

# CREATIVITY IN WORK IMPROVEMENT

by Dr. Ben S. Graham, Jr.

The Ben Graham Corporation

© Copyright 2000, The Ben Graham Corporation. All rights reserved.

Permission is granted to post, print and distribute this document in its original PDF format.

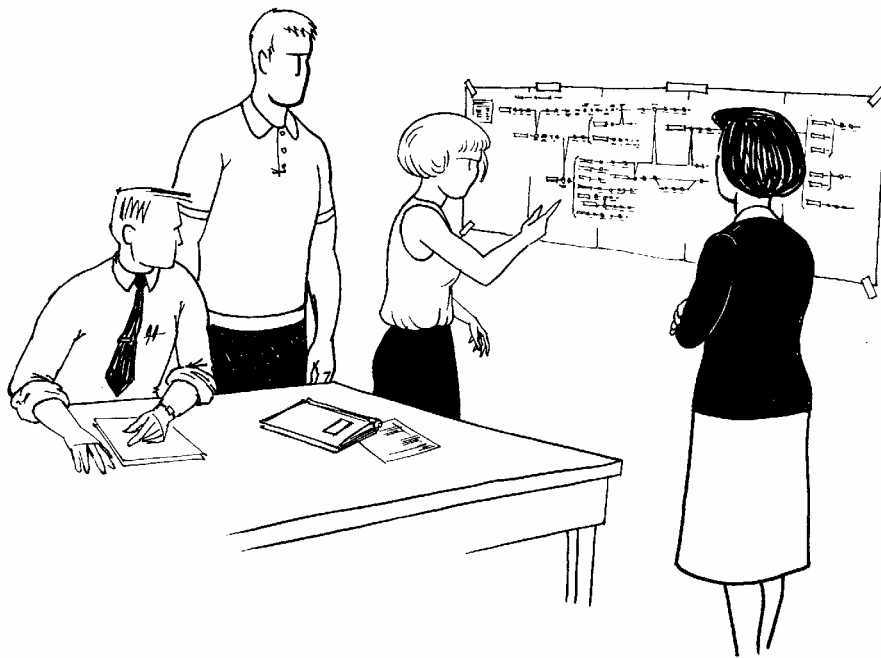
*People who are highly creative do things that make it easy for them to see creative opportunities. It is easily demonstrated that when anyone does these things their creativity improves. This article covers basic elements of creative behavior and includes several techniques some of which are general creativity techniques and others that are specifically aimed at finding better and easier ways of doing work.*

## Basic Elements of Creative Behavior

### *Creativity and Values, Improvement Vs Change*

There is a crucial distinction between the concepts of change and improvement. Change simply means doing something different and this requires no skill at all. **Improvement requires that our change leaves us better off and better is an issue of values.**

As soon as we consider the subject of values the question, "whose values?" becomes important. If we improve for the benefit of one faction to the detriment of another the side that benefits will consider the change an improvement but those who are damaged will not. To qualify as a legitimate business process improvement a change generally



needs to benefit four important factions, the owners, the management, the employees and the customers (sometimes referred to as clients, students, citizens, patients, etc.).

This is the major creative challenge in work improvement. "Win-lose" changes simply don't work. For instance, a medicine that clears the lungs while causing a heart attack destroys the organism, lungs included. When our work improvement blatantly rewards one or more of the factions at the expense of others, the pay-off is short run at best. For instance, changes that reap profits for owners and managers at the expense of employees and customers will hurt sales and anger employees. In time, dissatisfied customers will leave and the alienated employees will not do the things that are necessary to get them back. Organizations of every sort, private and government, can fail as a result of such one-sided change and calling it improvement or reengineering or reinventing or downsizing or any other buzzword won't correct the situation.

Instead, we should look for "win-win" opportunities. In fact we should look for "win-win-win-win"! The real challenge of work improvement is to come up with creative changes that provide better products and services at lower prices (or taxes) that in turn generate increased volumes and surplus cash flow. This makes it possible to reward all factions. The key to accomplishing this is to focus our creativity on doing the best possible job and not on getting a bigger share of the current pie. As for finding the creativity to do this, the key is to make use of the creative potential that resides, generally unused, in the organization.

### *Universality*

It is important not to confuse creative behavior with creative potential. Behavior is what we actually do and social conditions such as bureaucracy tend to restrict the amount of creative behavior that is actually done. Potential, however, includes all of the things we **could** do. And, almost all people have within themselves far more creative potential than they exhibit or are even aware of. We should not assume that a person who rarely exhibits creative behavior is a non-creative person.

People sometimes mask their most creative efforts intentionally. Certainly they do so when they are embezzling but it does not have to be outright criminal behavior. Almost every child learns early in life to pretend, "I didn't know." In an alienated bureaucracy there will be lots of pretending; dysfunctional creative behavior like defensive record keeping, fudging expenses, sleeping undetected in the warehouse, and beating the system in general.

In fact a great deal of highly creative behavior has a non-creative appearance. This happens in bureaucracies as follows. People in authority impose top-down decisions that are ineffective because they are out of touch with reality. The employees who are in touch with the facts are kept busy trying to make bad processes work. Eventually people get tired of trying. "Tee Shirt Philosophies" like "If it ain't broke don't fix it." and "Don't make a wave" take on an aura of wisdom that they don't deserve. People find it

easier to direct their creativity at avoiding creative challenges than at addressing them. Once this pattern is established people get so used to making excuses they fail to notice wonderful opportunities for improvement. Out of force of habit they wind up expending far more creative energy proving that improvements cannot be made than it would take to accomplish them.

A level of creative improvement effort evolves, in each organization, based on the improvement skills of the people and how much they have worn themselves out with ineffective improvement efforts. This level continues because the people find that if they do any more they cause flack and if they do any less they feel irresponsible.

All people have a potential for creative improvement. However, there is a self-fulfilling prophecy where lack of opportunity leads to the appearance of lack of ability, leading to further limiting of opportunity. People apply their creativity in those parts of their lives where they have the opportunity. For junior people in bureaucracies, this is almost exclusively off the job. On the job, senior people sometimes get the idea that the junior people (particularly in clerical areas) are not creative and they limit the exercise of creativity to themselves and their lieutenants. They justify top-down change and establish an elite who have the exclusive opportunity to exercise creativity and who operate at a distance from reality. And, thus they ignore a vast resource of ingenuity.

### *Appearances*

To assume that employees are not creative because they are not doing creative things is superficial. It is also superficial to assume that you can tell creative people by how they dress and wear their hair, by the language they use and the unconventional things they do. Suffice it to say that being preoccupied with appearances is standard adolescent behavior and growing up calls for focusing our efforts on things of greater consequence. Well-adjusted adults simply do not treat appearance as an issue. People whose appearance is very conventional may be extremely creative and people whose appearance is "off the wall" may go through life never accomplishing anything of authentic value with their creativity.

Similar to associating creativity with bizarre hairstyles and dress is a tendency to also associate creativity with mood. Some people are convinced that they can't force creativity and therefore they should wait for the spirit to move them. This badly underestimates our creative abilities and leads to procrastination. Unfortunately the spirit moves them as time runs out and the result is a rush job. We don't have to do it that way. We can bring on the spirit of creativity any time we want and the more often we do so the easier it gets.

People who have had a brush with psychology sometimes hold another superficial view of creativity. Having heard that compulsive people are rarely creative they assume that

any disciplined effort at organizing will stifle creativity. Actually organization and discipline are necessary if creativity is to be directed at worthwhile accomplishments.

The problem with compulsive people is not that they are organized. The problem is that they don't stop organizing. If they spend all of their time getting organized to do something creative and never muster up the courage to start doing it, obviously they won't get much done. But, that does not mean we should ignore the necessary preparations for improvement. The trick is to organize quickly and realistically and get on with improvement. The following techniques can help people to be creative effectively. And, they can be applied quickly, any time the need arises.

## **Pure Creativity Techniques**

The reason astrological forecasts appear so amazingly accurate to people who believe in them is not because of the insight of the writer. It is because of the natural creativity of the readers, who usually have little idea of how creative they are. The words that the astrological writer puts in front of the reader, momentarily shift the perspective of the reader who is briefly lifted out of whatever ruts may be channeling his or her life. For that moment, the reader looks at his or her life from the perspective of the words that have been supplied. And, amazingly (because the human mind is so amazing, not the astrologist) the reader finds a message that fits beautifully.

### ***Fresh Eyes***

Any subject can be handled more creatively by viewing it with fresh eyes. We can use a graphic presentation of it, a diagram, a chart, a photo, a model, etc. to view it with fresh eyes. The essential element is to step out of the rut of habit and gain a new perspective. Here are a couple of techniques for accomplishing this.

### ***The Yellow Pages***

Take the Yellow Pages and hold it by the spline. Allow it to fall open and then blindly place a finger somewhere on one of the exposed pages. Read what it says and use that subject as a starting point for discovering creative ways of dealing with the subject under study.

### ***The Think Tank*** (Dr. Edward de Bono and lateral thinking)

The think tank is a plastic ball that contains 30,000 plastic strips, each with an English word printed on one side. There is a transparent window on one side of the ball. When the strips are stirred up in the ball, typically 4 or 5 of the words can be read through the window and these are used to form a concept that becomes a starting point for discovering creative ways of dealing with the subject under study.

### ***Simply Stepping Back***

Artists have known for centuries that working on a painting too long leads to seeing what you want to see rather than what you have actually painted. There are several ways of avoiding this, each of which can be related to creative projects that are not painting.

*Simply Step Back* - By simply stepping back a few feet from the painting the perspective changes.

*Step Back and Use a Mirror* - While simply stepping changes the perspective, the effect of fresh eyes can be dramatically increased by using a mirror to view the painting. This is usually done by facing away from the painting and viewing it in a mirror held so that the painting can be seen over the shoulder. This little expedient reverses the picture so that, at least momentarily there are fresh eyes.

*Limiting the Amount of Time* - By limiting the amount of time that you work on a painting in one session you leave it and come back to it the next day with fresh eyes. Raphael worked on several paintings at one time. Each time he started with a different painting he turned over an hourglass and when the hourglass was at the bottom he stopped work on that painting and moved to another.

All of these efforts help to provide fresh eyes. This is the visual equivalent of getting out of the rut.

## Creative Techniques for Work Improvement

Creativity in Work Improvement (when it is constructive) is the action of finding better and easier ways of doing our work. It is not working longer or harder. It is working smarter. It is the biggest single factor that distinguishes between accomplishments that are outstanding and those that aren't. When it is done well in a hospital there is better health for the patients. When it is done well in a legal process there is more justice. When it is done well in national defense our nations are more secure. Wherever we do it well we benefit. And, where we do not do it well we simply live less well than we might.

### *Brainstorming*

The technique of brainstorming is one of suspending judgment while assembling ideas. Brainstorming is usually done by a small group of people, one of whom records the ideas on a flip chart while the rest simply blurt out anything that comes to mind without consideration of how effective or practical it may seem. As they call out one ridiculous notion after another it becomes easier to be non-conventional and occasionally an idea emerges that proves to be a jewel. Often it is so different from current practice as to seem nonsensical but on second thought it becomes obvious that it is an exciting and practical alternative.

### *The Questioning Method*

The questioning method is a more rigorous approach. It involves asking a series of questions about the steps of a process. Clear, reasonable answers suggest that the work steps are justified as is. However, when we ask the questions, "**What** is happening here and **Why** is it happening?" and we find no reasonable explanation, that work step can probably be eliminated. As we ask the questions, "**When** is this step done and **Why** is it done at that time?" opportunities for streamlining by changing the timing emerge. As we ask the questions, "**Where** is this done and **Why** is it done there?" opportunities for streamlining by changing the location become apparent. As we ask the questions, "**Who** does this and **Why** does this person do it?" we find opportunities to benefit by shifting work assignments. And, when we ask the questions, "**How** it is done and **Why** do we do it that way, opportunities for improving the way that step is done by work place redesign, programming, form design, etc. surface. These questions, asked in this sequence are bound to generate ideas.

## Summary

All minds are potentially creative. They act creatively when they are open. They are open when they are willing to step back and entertain questions. Having lots of questions is a natural condition for children and sages. Pretending to have all the

answers is a phony condition that thrives under social pressure and inhibits natural creativity.