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Introduction

This topic is often known as 'Creative Problem Solving'. In fact, most of the time we are not solving problems at all. Sometimes we generate ideas, reframe problems to see them in a different way or even use creative ways to make decisions.

I have a huge library of techniques library, but in reality, only a dozen or so ever get used.

Why Brainstorming Is BAD (or rather why it often fails)

No, BAD is not an acronym. I simply hate brainstorming and try to avoid it wherever possible. This stems from an introduction (many years ago) to the type of brainstorming that we all hate – sitting round a table with a pile of Post-It notes being told by the boss to come up with ideas. I objected because we never got anywhere, and a great deal of time was wasted. I firmly believe that Brainstorming is bad.

So if it did not work for you then maybe you put it down to the facilitator, or perhaps the problem was too hard, or maybe you just did not give it long enough?

Some people do, however, use brainstorming and have some success. There are a significant number of people who do not. Why is this?

Simples, as a well known Meerkat might say (apologies if you live outside the UK). Creative problem solving is a series of phases which alternate in using convergent and divergent thinking (focusing on one thing or generating many options).

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If you wish to generate ideas you need to know the objective. What are you generating ideas for and is it really the right thing to be doing? This is convergent thinking. It needs to be done, and there are plenty of creative techniques just for this part of the process.

So in a nutshell, we find out what the problem is i.e. what is the problem that is causing the 'business symptoms' that we are experiencing. Then we work out one or more ways to solve the problem, and finally we select a solution.

This is very different to saying 'we have a problem' and the sitting down to generate solutions. Brainstorming should not be the first thing we try, it is like throwing mud at a wall and hoping that some of it sticks.

All techniques can be categorised according to whether they are convergent/divergent, group/solo etc so it is essential to use the correct type of technique in each phase.

This is where those who tried to get me started went terribly wrong.

We sat round a table using a divergent technique to 'solve a problem' without working out exactly what the problem was. The only way this would have worked is by pure luck (and we never got lucky). There are other issues of course regarding environment, group make up etc but if you use the wrong tool for the job it is not going to work no matter how hard you try.

So when you are summoned to a meeting room to generate solutions to a problem you will generate something, but it is likely that you will not have identified what the problem actually is so the solutions will not fit very well.

I have a little black book with around 144 of these techniques, so if you would like to give this sort of thinking a try, please get in touch and I can find something tailored to your needs.

Making Use Of The Mood Hoovers

Mood Hoovers! Do you have some of those negative people in your business who just suck the life out of you? If you are self employed maybe you are surrounded by some. What do you do about them?

I spent some time talking to individuals who provide coaching and their take on it was to simply ignore these people. This could work if you work on your own and can make that choice but what about those people who work in organisations?

Negativity, like positivity is a resource that can be used so why ignore or waste it? Lets actively make use of it. But how?

There are a number of creative or alternative techniques that can be used to harness negative energy which I will not go into here, however the fundamental principle is the same. Even the most positive of us have a negative streak so let s first of all use this to create something. Maybe it is a whole heap of ideas or a story. As long as there is some sort of mapping between our negative output and something positive in the real world.

So why is this good? First of all, you will get a lot of output! Secondly when we generate ideas we find it easy to judge them. You will have noticed many comments such as 'that won't work' or 'we can't afford that'. If what you are producing is in fact negative, the mood hoovers will find it very difficult to judge and so more ideas will escape being filtered out!

So, the way to make use of these people is to use a technique known as 'reverse' or 'negative' brainstorming. I also label it 'how to create 20 ideas in the time it takes to drink a cup of coffee'.

Imagine you are trying to generate ideas on 'how to improve ...'. Turn this on its head and try to generate ideas on 'how to make things bad ...' (really bad, about as bad as the can get).

When you have a list then simply turn these negatives into positives. You may find they are a bit woolly in some cases so simply run the exercise again.

You can do this on your own or as a group. I have had a group of 6 people generate 65+ ideas in 10 minutes.

How To Easily Generate More Than 10,000 Ideas Quickly

I bet that headline grabbed your attention! The way to do this is to use a technique known as the Morphological Matrix. It is a technique which rapidly generates ideas, many of which will be completely whacky but which can act as springboards to other more fruitful ideas. Here is the description and a worked example. To make this even easier you can automate it. If you had 10 rows and 4 columns you could generate 10,000 different combinations!!

The example below will generate 1000 options for our imaginary TV series!

Here goes!

Step 1. Pick attributes
Describe the key attributes that play a role in your challenge. Write them down next to each other, horizontally.

Step 2. List possible components per attribute
Make a list of possible components for each attribute and list these components beneath the attribute, thus creating columns.

Step 3. Combine components from each column, randomly
Take one random component from every list and combine them to generate a new idea. Use a dice to generate random numbers, or simply try every possible combination one-by-one (warning: if you want to try every possibility you might be busy for a while).

Once you've generated many different ideas, pick the most promising ones to examine closer.

When should you use the Morphological Matrix?

You can use the Morphological Matrix to find creative ways to shape a new product, service, experience or story. Possible challenges that are perfectly suited for using the Morphological Matrix:

- Coming up with a story (for a game, book, film script etc.)
- Coming up with new ideas for a party, event, room- or space arrangement etc.
- Coming up with ideas for a new product (a new type of toothbrush, car, refrigerator etc.)
- Coming up with new ideas for gifts or day trips
- Coming up with new ideas for a tv format, escape room experience, primary school lesson etc.

Example: a new tv format

Imagine you want to create a new tv format for a big production agency.

Step 1. Pick attributes
You choose three attributes to list at the top of your matrix: 'target audience', 'type of show' and 'theme'.

Step 2. List possible components per attribute
You generate a list of 10 components for each attribute.

Step 3. Combine components from each column, randomly
You try out different combinations, randomly.

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Attributes:	target audience	type of show	theme
1	children	game show	history
2	the elderly	quiz	humour
3	teenagers	reality tv	sports
4	adults	soap	animals
5	animal lovers	news show	science
6	business men	talent show	science fiction
7	intellectuals	animation	literature
8	sports lovers	puppet show	food
9	parents	talk show	movies
10	foodies	travel program	politics

Numbers 1, 2 and 10 (children, quiz, politics)

A program for children, aiming to make kids more interested in politics. A young energetic host (a children's idol) asks two teams of clever kids questions about politics. Each team has thee opportunities to ask a famous politician (who is also in the studio) for help. This costs them 25% of their points each time (no reason to not also teach them a bit of math…).

Numbers 2, 8 and 1 (the elderly, puppet show, history)

Many old people love talking about their youth. So why not re-enact historical events that happened 60-80 years ago? We'll create a puppet show in which puppets who look like historical figures re-enact important events. The puppets also sing popular old songs with elderly people.

Numbers 8, 1 and 6 (sports lovers, game show, science fiction)

Let's create a hilarious new type of game show. Famous athletes (football players, darts players, snooker players etc.) pretend to be abducted by aliens and have to compete with each other in silly games. The 'alien' host (a puppet or host in futuristic clothes) explains the rules. Only the winner will be released back onEarth. The losers will be experimented on. The show ends with the losers 'disappearing' in a UFO (waving goodbye while standing in front of the window).

As you can see, making random combinations enables you to quickly generate original ideas. After generating many different ideas all you have to do is pick the most interesting ones. Elaborate and sharpen the ideas.

A Word Of Caution

Like everything else in the world of business, idea generation works on the principle of a funnel. For every 10 wacky ideas you generate only 1 will be worth exploring any further. Out of these, only 1 in 10 might be worth continuing with and out of these 'firm' ideas around 1 in 10 will make it into your product or service. So if you are a business that depends on a stream of new ideas you will need around 1000 wacky ideas to start you off on your road to a new product/service.

But the good news is that we can speed up the process and we know how long it can take to create and incubate ideas. The only issue is what action will you take?

So What Can We Use It For?

The answer is that you can use creative or alternative thinking for just about anything. In my book Creativity In Action I introduce readers to the following techniques:

- Asking Why?
- Working With Aliens
- Boundary Relaxation
- Speed Storywriting
- The Movie Screen
- Add-Subtract-Change
- Reverse Brainstorming
- List & Twist
- The Morphological Matrix
- SCAMPER
- Drawing
- Super Heroes
- Exaggeration
- Metaphor
- Multiple Redefinition
- Walking With Moccasins
- Changing Attributes
- Homing In
- Bullet Proofing
- Storyboard
- Mind Mapping
- Help Or Hinder
- Assumption Testing

This is not a bad toolkit. I suggest the type of things that you can do with each technique and in the following chapter I suggest how someone might use the list of techniques to solve the following business issues:

- How do I create a plan for developing a new product or service?
- How do I know if I have a good idea?
- How can I research the market?
- Do I need to develop a new product or service?
- How can we improve internal communications?
- Where should I spend my PR/Marketing budget?
- How can I create a Sales presentation?
- How can I get feedback on communications?
- How can I improve team working?
- I have problems with my team members - help!
- What is the best way to organise people?
- How can I improve my recruitement process?
- How can I make my business more attractive than teh competition?
- How can I reduce costs?
- How can I create a sustainable business?
- How do I create a business plan?
- How do I predict the future?

Readers will notice that most of the issues have been reframed as questions. This is because it makes it easier to work. However it is perfectly possible to simply investigate difficult situations such as bullying or sexual harrassment in an effective way, create a company strategy or even conduct a performance appraisal.