

Creative thinking can bolster bottom line

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We were asked to chart "our ideal vacation" on a blank sheet of paper. It was an easy topic, and the felt-tipped pens were soon flowing.

For me, places like Australia and New Zealand, and idyllic spots in Europe came to mind. My chosen activities include skiing, hiking, shopping and meeting new people.

Before this sounds like a personal ad, let me assure you this exercise was serious business.

We were learning how to be creative with the help of Fred Rosenzweig, president of Mindrange, a Montreal-based institute for thinking development. Executives from Discovery Channel and Motorola were participating in this particular session at the University of Miami.

Creativity comes naturally to some people. Others don't think they are creative, but once they do a few exercises, they are pleasantly surprised.

Often it helps the creative process to draw a visual "mind map," which was the exercise we were learning. In a mind map, you take a central organizing idea and build from it.

Mind maps can be used for strategic planning, help solve conflicts between departments, or apply to problems, Rosenzweig says.

"Nobody has really learned to think creatively. The more they learn the tools, the better they get at doing it," he says.

When we have new ideas, we may hear from others in the workplace: "That's not logical," "Follow the rules," "Be practical," "Play is frivolous," or "That's not my area."


We also defeat ourselves. "Very often it's not other people who turn you down, but yourself," Rosenzweig says.

Rosenzweig says our previous patterns of thinking often interfere. Logic leads us to doing what we've done before," he says. "It keeps us tethered to a certain set of beliefs. If we want to get beyond them, we have to scrap logic."

Some companies have formed structures to support creativity. 3M, for example, instituted innovation in its organization, which has spurred new products since the early 1900s.

Sometimes, to think differently, you have to change your paradigm or problem-solving system. IBM, for example, developed the personal computer by putting a team of workers in Boca Raton, rather than at IBM's headquarters in Armonk, N.Y.

Another example is Peter Ueberroth, who was charged with the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles. When the Soviet Union pulled out of the games within a few months, the



Olympics faced financial disaster. But Ueberroth used creative thinking techniques to rescue the games, according to Rosenzweig.

First, Ueberroth spelled out the existing thinking about the Olympics. Then he considered how he could escape from that thinking and developed a plan. Instead of depending on public sponsorship as past Olympics had, Ueberroth sold corporate sponsorships. He also engaged the nation in the games by choosing ordinary Americans to carry the Olympic torch cross-country to Los Angeles.

The result was record attendance and a first-ever surplus of more than \$200 million for the Olympics.

Rosenzweig gives a variety of creative thinking tools to clients. One is the "paramount idea." Determine the central idea and then consider how to escape from it.

Our teacher gives us this one to tackle: Canadian National owns railroads. What could the company do with its assets beyond standard transportation?

Our group came up with ideas ranging from clothing-optional cars to moving casinos. Not all the ideas were practical. After brainstorming, you mature the ideas, tailoring them to the business environment, Rosenzweig explains.

Provocative questions also can stimulate creativity. To get us going, Rosenzweig leaves us with this to ponder: "What is it that seems impossible now would fundamentally change your organization?"

What a great challenge for 2004.

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