn startled Robin from his thoughts. Nothing had been resolved or settled - Robin had decisions to make.

QUESTION: what actions might he take to overcome problems and advance his cause?

Note: while ideas should be practical, there is no need (if you want) to make any attempt at realism linking to the times; thus if you want to have people communicating by email or Twitter, that's fine. The idea is to flex your idea-generating muscles and use your unfettered imagination.

The consideration that follows can make a useful exercise and can also be done with a group of people. This is for you to think about and I will not list any answers (problems or ideas) other than to quote a favourite suggested at a group exercise: one group, having identified that two problems were that too many people wanted to join Robin's band and sufficient food was difficult to come by, suggested cannibalism! Not to be recommended in the real world but certainly that would address both problems.

A final word

Finally, after a good number of pages about thinking creatively, let me end with a puzzle. Can you speak (in a way that makes sense) for a full minute without using a word with the letter "a" in what you say? Sufficient time would allow you carefully to write a script (and don't do that), but there is one idea – a "trick" if you like - that allows you to do this easily – thinking what that might be needs some creative, perhaps lateral, thinking.

Any ideas?