

**Innovate or Perish!**  
**Ten tips for Fostering Innovative Practices**  
**By Regina M. Clark, CSP**

When was the last time that you had a creative idea? Last week, last month, a year ago? Are you stuck in your comfort zone? Do you embrace change or dread it? If you are not challenging the system on a daily basis, you will not move forward to world class results. Businesses must develop new products and services to stay in business. We must find creative solutions to existing problems. Many highly educated, intelligent business executives know that fostering innovation is a smart thing to do, the right thing to do, the one thing that will set them apart from the competition and still they fail to innovate. Why? Why do people and organizations fail to innovate even though they know they should? One answer could be because it's hard, it takes time, energy and a sincere commitment. It's easier to keep doing things the way they have always been done. The problem with doing things the way they have always been done is that you keep getting the same results that you already have. The same results just don't cut it in this constantly changing world in which we live. Another reason people might avoid being creative is because it isn't logical. It's easier to be a logical thinker than a creative thinker. It's easier to be an analytical thinker than to be a creative thinker. It's also safer to be a logical, analytic thinker than to be a creative thinker. Don't get me wrong, logic and analysis are very important thinking skills. We use analytical skills to dig for the root cause of problems all the time. We need creative skills to find creative solutions and innovative ideas.

Here are ten tips for encouraging innovative thinking. The tips are in no particular order which may annoy some of you. Too bad, it's time to challenge the logical side of your brain.

**#1 Get rid of mental locks**

Did you ever hear someone say?

- I'm not creative.
- Everything is fine the way it is.
- We've done all right so far.
- It's too much work
- We don't have enough time to be creative
- It's not my job
- The staff will never buy it
- We shouldn't be having this much fun at work.
- This stuff is silly.

These are all excuses. Get rid of the excuses, everyone is creative!

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We were all born with a brain that has two sides, a creative side and a logical, analytical side. We were all curious when we were little kids. We asked lots of questions and wondered about things. We asked:

- Why do birds fly?
- Why does water move?
- Why are monkey bars called monkey bars?
- What do foxes eat?
- Why do we have to color in the lines?
- Why is the sun shaped like a bagel?
- How do kites fly?

Unfortunately, when we entered the school system, we were taught to think logically, that there is one right answer. We studied facts and some of our creativity was squashed! Of course, now we know as adults that there is often more than one right answer. Start asking why again! Challenge your thinking.

## **#2 Use both sides of your brain**

Think of your brain as a muscle. When we use our muscles, the muscles become stronger. Wouldn't you love to have a stronger brain which would enable you to think better? You could read more efficiently, solve problems faster and improve your memory. Who knows what you are really capable of accomplishing. Some people say that knowledge is power. Knowledge is powerful when it is used. There are many knowledgeable people that don't do anything with their knowledge. There are other knowledgeable people that know a lot about a variety of things and they have the creative ability to link random thoughts together to develop powerful ideas and solutions.

When was the last time that you picked up a crayon, a marker, a water color paint set and drew a picture? When was the last time that you sang out loud, danced the cha-cha, played a musical instrument or composed a song? How about using your digital camera to capture a bird in flight or a sunset? Or completing the NY Times crossword puzzle? I'm not talking about painting a masterpiece or singing on key. I'm just talking about developing the creative side of your brain. Do you allow yourself time each day to daydream? Do you ask yourself what if questions? In 1974, Tony Buzan wrote a book called, *Use Both Sides of Your Brain*. The book is about how the mind really works. We can develop thinking skills to use our brain more effectively.

## **# 3 Learn creative thinking techniques and use them!**

There are a variety of creative thinking techniques that can be used to stimulate innovative thinking. Some of these techniques can be learned by reading books or attending seminars. The simplest technique is brainstorming. Brainstorming is

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widely used and abused. When a group decides to brainstorm, they must follow brainstorming rules in order to be effective. When a group embarks on brainstorming it must be timed. True brainstorming generates many ideas (quantity vs. quality) and no judging is allowed. People are encouraged to build on each other's ideas. Often, participants begin to analyze before the brainstorming is done, this ruins the brainstorming session. A good facilitator can quickly put an end to the analysis and get the brainstorming back on track.

There are many other techniques including the Random Word Technique, Creating Metaphors, Thinking Like a Child, The Six Thinking Hats, and Mind Mapping. Books by Edward DeBono, Roger von Oech, and Tony Buzan are full of techniques. Many years ago, I watched Edward De Bono present to a large group of educators. He showed them how to use creative thinking techniques to solve problems. De Bono believes that our mind needs to be provoked to think differently, that's why the random word technique works so well. First, you select a random word from a book or magazine. Then you brainstorm with the word on the top of a flipchart. Anything that comes to mind goes on the flipchart. Then the words on the flipchart are used to solve a real business problem.

Often, during process improvement training creative techniques are introduced. The participants select a technique and then use it during an exercise. Unfortunately, most participants fail to apply the creative techniques outside of the classroom. It's just easier not to.

Recently, I was working with a high performance work team. We were doing an exercise about using innovative thinking, which is one of the organizations core values. The group decided that they were very creative. I asked them what creative techniques they use. The response was, "what do you mean?" Then I said, "Do you use the random word technique, or lateral thinking, or think like a child, or the six thinking hats?" The response was, "I guess we're not as creative as we think we are."

#### **# 4 Move outside of your area of expertise**

Most of us hang around with people that are like us. We even hire people that are like us. At work, finance people have their own language, engineers work together, cops socialize with other cops, and senior executives have lunch with other senior executives. Different ideas come from people that think differently. Invite people that are from outside your area of expertise to join you in your creative problem solving. Read magazines and journals that you don't regularly read to stimulate your thinking. Learn a lot about a variety of things and see if you can make any connections. I was reading a story in National Geographic about John Smith. (I don't usually read National Geographic, my husband does) John Smith enforced certain rules with the settlers in the New World, if you didn't work, you didn't eat. I used the example during a management training program

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when I was discussing adult motivation. The settlers were clearly motivated to eat, so they worked.

### **# 5 Avoid the classic innovation traps**

In 2006, Harvard Business Review published an article called *Innovation: The Classic Traps* by Rosabeth Moss Kanter. In the article case studies were shared which showed classic innovation traps that have occurred time and time again. For example, some companies adopt the wrong strategy: investing only in ideas that they think will become blockbusters and ignoring small ideas that could have generated big profit dollars. Other traps include process mistakes, structure mistakes and skills mistakes. The remedies include adding flexibility to planning, tightening the human connections between innovators and others in the organization and selecting innovation leaders with strong interpersonal skills who know how to put teams together. If you are serious about implementing innovative practices in your organization, study the HBR article!

### **# 6 Allow failures**

If you don't allow yourself to make mistakes, you will never learn from your mistakes. Innovative thinking is risky, you might generate an idea that is the best idea ever or the idea is a total flop. Bad ideas cost businesses money. When Coca-cola introduced new coke in April of 1985, they expected the new soft drink to replace classic coke. Instead, the launch of new coke was a disaster, public reaction was overwhelmingly negative. Consumers started to hoard classic coke and sell it on the black market. New coke was pulled off shelves by July, 1985. Recently, an energy drink called Cocaine was introduced by Redux Beverages, LLC. Naming a high energy drink after an illegal drug is certainly risky business. Creative but risky! The FDA issued warnings that the drink was illegally marketed as a drug alternative and dietary supplement. The beverage was pulled from the market and the company plans to sell the beverage under a new name.

### **# 7 Create a process map**

Edward Deming once said, "If you can't describe the work you are doing in terms of a process, then you don't know what you are doing." Before you can come up with creative solutions to problems, you need to understand exactly what the problem is. You must understand the work that you do in terms of processes. Every process has a beginning and an end with inputs and outputs. Years ago, a Finance Department was trying to solve a payroll problem. Workers were not getting paid on time and the Finance Department was getting blamed. Part of the problem was inaccurate or missing information. The information should have been collected by Human Resources during the initial hiring process. The Finance Department was trying to fix the problem without including the Human Resource Department. They blamed HR and called them incompetent but failed to include them when it came time to look for solutions. Developing a process map with a clearly defined beginning and end point helped this group collaboratively solve their problem.

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## **# 8 Get people involved**

When it comes to stimulating creative ideas, the more people that you can get involved, the better. Include people from different areas, with diverse knowledge and expertise, different backgrounds and different ages. The best way to get a good idea is to get lots of ideas and then select the best idea. Diverse teams will generate more creative ideas than homogeneous teams. Also consider inviting external people to join your teams. External people have a totally different point of view and no hidden agendas.

## **# 9 Get out of your way**

We work our entire lives to develop skills and knowledge that serve us well. Some times we are so competent that we get in our own way. We think we know the answer because we have seen the situation before. Or we are prepared to solve problems because we have the skills to do so. When I teach people how to facilitate participant centered training, one of the most challenging things is to get subject matter experts to shut up! These SME were selected to train because they know the material and because they have effective presentation skills. Good trainers check their egos at the door and truly facilitate learning. Good trainers know how to pull the answers out of the audience and how to check for understanding. After all, the focus of training isn't about the trainer; it's about the participants learning. So, get out of your own way, listen and enter into situations with an open mind.

## **# 10 Create an environment that supports innovate thinking**

When was the last time that you took a trip to learn about something? In grade school or high school? Do you visit the competition? Do you purchase their products? Do you know what their work environment is like? Does your work environment stimulate innovative thinking? Do you have a suggestion program at work? Are there books and other resources available? Does anyone have a whack pack? Are there opportunities to clear your head at work? Can you participate in developmental opportunities? Google was recently named the best company to work for by Fortune magazine. According to Fortune magazine, Google engineers are required to devote 20% of their time to pursuing projects they dream up that will help the company. Google also provides lots of perks like rock climbing walls, gourmet restaurants, and lap pools for their employees. Google recruits at Harvard, MIT or Stanford and they look for employees that have diverse interests. They hire smart people and work hard to keep their employees motivated. They create an environment where employees are stimulated to challenge their thinking.

There are many ways to stimulate innovate thinking. This article has touched on a few of the ways. The reality is that it's really up to you. Henry Ford once said, "If you think you can or if you think you can't, you're right." The first step to being

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an innovative thinker is to make a sincere commitment to innovate. Who knows what will happen next!

Suggested reading and resources to stimulate Innovative Thinking

- A Whack on the Side of the Head by Roger von Oech
- A Kick in the Seat of the Pants by Roger von Oech
- Creative Whack Pack by Roger von Oech
- Teach Your Child How to Think by Edward De Bono
- Six Thinking Hats by Edward De Bono
- Lateral Thinking by Edward De Bono
- Use Both Sides of Your Brain by Tony Buzan

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