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Bread + Meat = Sandwich, or How to Find Creative Solutions to Problems

The 4th Earl of Sandwich, an 18th-century English aristocrat, used to order his valet to bring him meat tucked between two pieces of bread. He was fond of this form of food because it allowed him to continue playing cards while eating. Whether this is considered history or fiction, it qualifies as a problem solved in a creative manner.

So, how do we find creative solutions to problems? Let's start with definitions. As most people do nowadays, we have checked Wikipedia and found that:

- a **problem** is a matter needing to be dealt with and overcome;
- a **solution** is the answer to a problem, and
- **creativity** is the generation of new ideas that usually produce original solutions.

Therefore, we may conclude that to solve a problem in a creative way **all that is needed is an issue that needs to be resolved incorporating new ideas**. Simple, right? Not at all!

It's not that easy because acting in a creative and original way implies navigating through unknown territory. We're just not used to it. Most people prefer to stay in their own comfort zone and repeat a known pattern based on what works and has been proven.

The challenge when solving a problem is to stop asking *what has worked in the past* and start asking *how it can be approached differently*. Experience does not lead to creativity.

If it were possible to examine a particle of creativity under a microscope we would find the following elements: **Originality, Surprise, Utility** and **Beauty**. These four elements

guarantee that a creative solution is easily distinguishable from others.

The sidecar was widely used in the 40's and 50's. This is a great example of **Originality**. It was a one wheel vehicle attached to a motorcycle, making it a three wheel vehicle with the ability to transport additional people.

It's not necessary to think about something completely innovative in order to cause **Surprise** (as the first flight by the Wright Brothers in 1903 was). Perhaps the challenge nowadays is to cause surprise with a product developed outside of its conventional limits. How? Relating, associating and recombining known ideas or processes in an unknown manner. In 2005 a group of engineers orchestrated by Steve Jobs started to investigate touch screens, leading to the first iPhone in 2007. The iPhone was – and continues to be – a surprising product.

Utility is simply the attribute of solving the problem.

Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. It is totally subjective. On the other hand, some studies indicate that most people consider something beautiful if it can be processed easily. It is beautiful if it is easy to see and to understand. Like the previously mentioned iPhone.

But... what does it mean to be creative?

From the outside, the creative process seems to be restricted to a few illuminated minds, eccentric people with mysterious behaviors and non conventional looks. Obviously this is a myth, since we all have the potential to be creative. On the other hand, few people care – or even try – to develop this potential.



Worse, there is a perception that it is easy to be creative, but...it's not like that at all.

Creativity comes with effort and hard work. Those who develop their creative skills, individually or in teams, normally follow a well established four step sequence. This sequence has produced such great products as **Business Class** (created when the airlines started separating full-fare and discounted economy class passengers), **cell phones**, **cable TV**, and **ATM's (Cash machines)**. They were not a brand new product but the reconfiguration of an existing idea. The methodology is as follows:

1. Gather Information

The process starts with collecting extensive information about the topic. Problems cannot be solved if they are detached from a context. Information is the raw material which originates the creative process. Information needs to be matured before being used.

2. Maturing

There is no such thing as immediate or instant solutions. It takes time to process and assimilate information. There is a direct ratio between digesting the ideas and a solid solution. As Napoleon once said, "Dress me slowly, for I am in a hurry", emphasizing the importance of careful preparation. Time and processing will also provoke the diversity of thought. Check this two-minute video reporting an experiment with a group of kids. The results accomplished in 10 seconds become surprisingly different when the group is given 10 minutes to perform the same task.

<http://youtu.be/VPbjSnZnWPO>

In our corporate reality, unfortunately we don't have the luxury of time to explore our creative potential. This is one more reason for you to continue reading this article and implement some of the ideas.

3. Inspiration

Matured information provokes other ideas to show up, wake up, come to mind, come out of nowhere... what we normally call inspiration. Therefore, the challenge is to shape it. The key part here is to be able "see" and "connect" ideas...

The development of Velcro is a good example of inspiration. After returning from a hunting trip with his dog, George de Mestral noted several seeds that kept sticking to his clothes and his dog's fur. He examined them under a microscope, and noted hundreds of "hooks" that caught on anything with a loop. Not surprisingly, others called him crazy during the 10 years it took him to develop his new product.

4. Articulation

This is the stage where we need to express the idea in a conceptual manner, using playful and visual aids, as well as metaphors and a creative narrative. The challenge is to find the correct way of presenting an idea. There's nothing better to help us with this stage than pencil and paper. You can doodle, erase, throw away and restart until you find the best way for you. Of course you don't need to be artistic to do it...You don't even need good handwriting.

Try using this methodology next time you need to create a new product, improve a process, get into a new market, or "simply" prepare a presentation. If used frequently, the following actions will allow you to maintain your creative muscle:

Keep the inspiration channel open

Ideas do not "show up", they are developed. The inspiring muse does not exist, it's nothing else than the spontaneous interconnection of apparently unrelated ideas which brings fresh air to our thoughts. Originality is the combination of existing ideas, seen from a different angle. Therefore,



the key is to collect information not only from trustful and known sources but also from unusual and weird ones. Start by connecting the evident ideas, and keep an open mind while searching for intersections, shared points, and the juxtaposition of subjects that do not relate to your problem. Think in and out of the box.

Be open to explore ideas that appear to be “crazy.” Abandon the superficial and the obvious and dive into a deeper level of connections and questioning.

Don't fly solo

Even the genius needs a team to fuel his/her creativity. Remember that Michelangelo worked with 13 other painters to finish the Sistine Chapel.

Keep an open mind to the diversity of ideas, styles, thoughts and behaviors.

Share your ideas with others, maintain conversations to understand how your ideas are being perceived and ask for feedback. As they say, two heads are better than one.

We would like to finish this article with the famous quote from Thomas Edison: ***“Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration.”***

See you next month. Suggestions are welcome.

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