

GET “CREATIVITY FIT” AND INNOVATE EVERY DAY

By **Dan Coleman**

Founder
Excelsior Learning

When you “Get Creativity Fit” you strengthen your creative thinking skills and anchor their use as repeatable, everyday habits. The outcome is increased innovation. The purpose of this article is to provide you with tools and techniques to strengthen your creative thinking skills.

Identifying, developing and commercializing innovation has been named as one of the top priorities of executives in a number of surveys conducted over the past decade. Organizations have invested heavily in a number of initiatives, including venture capital, best practice studies, field trips, incubators, innovation training, consulting firms and others, in search of the goose that lays the golden innovation egg. Yet despite significant investments, a high percentage of executives still report dissatisfaction with their organizations’ innovation productivity and results. If you ask executives what gets in the way of consistently innovating, they point to a broad and formidable list of barriers, summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Barriers to consistent innovation

Long development times	Selecting the right ideas to commercialize
Lack of time	Results don't justify the investment
Risk averse culture	Insufficient infrastructure, processes and coordination
Not finely honed creative thinking and innovation skills	Not enough marketing innovations
Not enough big ideas	Not recognizing potentially big ideas
Not enough customer insight	Can't measure performance well
Compensation not tied to innovation	Leadership commitment to innovation

These barriers are present at both the organizational and team levels. Switching gears to the world of SAMs and KAMs, these same barriers rear their ugly heads. To be sure, innovation productivity is required across the SAMA Strategic Value Priority Areas: (1) Customer Co-Discovery and Value Fit; (2) The Strategic Account Business Value Plan; (3) Co-Creat e Value; (4) Mobilize and Align the Multifunctional Team; (5) Capture Value through Negotiating and Closing; (6) Execute Value and Deliver to Customer Commitments and Orders; (7) Realize/Expand Value through Overall Relationship and Outcome Management. While all of these are important, areas one, two and three most likely require the highest need for continuous innovation productivity.



New ideas originate primarily from identifying and making new combinations (putting things together in unique ways).



In my work over the past decade with many individuals and teams, I've found the most innovative ones demonstrate the following five behaviors:

1. **They have a strong iconoclastic streak**, a healthy disdain for conformity, and optimistically believe there's a better way to do something, to create and to claim value.
2. **They get out of the cube, out of the office and the echo chamber** and immerse themselves in situations that will help them fully understand the unstated and stated needs, wants, desires and dreams of their customers.
3. **They are highly collaborative and not tribal** as they work up, down, across and beyond the boundaries of their own, their customers' and suppliers' organizations.
4. **They exhibit a "power of speed"** and embrace an unrelenting attitude, discipline and resilience to experiment, learn, prototype and adapt.
5. **They take calculated risks** and invest time to identify and develop non-conventional approaches, ideas and concepts.

• **P.S.** They also secure just enough resources to get the job done.

With the goal of increasing innovation productivity, I zero in on one issue that is fully in the control of the SAM and KAM: How to strengthen creative thinking skills and anchor their use as repeatable, everyday habits?

News Flash: We interrupt this

regularly scheduled article for a short discussion on creative thinking and innovation. We will return to the regularly scheduled article soon...where you will have six at bats to strengthen your creative thinking skills.

Creative thinking is the high test fuel for innovation

Creative thinking is "the development and production of novel and valuable ideas to solve key customer challenges." Innovation is "the implementation of novel and valuable ideas, concepts and solutions that solve key customer challenges." There are three key points I want to highlight:

1. The driving force behind all innovation is creative thinking.
2. Behind creative thinking are positive, repeatable habits.
3. If you want more innovation, strengthen your creative thinking skills and anchor their use as repeatable, everyday habits.

The power of analogical thinking

Although there are a good baker's dozen, plus two discrete divergent and convergent thinking skills, a number of creativity researchers (including this author) report that it is hard to overstate the importance of analogical thinking. When we think analogically, we *borrow* ideas from one situation or context and

force connect them to a different situation or context, producing new ideas, alternatives and combinations in the process.

New ideas don't appear out of thin air, they originate from somewhere else, and we are well served to prime the analogical thinking pump. Following are a few examples to underscore this point.

Bill Klann of the Ford Motor Company got the idea on how to speed up production of the Model T from visiting the Swift Company's slaughterhouse in Chicago. He *borrowed* the idea of butchers performing a specific task cutting up carcasses as they moved along overhead trolleys, and used it to visualize a moving assembly line with auto workers performing a specialized task.

Eiji Kakatsu, general manager of technical development for the Japanese bullet trains, faced severe noise problems with early designs. After listening to a lecture on birds from an aviation engineer, he led a design team to model the nose of the train after the beak of the Kingfisher bird. The birds have specialized beaks that allow them to dive into the water to hunt at high speeds with a minimal splash.

Steve Jobs of Apple was exposed to the computer mouse and graphical

window user interface (e.g. click, virtual buttons) when he visited engineers at Xerox's Palo Alto Research Center. He used this inspiration and insight, coupled with other hardware and software advances to make personal computers accessible, easy to use, and affordable. Additionally, when designing the first Macintosh computer, he borrowed the art of calligraphy he learned at Reed College and designed into the Mac. It was the first computer with beautiful typography.

These examples illustrate the power of analogical thinking. In each case the parties *broke* existing thinking and perceiving patterns and experimented with new approaches, combinations and patterns. New ideas originate primarily from identifying and making new combinations (putting things together in unique ways). So why can it be difficult to break patterns of thinking and perceiving, and to view challenges, problems and opportunities in a new light?

Resistors to analogical thinking

Most of us are prone to some degree to exhibit a stubbornness or rigidity in the way we think about, perceive and respond to challenges, problems and opportunities. We prefer to approach them in familiar ways. Social psychologists define this as cognitive, functional or perceptual fixedness. The following three resistors contribute to our fixedness:

1. We learn and are programmed to repeat success patterns and not to instinctively look for new patterns. It's at the core of evolution and biological reproduction. As it relates to blocking new ideas or taking action on them, we perceive that our existing ideas are good because we are familiar with them. As a result, the trap we set for ourselves is to view

new ideas, alternatives or combinations as inferior because they are unfamiliar to what we know, the way we know how to do and make things work.

Additionally, consciously breaking from what currently works is counterproductive to being efficient and getting things done. We wouldn't be able to accomplish much at all and literally get through the day if



Creative work and everyday work are diametrically opposed.

we didn't repeat success patterns. After all, we want our surgeon and pilots (to name a few) to perform their tasks the best way they know how, every time with no exceptions! No need to experiment on me, thank you!

2. Organizing for creative work is juxtaposed with everyday work. Creative work and everyday work are diametrically opposed. With everyday work we organize tasks, processes, structures and systems to deliver consistent, reliable and repeatable results. The goal is zero variance. It's what businesses need to do to make money. Creative work on the other hand is just the opposite. Variance is

the lifeblood of creativity, so with creative work we want to foster and accelerate variance. We want to be exposed to diverse stimulus to get the hot idea sparks flying. This forces us to break from habit, to think about, perceive and respond to things differently in order to make new connections.

A high failure rate is inevitable; in fact it's necessary. Thomas Edison "failed" over 600 times in his attempt to light the incandescent light bulb at an acceptable cost. This failure rate is highly problematic in everyday work (you think?). The skills and behaviors that enable high productivity in everyday work are in stark contrast with those required to discover and develop tomorrow's model.

3. Cognitive and perceptual fixedness are also rooted in our inclination to leap to conclusions and prematurely make decisions without first generating, developing and evaluating an ample supply of potential options. The tendency to make quick decisions and take decisive action can prevent us from taking adequate time to step back, assess the environment and experience a more complete picture of the situation.

If we diagnose a problem or opportunity based on symptoms that seem quite familiar, or continue to only use the techniques that have worked in the past, and don't challenge that tendency, we may not solve the central problem or pursue the optimal opportunity. Unfortunately, many an auto mechanic, teacher and physician (to name a few) fall prey to these tendencies.

The power of habit

Merriam-Webster defines habit as "a usual way of behaving; something a person does often in a regular and

repeated way.” It is something you do that is part of the way you live your life. It isn’t something you do occasionally; you do it all the time. It is habit.

It may seem counterintuitive to hold creative thinking and habit in the same thought. Creative thinking is about novelty; habit is about repetition and routine. What is routine is that creative people routinely think about and respond to challenges, opportunities and problems in fresh and unique ways. They don’t travel down the well-worn paths that the crowd habitually goes down.

In her book *The Creative Habit* famed dance choreographer Twyla Tharp wrote about “creativity being augmented by routine and habit.” In over thirty years she created more than 130 dances for not only her own company but also the Joffrey Ballet, New York City Ballet, Paris Opera Ballet, London’s Royal Ballet and American Ballet Theatre. She wrote that “creativity is a habit and the best creativity is a result of good work habits.”

Developing the creative habit is no different than developing any other habit. And like with any habit, creativity can be either encouraged or discouraged.

News Flash: We now return to the regularly scheduled article and get strengthening our creative thinking skills and anchoring their use as repeatable, everyday habits.

Get “Creativity Fit” and Innovate Every Day

Welcome back! I’d like you to zero in on the area where you have the most energy, passion and need to generate increased levels of novel and valuable thinking: (1) Customer Co-Discovery and Value Fit; (2) The Strategic Account Business Value Plan;

“Creativity is a habit and the best creativity is a result of good work habits”

- Twyla Tharp, choreographer

(3) Co-Create Value; (4) Mobilize and Align the Multifunctional Team; (5) Capture Value through Negotiating and Closing; (6) Execute Value & Deliver to Customer Commitments and Orders; (7) Realize/Expand Value through Overall Relationship and Outcome Management.

You will produce more novel and valuable ideas and actions when you work out and think creatively every day, no exceptions. You can’t increase muscular strength by talking about lifting weights; you have to lift weights (what a novel thought). And the same holds true for generating more novel and valuable ideas and actions. You can’t just think and talk about it; you have to work out to get results.

Following are six creative thinking workouts. Integrate these into your daily schedule (30 minutes/day) every day for the next 28 days. By doing so, you will:

- Generate novel and valuable ideas for your specific client challenge.
- Develop and strengthen your creative thinking skills
- Anchor their use as repeatable, everyday habits.



Six creative thinking workouts

1. Reframe ‘em. When you reframe ‘em you break thinking and perceiving patterns by restating your problem/opportunity from many perspectives (wide and narrow). Ideas follow how challenges, problems or opportunities are framed, so it’s good to be working from many. Some statements will be more useful than others, but you can only assess that after you have worked with them. Use such statement starters as: “How to...? How might I...? In what ways might I...?” Give the problem/opportunity statement pot a darn good stirring!

Let’s say for example that you zero in on the challenge: “In what ways can I/we create more value with the client?” Take the following steps:

- Identify and list the barriers (real and/or perceived) that are preventing/slowing down your efforts. Take each barrier (what’s preventing you from taking the action/solving it?) and turn each barrier into a specific problem/opportunity statement. Use the questions in Figure 2 to help spark your thinking and generate specific problem/opportunity statements.

Figure 2. Questions to identify barriers

What approaches have you tried previously and what were the results?
What does the data tell you? Not tell you? What is missing or unclear?
What data, details, facts and opinions still need to be discovered and analyzed?
What facts that emerge from the data are most dominant and why?
What are the root causes of the problem?
What do your gut feelings, hunches and instincts tell you to do about the issue?
What issues need to be challenged and improved – strategy, technology, people and relationship, organization structure, processes, compensation, rewards and recognition issues?

- Think about how other people might see the same issue and frame it from their perspective. Ask the questions in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Questions about other perspectives

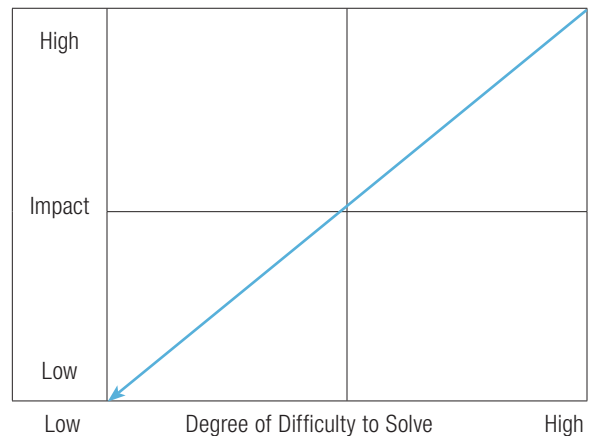
How would a novice frame this issue?
Who else has had a similar challenge/problem/opportunity? How did they view it?
How did they solve it?
Who else could offer a valuable perspective?
How might 007 approach this situation?
How might Steve Jobs have approached this situation?
What would be a perfect approach from the clients' perspective?
How could the problem solve itself?
What assumptions are you making about this issue? Which ones need to be challenged?
If you weren't constrained by resources, what approach would you take?'

- Identify the specific customer challenge you want to work on, and use the preceding questions to generate a minimum of 20 specific problem/opportunity statements. Example: *'How to bring more differentiated, unparalleled value to my client?'* *How to claim our current value to my client in a far more compelling way?'* With your reframed, clarified problem/opportunity statements in hand, propel forward and evaluate and select 'em.

2. Evaluate and select 'em. When you evaluate and select 'em you prioritize the most valuable and feasible problem/opportunity statements you have generated. Use the following steps:

- Review the problem/opportunity statements you generated.
- Give each statement a letter, e.g., A, B, C, etc.
- With each statement ask: "What do I think the impact will be when solved?" Then ask: "What do I think will be the degree of difficulty to solve it?"
- Place the letter on the matrix.
- After populating the matrix, draw a line from the NE corner to the SW corner. The problem/opportunity statements above the line represent your best options.
- If you have problem/opportunity statements with a high impact and high degree of difficulty to solve, generate ideas to reduce the difficulty.
- Hit the best problem/opportunity statements to move forward with.

Figure 4. Evaluate and select 'em matrix



The reason why is that the problem statements that fall above the line (in 3 quadrants) are all opportunities. Those in the top left quadrant may not have as high an impact as those in the top right. Those in the bottom left are easier to implement (see Figure 4).

The line should be drawn from the NE corner to the SW corner.

With your prioritized problem/opportunity statements, you have constructed a solid foundation to build on. It's time to diverge and generate novel and feasible ideas to address them. Burst forward and reverse it!

3. Reverse it. When you reverse it you break cognitive and perceptual mindset by identifying what you would do if you wanted to gum things up and didn't want to solve your challenge (using each of your specific problem/opportunity statements). Yes, you first generate the opposite of what you would like to accomplish. Then you reverse each statement and identify/exaggerate what would be perfect, what you would ideally like to accomplish. Use the following steps:

- Bring forward your prioritized

Figure 5. Reverse it

Problem/Opportunity Statements	Wrong-Way Ideas	Reverse it—Right-Way, Perfect Ideas	Tamed Ideas and Actions

problem/opportunity statements.

- Working with one problem/opportunity statement at a time, ask: “If I really didn’t want to solve this problem/opportunity, what actions would I take to really gum up the works? What are some very wrong-way ideas?”
- Working with one wrong-way idea at a time, reverse it to be a right-way idea. Extend well beyond current established boundaries (real and/or perceived). Ask: “What is the complete opposite of this wrong-way idea? What would be a perfect action/solution, one that would be ideal?”
- Working with one-right way/perfect

idea at a time, tame the idea to be feasible and actionable. Ask: “How can this idea be made feasible and actionable?” How’s that for some novel thinking? Put that in your pipe and smoke it!

- Now, move forward and hit the most promising tamed ideas and actions (see Figure 5):

4. Hit ‘em. When you hit ‘em you use a Decision Selection Grid (Figure 6) to select the most valuable and feasible idea options – your “hit yes ideas.” Use the following steps:

- Identify the criteria to use to judge your idea options and list them across the top row labeled “criteria.” Make

Figure 6. Hit ‘em Decision Selection Grid

Criteria					
Idea option 1					
Idea option 2					
Idea option 3					
Idea option 4, etc.					

certain the criteria you choose are as specific as possible.

- List the idea options in the first column.
- Working with one idea option at a time, moving from left to right, judge if the idea option meets each of the criteria. If yes, hit ‘em and put a check in the box. If no, leave the box blank. Follow the same process for each idea option.
- Once completed, review the grid to get a visual representation of your selection. The idea options with the most checks represent your best “hit yes ideas.”
- If warranted, strengthen the idea options with low ratings. These may be your most novel ideas.
- Now, move forward with your ‘hit yes ideas” and Use the Back of the Napkin.

5. Use the back of the napkin. When you use the back of the napkin you take the “hit yes ideas” from hit ‘em and cobble them together into an organized, actionable and compelling concept/solution. Use the back of the napkin questions in Figure 7 on page 70 as your guide.

A little drum roll please.... “The concept/solution I now see implementing is....”

- Now, move forward with your concept/solution and get fast traction.

6. Get fast traction. When you get fast traction you ask and answer the who, what, where, when and how questions to develop and execute a Get Fast Traction Action Plan to implement your best concept/solution (see Figure 8 on page 70).

Summary

The driving force behind all

Figure 7. Back of the napkin questions

What is the name of the concept/solution?
What is the lead news story headline?
Explain your concept/solution in one to two sentences:
What problem or opportunity does your concept/solution solve for your customer?
Who is the customer?
What is the central problem or opportunity?
How does the concept/solution work?
Describe in sufficient detail how the concept/solution works and how it solves the customer problem or opportunity.
What is the evidence that the concept/solution will solve the central problem or opportunity?
What is unique about this concept/solution?
Explain how this concept/solution is truly unique and isn't just "more of the same."
What is the concept/solution worth?
To the customer?
To you?
What do you estimate the concept/solution (or prototype) will cost (time, \$, resources) to develop?
Where is the quicksand?
Where could this concept/solution get sucked into the quicksand, get stuck or derailed?
How to avoid the quicksand?
What ideas are needed to avoid the quicksand?
How to test the concept/solution (or prototype) with users?
What elements/components of the concept/solution to prototype with users?

innovation is creative thinking.

- Behind creative thinking are positive, repeatable habits.
- If you want more innovation, strengthen your creative thinking skills and anchor their use as repeatable, everyday habits.

The good news is that creative thinking is very pragmatic and doable. It requires zeroing in on a specific customer challenge and integrating the use of daily creative thinking “workouts” to consistently generate novel and valuable ideas and actions. Thinking analogically, borrowing and adapting from the legendary hall of fame pro football coach Vince Lombardi: “Consistently [innovating and creating value] is not a sometime thing, it’s an all-the-time thing. You don’t [innovate, create value and] do things right once in a while, you [innovate, create value and] do things right all the time. [Innovating and creating value] is a habit. Unfortunately so is accepting the status quo. There is no room for the status quo. There is only one place in my game, and that’s [innovation] first place.”

Yes, I have borrowed the phrase from Lombardi and have altered it in a couple of spots. ■

Dan Coleman is Founder, Excelsior Learning and author of *Bursts of Fresh-Squeezed Ideas*. Prior to starting Excelsior Learning in 2001, Dan led national account sales and negotiation teams at AT&T and American Greetings and was a senior manager with Accenture. He will be publishing a new book on creativity and innovation later this year, *What’s Stopping You? Risks I Wish I’d Taken...And Still Can!* He can be contacted at dancoleman@excelsior-learning.com

Figure 8. Get Fast Traction Action Plan

What fast traction?	By whom?	By when?	Where?	What resources?	What measures?