

Try Thinking Creatively For A Change

By Rod Matthews

'But I'm just not creative'

At school, at university, and at work we are encouraged to think critically – to divide, analyse and, in some cases, to judge. In scientific subjects we are asked to establish a hypothesis, conduct experiments, observe the results and determine whether the hypothesis was accurate or not. Even in many of the arts, like music, languages and history, we are asked to divide a piece of music, analyse a text, and judge a historical development.

While this is a very useful way of thinking in some contexts, it is almost the opposite of creative thinking.

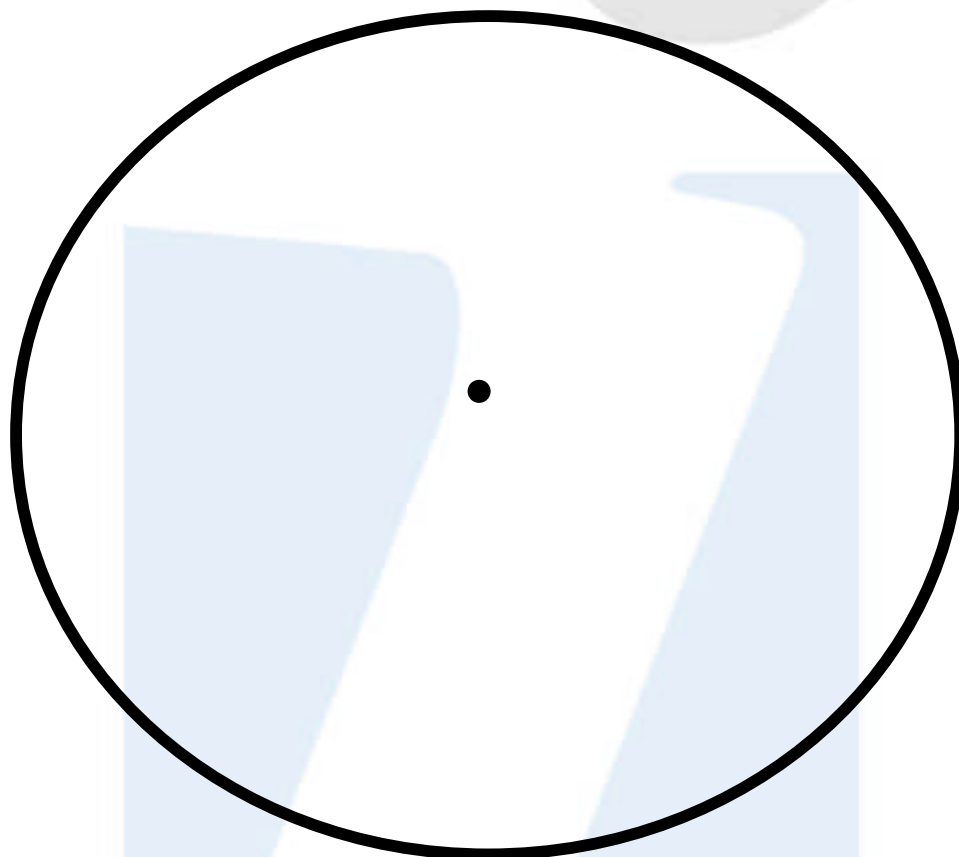
Creative thinking is more about linking than dividing, it is more about synthesis than analysis, and it is more about acceptance than judgement. These are skills that are difficult to develop in a school system that needs to assess, rate and mark, so it's not surprising that many people arrive at work thinking, 'But I'm just not creative'.

Creativity is a skill, and like any other skill you can't expect to be able to use it well without study and, above all else, practise. How is it that athletes become Olympians? Not by reading about how to be an Olympic athlete in a book, then getting frustrated with their under-performance the first couple of times they give it a shot, only to quit after having tried just once or twice.

In this chapter we can divide, analyse and label how creative thinkers think. It is up to you to put these techniques into practice and to stick with it long enough to be able to see their value.

Let's get started ...

For the next minute, without looking at the following page, try this quick quiz:



Reproduce this without lifting your pen off the page

How did you go? Got any ideas? There are a few ideas that people usually come up with, including:

- **Fold the page**
Draw the dot in the middle, fold the paper so you can move the pen onto the back of the page and then move it to the outside to draw the circle.
- **Use a retractable pen**
Draw the dot, retract the pen, move the pen to the outside and then draw the circle.
- **Lay the pen down**
Draw the dot, lay the pen down on the page and then move it to the outside and lift the pen up and draw the circle.

There are in fact over 30 ways of reproducing the figure without lifting your pen off the page. I kid you not!

To try and work out what they are, get together with a group of people and spend 10 minutes coming up with as many ways as you can to 'reproduce this without lifting your pen off the page'.

Here are a few avenues to explore:

- Photocopy it – place your pen on the page and photocopy it
- It is not a dot on the page – it is a dead fly
- Use someone else's pen and leave your pen lying on the page

In the space below, list all the ways that you and your friends can come up with in the 10 minutes allocated. Do this before turning the page. Remember, that there are over 30 ways so you can't afford to be fussy.

How did you go this time? Did you come up with more ways than you did the first time you looked at it?

Here are more than 30 ways to 'reproduce this without lifting your pen off the page'.

- Fold the page's top left corner
- Fold the page's top right corner
- Fold the page's bottom left corner
- Fold the page's bottom right corner
- Use a retractable pen
- Use someone else's pen
- Use someone else's paper
- Use two people
- Use two hands
- Use your hand and a foot to hold a pen
- Use your hand and your mouth to hold a pen
- Use a pencil
- Use a texta
- Use a highlighter pen
- Use lipstick
- Use blood
- Photocopy it
- Take a photo
- Take a digital photo
- Scan it
- E-Mail it
- Copy it electronically
- Reproduce it in a computer program
- Hold a mirror up to it
- Write the word 'this' in running writing
- Write the words 'this without lifting your pen off the page'
- Drop the page rather than lifting the pen
- Reproduce it in sand
- Reproduce it in wood
- Reproduce it in metal
- Reproduce it in plastic
- Buy paper with a dot already on it
- Buy paper with a circle already on it
- Reproduce it in your mind

As you can clearly see, there are quite possibly infinite ways to 'reproduce this without lifting your pen off the page'. Strangely enough, it's all about creativity!!!

Now let's examine what happened as we moved through that activity, because it will give us some insights into the nature of creativity.

When you were first asked to 'try this quick quiz', chances are you thought a lot of different things. For example, you might have thought:

- It can't be done'
- I know this. I've seen it before.
- I'm no good at these things.
- Oh here we go. This is one of those lateral thinking tricks.
- I don't care. Just tell me the answer.
- Okay, I'll give it a shot.

The thing is, all these thoughts lead to, at most, just one way of solving the puzzle. Even if you've seen it before, chances are you'll remember the way you did it last time, and be satisfied with that answer.

And yet something happened to enable us to come up with over 30 ways of 'reproducing this without lifting your pen off the page'.

The Principles of Creative Thinking

What we did was employ three key principles of creativity:

- Re-set the standard
- Two heads are better than one
- Allocate time

Re-set the standard

In this activity, I told you that there were in fact over 30 ways to 'reproduce this without lifting your pen off the page'. This dramatically re-set the standard, and in so doing, forced you to re-examine the puzzle in a new light.

If I had told you that there were only three ways, you would have had less reason to re-examine the puzzle. Going from zero or one solution to three solutions is not sufficiently significant to force a re-think.

The standard needed to be significantly re-set to prompt you to have a second look from as many different angles as possible.

Two heads are better than one

If someone only has one way of looking at something, we often call it tunnel vision. When we can see two positions on a problem, this often leads to a dichotomy – one position wins at the other's expense. We call a person wise when they are able to view the same issue or problem from many different perspectives.

Getting together with others has the obvious benefit of increasing the perspectives on the problem. Creative thought is thinking that produces many different perspectives. Sometimes we need two heads to help us get started.

Allocate time

In order to come up with over 30 ways, you needed to allocate time to think about nothing else other than re-examining the puzzle.

In our society, we tend to reward movement rather than thinking. People are considered productive when they are moving around the workplace with apparent purpose. People are considered unproductive if they are spotted sitting quietly, just thinking. And yet in some contexts, this could be exactly what is needed, rather than movement for movement's sake.

How to Think Creatively

So, let's assume that you have a puzzle, a problem, or an issue that requires some creative thinking. Let's also assume that you've applied the three key principles of creativity outlined

above and set aside time with other people to re-set the standard.

We now need to look at some techniques that will help us to keep the creativity happening for everyone.

The three techniques that we will look at are:

- Accepting the offer
- Linking anything to anything
- The Disney Pattern

Accepting The Offer

Have you ever listened to good breakfast radio, where the announcers seem able to be funny every morning?

What an amazing skill. They need to be able to come up with new material on the spur of the moment, material that has a shelf-life of one morning! How do they do this?

One thing that these exceptional announcers do is 'accept the offer'.

When they find a piece of material to use, a news item, a call from a listener, an article in the morning newspapers, they bounce ideas off each other without blocking. They know that if they block, the material ends, and they need to look for something new. So rather than block, they 'accept the offer'.

To illustrate this technique, let's say a morning radio announcer has asked people to phone in with examples of things their parents said to them when they were growing up that made little sense. Callers tell of how their parents would say things like *'I'm going to thrash you within an inch of your life'*, *'If John put his head in the fire, would you?'* or *'I brought you into this world, and I can take you out of it'*.

If, when the announcer hears one of these phrases from a caller, they block it, they sound something like this:

'Oh, I've never heard that one. That's a good one. Okay, let's go to the next caller ...'

There's no repartee, no humour.

If, on the other hand, the announcer accepts the offer, then we start to get the humour:

Caller: *'My mum used to say "I brought you into this world and I can take you out of it."'*

Announcer: *'Ah yes. I remember my mum saying that. Now what on earth does it mean?'*

Caller: *'I'm not really sure, but it used to frighten the life out of me.'*

Announcer: *'It sounds as though your mum was claiming some sort of legal right over whether you lived or died. So what was it like growing up in a house where you felt like your life was in someone else's hands?'*

Caller: *'Yeah, I guess you just sort of thought that mum and dad were like demi-gods.'*

Announcer: *'Demi-gods with strange powers, like cartoon characters.'* (In cartoon character voice) *'Able to know what you're doing no matter where you are, able to break a feather duster over your backside, able to take you out of this world at a moments notice ... look out for Supermum!'*

No doubt you can see that accepting the offer leads to more material, more 'lightness', if not humour, and therefore more creativity.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, creativity is more about accepting than judging.

It is very easy (because we have been trained that way) to judge ideas before they have the chance to breathe and grow. When a person, or in some cases our own self-talk, comes up

with an idea, our minds seem to have a natural tendency to look for faults in the thinking, flaws in the logic, to judge. This takes little or no skill, because when an idea is young, it generally has many flaws, so spotting them is easy.

We need to be able to keep our mind in check, and we will look at ways to do this shortly. We also need to refrain from saying anything that could kill an idea until we have taken the time to think critically. To do this, we need to use the language of acceptance in preference to the language of blocking and stopping.

Words that block and stop	Words that accept
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No • But ... • Not a bad idea, but ... • We don't usually do it that way you know • Too expensive ... • We tried that last year ... • Too theoretical, it needs more research • It's against our policy ... • Don't be stupid ... • You don't understand our problem ... • Let's be practical ... • Let's form a committee ... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • And • Yes ... and ... • What I like about that is • That's clever, particularly if we add ... • What about if we take that and ... • Repeating what the previous speaker has said before adding your idea • What would it be like if we included ... • I love how that incorporates ... • And then we could ... • What that leads to is ...

Linking Anything to Anything

If all we do is accept the offer, we'll sound like a parrot, which of course is not creative. So, once we've accepted the offer, we need to add something to it – to develop the idea before passing it on.

A technique that works well here is to 'link anything to anything'.

Have you ever had an experience whereby you have seen or heard two things linked together for the first time, and just seeing or hearing that connection has caused an explosion of thinking or emotion?

I was reading an article in a paper recently about autopsies of societies. I know – I'm a nerd! I've been a nerd for long enough now to not only not care about it, but to actually be comfortable with it. The point is, I know what an autopsy is, and I know what a society is, but I have never seen or used those two words together before. When I first saw them used together, I experienced a small explosion of thought and excitement at what, to me, was a new field of study. Wow, the study of why societies had failed – of what caused their 'death'.

'The time has come', the walrus said, 'to talk of many things: of shoes and ships and sealing wax, of cabbages and kings'. The linking of things that have not been linked together before is an example of creativity. Ancient civilisations mixed copper, which is a soft metal, and tin, which is even softer, to create bronze, a hard metal. Gutenberg combined the wine press and the coin punch to create the printing press.

This is a skill that takes practise and persistence. Just because you combine two things does not necessarily mean you will have a winner on your hands. Often, you will come up with nonsense, but every now and again, amid the nonsense, there will be one combination that is what you are looking for, and perhaps far more than you expected.

As well as practise and persistence, it also takes an ability to play with your idea before you decide whether to keep or discard it. For example, I opened the dictionary twice to find two words to link together. The first word I found was 'indemnity', and the second word I found was 'continent'.

Rather than finding reasons not to link the two words together, the secret is to 'accept the offer' and 'link anything to anything.' After playing with the two words for five minutes, I came up with the following ideas:

The Continent free of Indemnity – Late in the 21st century a growing number of people were becoming disillusioned with a legal system that seemed to focus on the apportionment of blame at the expense of personal responsibility. These people banded together and moved to a small continent where indemnity was outlawed, the advantages being that there were no insurance premiums, no whingeing, no blaming and, best of all, no lawyers. The disadvantage was that the continent was populated by people who didn't think before they acted and as a result, their foreign affairs department was a global embarrassment. I think there's a book in this!

Continental Indemnity – A new insurance product aimed at those in danger of being sued when their continent causes an earthquake that affects a neighbouring continent. Do you live near a fault line? Avoid being caught short by the next earthquake. Not only could you lose your own house, but people in neighbouring continents could sue you for the loss of their houses. For peace of mind, contact Continental Indemnity today.

Take the issue you are working on and define it using a variety of words. Then select one word at random from a dictionary, and link it to your definition. Play with these words for a few minutes, linking them in all possible combinations, and see what you come up with.

The Disney Pattern

If you ever watched 'The Wonderful World of Disney' when you were growing up, you might remember seeing a short film on the making of 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs'. It is worth a look from a creativity point of view, as it documents how one of the world's most creative people actually created things.

You will notice that, as well as an enormous amount of persistence, there were three distinct stages to Walt Disney's creative process. This has come to be known as 'The Disney

Pattern', and is now used by people to create everything from music, literature and art through to problem-solving and decision-making in the business world.

The three stages in The Disney Pattern are:

1. Dreaming

Preferably done in a small group, this involves a freewheeling brainstorming session to come up with all possible ideas, no matter how impractical they might seem at first. It's important to push the group past the first 'dead spot', as great ideas often tend to emerge just after that point.

Avoid evaluation during this phase, and appoint one group member as a facilitator to keep the brainstorming going and to regularly review the current position to stimulate movement past any 'dead spots'. This can be done by using the principles of creativity we identified earlier:

- Re-set the standard
- Two heads are better than one
- Allocate time

2. Grouping

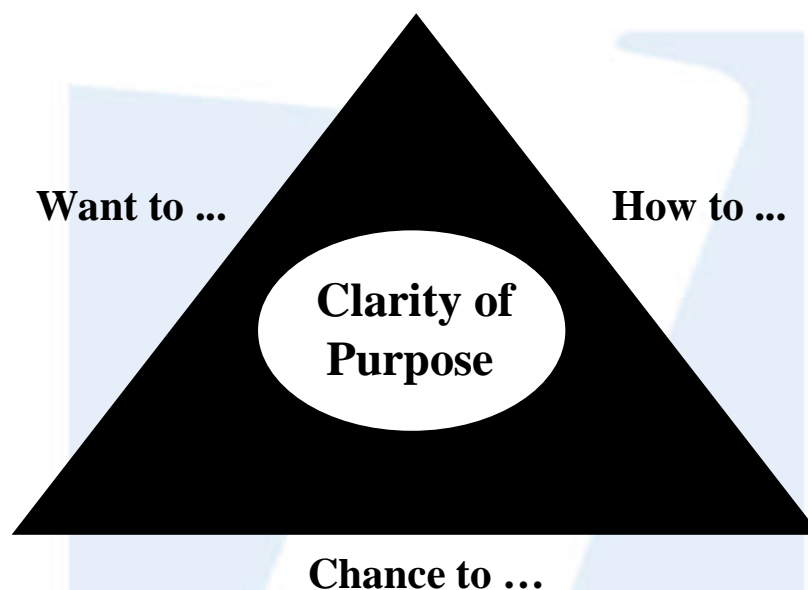
This stage involves simply grouping similar ideas together, and inviting the team to contribute to structuring some of these ideas and thinking them through by asking them, 'Realistically, what will we have to do to get this one off the ground?' This will help to clarify, structure and 'chunk' the ideas.

3. Formatting

Now we can evaluate what will work and what won't. The formatting phase allows reasoned debate about what might be feasible and what isn't – it is NOT an opportunity to tear apart all the ideas. It is also the stage where the information is sequenced. Think of this stage as the objective evaluator, unattached to any one idea, and able to see flaws and gaps in the thinking.

Creative Thinking is only the Start

Think and Grow Rich, by Napoleon Hill, is widely acknowledged as a classic in management literature. In this astounding book, Hill interviews some of the most exceptional people in history such as Henry Ford, John D. Rockefeller, and Alexander Graham Bell. The combined experiences of these people point to the idea that there are four primary components of exceptional performance.



Want to... the passion

One of the requirements for achieving significant results is that you need to *want to* – with a passion.

I can understand that you might be thinking, 'So far, so good. This is easy. I want to be rich. I want to have money to burn. And make no mistake Rod, I want it with a passion'.

The thing is, you have to 'want to' enough to do whatever it takes to create that wealth. Many of us want to do or have or be all sorts of things, but not enough to actually take the action necessary.

I know people who have attended numerous 'Wealth Creation' seminars - you know the ones. They're run by people who claim that only a couple of years ago they were destitute and homeless, living on the street and eating out of bins. Today, thanks to the secrets they're about to share with you, they're financially free, own numerous properties, cars and boats, and are right up there competing with Warren Buffett and Bill Gates for the title of world's richest individual.

Don't get me wrong - the information that they provide in most of these seminars will increase your wealth... but only if you take action! And that's the point. People's passion, people's 'want to', often runs out when the hard yards begin, when they have to back their own judgement, when they have to take risks!

We might hear things like, 'I'll invest in property one day, but not just yet. The market is over-inflated', or 'Never again. I bought a property once, but I got ripped off and the tenants ruined my investment', or 'I'll buy some shares in about six months time. I think the market is headed for a correction, and I want to buy at the bottom', or 'I want to buy some shares, but I need to do some more research on the companies before I actually take the plunge'.

Those people obviously do not 'want to' enough.

How to... the plan

Unfortunately, just having the passion isn't enough in and of itself. Suppose you needed heart surgery immediately. Would you hand the scalpel to your partner or dear friend? Unless they happened to be a heart surgeon, the answer is probably a resounding 'No!'

They might want to see you well. They might want to see you well with a passion. Sadly however, they are missing the 'how to' - the plan.

In order to produce exceptional results, you will need sufficient knowledge, skill, and expertise.

Chance to... the persistence

I once participated in a training program run by one of Australia's best corporate trainers, Colin James. As well as being an exceptional trainer, Colin is an accomplished artist. He was able to select someone from the audience and, Rolf Harris-like, draw a caricature of them that was instantly recognisable to others in the room. Very clever.

During a break, I told Colin that I really admired his drawing ability, and that I had always wanted to draw like that.

'No you haven't, Rod', he replied.

'What do you mean?' I asked.

'You haven't always wanted to draw like that. If you really wanted to draw like that, you would have enrolled in an art class at your local TAFE, and then you would have set aside three hours a night, three nights a week to practise. If you'd done that, you'd be able to draw every bit as well as I can.'

It's true. The TAFE course is obviously the 'how to'. The 'want to' is the passion and in this case, was obviously insufficient for me to take the necessary action. The 'chance to' was the persistence: the time spent practising the newly acquired skills.

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, if you do not allocate the necessary resources, time, people, etc, to the process of creativity, it will not happen.

We have talked about the 'want to', the 'how to' and the 'chance to', but the component that we have not yet discussed is...

Clarity of purpose... the direction

Significant vision always precedes significant results. There are many examples of the application of this principle. Viktor Frankl wrote of his experiences in Nazi concentration camps during World War II in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*.

What he noticed from his experiences, both in the concentration camps and later as a psychologist, is that the people who survive great stress and tragedy in their lives, the people who have left a mark on this earth, are not necessarily the strongest, the richest or even the fittest. They are those who have something significant that they are yet to achieve. They are not ready to die, they are not ready to give in, they have not completed their 'mission here on earth', their *raison d'être*.

Purpose is powerful.

If you looked directly at a 25-watt light bulb, you would not do any real damage to your eye. If you looked directly at a 25-watt laser beam, you could blind yourself. Why? What is the difference? Both emit 25 watts of energy.

The difference is, of course, that the laser beam is concentrated energy. It is focused on one point, while the light bulb's energy is diffused in every direction.

A complete definition of creativity encompasses two elements: generation of ideas, and completion.

In this chapter, we have discussed how to generate ideas. I would suggest to you that this is only the beginning. Creativity is not complete until the idea becomes a reality. Generating ideas is a common experience. Every day, people around the globe come up with ideas. Completion, by itself, is also a common activity. Every day people all around the world finish activities they have started. When the two are combined however, when a new idea is acted on to the point where it becomes reality – that is creativity.



Some things to reflect on...

Try thinking creatively for a change:

What are the areas in your life where you like a change ?

What is it about those areas that is satisfactory / unsatisfactory?

Apply some creative principles:

Who will you ask to assist you come up with some creative approaches to change the results you are generating in those areas? (Select someone who you are comfortable with and who has a playful and creative personality)

Set aside some time to get together with this person.

Re-set the standards by imagining there are over 30 ways to generate better results in those areas.

Use the 'Disney Pattern':

Spend 1/3 of the time dreaming and accepting the offer.

Spend 1/3 of the time grouping the ideas

Spend 1/3 of the time formatting the ideas

Making it happen:

What is the direction you could set?

Do you want to change things enough?

Do you have the skills or at least know where to start?

How would you know when you are giving up and when you are persisting?

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