



## Thoughtcatcher

Freeing the Prisoners of Boring, Unproductive Presentations and Training

“We need our people to think outside the box!” by Ed Bernacki of Wow !

Managers and executives often ask for programs to make their staff “think outside the box”. What these organisations really need is to see is that to foster organisational innovation, you must start with individual skills for managing ideas.

When organisations look for innovative thinking programs, the typical symptoms, as they see it are:

- Lack of teamwork within a department or business.
- Important decisions seem to be made at the last minute.
- New ideas are rare or non-existent.
- People are reactive – virtually unable or unwilling to take initiative.

These symptoms relate to both the government sector and the corporate sector. At best, organisations develop skills to react to problems. However, many fail to do this adequately. The losers are customers who do not benefit from problem free services or products.

What is the role for HR and Training to get people to think outside the box?

This is a truly important question, which needs a much broader examination than most organisations are prepared to take. The result is a tremendous waste of brainpower in our organisations. Workshops that give people a brainstorming tool or two are not the solution.

The solution will be found in looking deeper into the issue of what prevents people from thinking in new and original ways. To start, let deal with this question – “what’s makes an innovative organisation innovative?”.

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PriceWaterhouseCoopers looked at 300 large UK corporations to tackle this challenge. The measure used was the ability to continually launch new products and services and profit from them (in terms of the percent of turnover coming from sales of new products and services in comparison to overall revenues). This bottomline measure ranked companies and PWC studied the top companies in depth. The results were surprising.

What it did not find

- Innovation is not the domain of certain industries such as technology or marketing. In fact, some technology companies were not innovative at all while some commodity-based companies were.
- We do not have innovative industries – we have innovative companies in all industries.
- Innovation is not the role of R&D – all departments must contribute ideas and innovations to grow the bottomline.

What it did find


Innovative organisations have above average earnings for their industry.

Innovative organisations – regardless of their industry – have certain common attributes. These attributes reflect their programs and policies in three key areas:

1. Innovative organisations have well defined “idea management policies”. Idea management policies are those that encourage people to actively seek out ideas, to manage these ideas, and to act on them.
2. Innovative organisations create a climate that is open to new ideas. There is no point in teaching people to create ideas if the organisation is not prepared to use them.
3. Innovative organisations are led by executives who carefully balance leadership and management, who empower people to take initiative, recognise and reward those who encourage staff to take broader approaches.

It is the first of the common attributes that we must explore – Idea Management.

To put the need for greater personal skills to manage ideas in context, it is useful to go back to a book published in 1953 called Applied Imagination. The reason



for doing so is that its author mentioned a process to improve the effectiveness of meetings when he wrote, “we need to harness our brains to storm through problems”. This was later referred to as “brainstorming”. The key is to notice that Alex Osborn invested 278 pages in techniques, ideas and suggestions to help individuals to be more creative as individuals, and 17 pages in the group process of brainstorming. His philosophy is that we must maximise our personal skills first, apply them, and then resort to a team once we’ve exhausted our personal contribution toward solving a problem. This almost seems at odds with today’s preoccupation with teamwork.

To broaden your appreciation as to the potential of what this implies, here is a summary of an innovation training program developed by the Singapore Prime Minister’s Office. Its goal was to make the public service more innovative. I edited that actual guide that was forwarded to thousands of civil servants. It represents a very sophisticated training program.

Idea management was broken down into six components. Managers and staff were challenged to contribute to a more innovative culture by developing their capacity to innovate. These competencies are the foundation vital to the innovation process:

1. Idea Generation – Innovation starts with finding new ideas when and where they are needed. One writer call this, “deliberate creative thinking”. We can use tools that create new ways of thinking that help us find new ideas.
2. Ideas Developing – Our first ideas are often raw and need to be enhanced, combined or connected to transform average ideas into great ones.
3. Idea Evaluation – By learning to evaluate ideas we find those capable of creating the results we want.
4. Ideas Marketing and Proposing – To get commitment to any new idea takes communication. Learning to sell your idea is as important as finding it in the first place.
5. Ideas Implementing – Transforming our ideas into action plans and results is our goal.

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6. Team Learning – The final element is to ensure that team lessons are learned during the innovation process.

Specific training programs were developed for each of these areas and offered by the Singapore Civil Service College. The Public Service is already known for its efficiency and effectiveness. The bottomline for the Prime Minister Office's which commissioned the work is the need to go forward "by building a culture of innovation that ensures we will find new ways to create greater value for the organisation, its people and those we serve".

The next time someone in your organisation says, "we need to think outside the box" try to assess where the problem really lies. It is generating ideas, harvesting them, or turning them into action. This can provide a stronger framework for identifying training needs.

[Wow! that's a Great Idea!](#) is a 170 page idea manual for managers or business owners wanted to improve their idea management skills and to foster more innovative thinking on their team or in their organisation.

