Toolkit for Achievers

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2.6.

Search for Creative Shortcuts

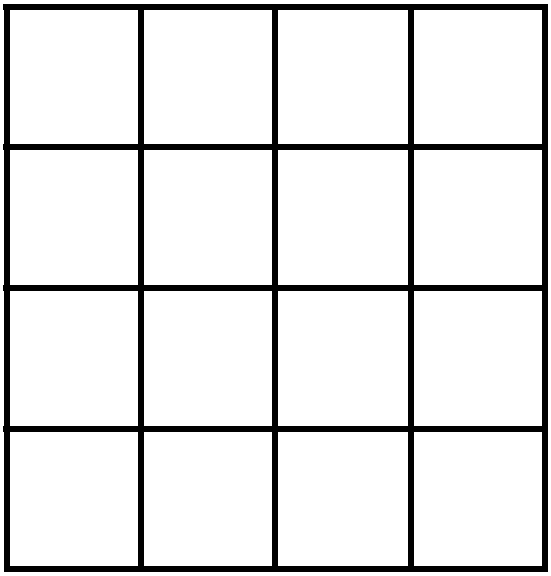
Creativity is our ability to generate new ideas. It is our ability to figure out new solutions when faced with difficult situations. This is often paramount because the existence of difficulties is proof in itself of the insufficiency of our *existing* ideas. If we always knew ahead of time how to tackle difficulties, we would never even have to call them obstacles.

What is the difference, then, between a creative person and a less-creative person? The one ability I consider foremost is the creative person's habit of doing and seeing things differently. Take Albert Einstein for example. When he formulated his theory of relativity, he imagined himself to be riding a beam of light haphazardly through the universe. His own comment: "Imagination is more important than knowledge."

Beethoven believed that, in all musical composition, you must first learn the rules, and then must learn how to break them. As I wrote in the section on independence, this requires a great deal of daring. Also necessary is a willingness to work outside of your usual framework. For this is what creativity is all about: daring to work outside of a given framework. If we cannot step outside the frame, we will never be able to create anything new.

So what is it that makes it so difficult for us to move outside the frame? One reason could be that we were taught in school that there is always only one correct answer to every question. For many of us, school was all about trying to figure out which answer the teacher was looking for. Those who were the best at fitting in, at following the rules, also got the best grades. As an adult, one realizes that life really isn't all that simple. There is rarely only one correct answer to any given question. Let me illustrate this with a simple exercise.

How many squares can you find in the figure below? There are many different answers. Think about this for a few moments before going on to the explanation that follows.[1]



Source: The Humor Project, Saratoga Springs

As you can see, there are several answers, and there is no one answer that is obviously co8rrect. There is no answer that jumps out and says, "This is it!" Just when you think you've come to a conclusion, you discover that there are more squares than you saw at first. This is a

[1] There are 16 small squares ... and one big square 16+1 = 17 ... and one 2x2 square in each corner 17+4 = 21. There is also one central 2x2 square 21+1 = 22 ... and four 2x2 squares along the sides of this one 22+4 = 26 ... and four 3x3 squares 26+4 = 30. Plus a very tiny square at the intersection of every pair of lines – this makes a total of 30+25 = 55 squares.

good illustration of how we tend to limit our thinking. Seeing only black and white or right or wrong makes finding new solutions difficult. Spending your time searching after one correct answer to any particular question traps you within certain boundaries and so limits your thinking.

But getting ourselves outside the frame isn't easy, mainly because we are so used to thinking in the traditional manner that we have been taught. The world is a complicated place, and to understand just a little bit of it, we are forced to simplify what we see and experience.

I can illustrate this with another example. Below you see the number nine written in Roman numerals.

IX

Source: Whack on the Side of the Head by Roger von Oech

I would like you to change this to a number six by drawing one single line. Take a minute or two to think about this before reading any further, as the answer is given below.

As you might have guessed, this puzzle also has more than one possible solution. All of the solutions here have one thing in common: in order to solve the puzzle, you have to break one or two imaginary rules that you may have imposed upon yourself without realizing it. A line, for example, must not necessarily be straight. It can be curved. This is why you can simply draw an S in front of the IX to form the word SIX.

Another solution is to draw a line straight across the middle of the number, turn the paper upside down, and then cover the part of the figure that is below the line. This will give you VI, the Roman equivalent of the number 6. Some might argue that this is not a legitimate solution, but no restrictions were imposed when the challenge was given. We often set up our own rules and restrictions without realizing that this is what we are doing. This gives us a smaller number of conceivable solutions to choose from.

A third solution is to put a 6 right after the X, which gives you IX6 (1 times 6). There may of course be many more other solutions that I have not thought of.

Here's another puzzle. How would you continue the series below? A couple solutions can be found on the last page of this section.

$$A_{BCD}{}^{E}{}_{FGH}{}^{I}{}_{JKL}$$

Source: Whack on the Side of the Head by Roger von Oech

The point with exercises such as this is to help us break our tendency to impose limits upon ourselves. They help us to see beyond our self-imposed restrictions and our preconceived notions of how the world is.

We might subscribe to the stereotypes that Scots are stingy, Germans are effective, Spaniards are great lovers, Japanese are loyal, Englishmen are polite, and Americans are money-hungry. But when we are out and about in the world, we discover that it's not that simple. We may very well meet dishonest Japanese, impolite Englishmen, or even generous Americans. Our worldview changes instantly, forcing us to realize that the world is much more complicated than we thought.

Sadly, we sometimes simplify our world past recognition as we search for a sense of security. It's so much easier to comprehend the world if we assume that all Japanese are loyal and that all Englishmen are polite. "Knowing" how things are gives us a false sense of peace and security.

When faced with puzzles and challenges of the type I've presented here, we usually assume that the problems must be solved within a given framework or in a certain way. We tend to limit ourselves to one particular method. But this kills creativity.

There are many ways to free yourself from these self-imposed limitations. One way is to use a method called the random input introduced by creativity expert Edward de Bono. In this method, you use random words to produce new ideas. De Bono claims that when faced with a problem, we can use any random word to act as a catalyst for new ideas. The main thing is to stimulate ourselves into thinking in new directions.

Let's say that you and your spouse have a problem. Your spouse wants you to be at home more, but you are in the middle of an exciting project at work and want to spend a lot of time there. It may seem impossible to solve this problem because you see only two solutions — you either stay at home or go to work. But this limited view of your options totally ignores other possible alternatives.

Let's use the random word method to find a way out of this predicament. On the last page of this section there is a list of 60 words. You will need to use a watch or a clock with a second hand to help you choose a word from the list. Just glance and see where the second hand is right now, and then use that number to select the word that has the same number in the list. For the sake of illustration, let's say that you landed on the word *asphalt*.

How in the world can the word *asphalt* help you find new solutions to your problem with your partner? Start by making a list of the associations you have to the word you have chosen. Somewhere in this list you will find a number of hidden but nevertheless feasible solutions to your dilemma. My list of associations to the word *asphalt* looks like this:

Asphalt
Black
Hard, but softer than concrete
Hot and smells good when it is laid
Good surface to drive on
Can cause the air above to quiver on a hot summer day

The fact that asphalt is black doesn't sound very uplifting, I realize, because that might lead you to thinking about you and your partner going separate ways. But it might also lead you to considering coming home from work before dark — or at least before your partner goes to bed. Wouldn't that be a good idea?

This thought may give you the idea of working early mornings instead of evenings. Somewhere in here you might get the idea of taking some of your work home with you. Or of finding parts of the work to delegate to others so that the project will take less of your own time.

Perhaps the thought of hot asphalt will get you thinking about how hot your relationship to your partner actually is – or of how hot you wish it were. Your spouse has said that she would like to see more of you, but is this the real concern here? If you improve the quality of the time you spend together, you may find that how much time you spend together is no longer the issue. Quality is, after all, more important than quantity.

Hot asphalt may also lead your thoughts to sunny beaches and warm countries where you might want to take a vacation with your partner. After such a wonderful trip, you could return to work fresh and revitalized.

Another obvious association to asphalt is traffic. You might consider what kind of social traffic you and your partner have been experiencing lately and how this has affected your relationship. How often do you see friends? Too often or not often enough? If you don't get out much, you may be experiencing feelings of isolation that exaggerate your need to spend more time with each other. If you're out all the time, you might feel that you never have time to yourselves. Perhaps putting these matters into better balance can help you with your dilemma.

As you can see, the random input method is a simple way of generating several new ideas and perspectives. But it is not necessary to use any of these techniques. New ideas sometimes just come of their own accord. Typical times when ideas come floating in are when you are showering, or right before you fall asleep in the evening, or when you have just finished eating lunch.

These situations have one thing in common. At each of these times we are usually relaxed and not thinking about anything in particular. When ideas appear suddenly out of nowhere, it is evidence that our subconscious has been hard at work. The subconscious mind can be seen as an enormous ocean containing an infinite number of facts, feelings, memories and experiences. It is an immense resource when it comes to producing new ideas, but we cannot consciously command it or steer it. We have to just wait patiently until the subconscious itself feels like giving us a hand with our problems.

That is why it is always a good idea to write down the problems you are currently trying to find solutions for. It is like writing instructions for the subconscious: "These are the things I need answers for." In this way, you let yourself know that you are expecting answers.

This also frees you up from always having to keep your problems in mind. Writing your problems in a notebook gives you time to think about other things because you know that you won't forget anything important. Going around stewing over your problems all the time only makes them seem insurmountable.

It's also a good idea to write down your ideas that just pop up from nowhere. You can easily forget them if you don't capture them in writing. Of course, writing down ideas that come to you in the shower is not so easy, but carrying a notebook with you wherever you go is usually a good idea. Using your calendar is also an option.

I think it's a good idea to write down your ideas no matter how crazy they seem when they pop up. The subconscious expresses itself sometimes in strange ways. Take dreams, for example. We seldom dream anything that is logical or rational, yet our dreams contain a great deal of valuable information. The same is true of a

lot of our ideas. They may not make sense at first glance.

Creativity consultants generally advise us to divide our idea search into two phases. The first phase is called brainstorming. This is the process of trying to come up with as many ideas as possible in a limited time period. It can be helpful to do this as a group. During this phase, criticism is not allowed. All ideas are encouraged, no matter how insane they may seem.

Only when the group has finished generating ideas is it time to begin the assessment phase. The group goes through the list of ideas and discusses their feasibility and discusses how each idea can be put into practice. Even the crazy ideas have an important part to play during this stage. Although unfeasible, they might lead to other ideas, and one of these can prove to be the best solution. In this way, strange ideas are an excellent catalyst to get us thinking in new directions.

It is therefore important not to criticize ideas during the first phase. This is true whether you are working alone or in a group. That is why I stress the importance of writing down even the crazy ideas. Some experts on creativity even advocate the deliberate cultivation crazy ideas.

Like strange ideas, humor also helps us to think in entirely new ways. There is a strong link between humor and creativity. Humor is almost always dependent on an element of surprise. This element can force us to think in new directions. I'll get back to this in the section on humor.

There is much more to creativity, of course, than what I have brought up here. I hope, however, that I have succeeded in giving you a brief but convincing insight into what an important role our creativity plays in the problem-solving process.

Random Words List

1 beer can
2 car
3 oven
4 sun
5 house
6 lawn
7 typewriter
8 Santa Claus
9 ice cream
10 underwear
11 poodle
12 hare
13 costume
14 bull
15 window
16 boat
17 water
18 milk
19 popcorn
20 strawberries
21 raspberries
22 birch
23 hat
24 hamburger
25 cake
26 lingonberries
27 train engine
28 pool
29 swing
30 race track
31 skyscraper
32 ape
33 island
34 palm tree
35 ass
36 stone
37 spit
38 pen
39 blood
40 tongue

41 snow
42 nose
43 potato
44 cane
45 goldfish
46 eyeglasses
47 rifle
48 jacket
49 wool
50 sand
51 carrot
52 shoe
53 mushroom
54 toe
55 eye
56 asphalt
57 antenna
58 organ
59 mangle
60 eagle

Solutions to the series of letters:

$A_{BCD}{}^{E}{}_{FGH}{}^{I}{}_{JKLMN}{}^{O}$

or

$A_{BCD}{}^{E}{}_{FGH}{}^{I}{}_{JKL}{}^{M}$