

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

# Creativity and Problem Solving

In order to remain healthy and competitive, companies must constantly reinvent themselves so as to adapt to changes (economic, technological, cultural, etc.) that threaten their continued existence. The process of adapting to change boils down to identifying problems and generating solutions. Decisions about which solutions to implement are critical to the company's future and must be made with care. Just because a solution worked in the past does not guarantee that it will work in the future. A company's acceptance of imaginative and creative problem solving methods can make the difference between whether they will be successful or unsuccessful in managing change.

Creative managers and employees can help their companies to overcome rigid, traditional problem solving approaches. What sets more creative managers and employees apart from their less creative counterparts is their remarkable ability to solve problems. When faced with unusual or challenging situations, creative people are able to come up with innovative alternative solutions.

While creative people do tend to be smart, in general they are no more intelligent than their less creative counterparts. They do have a wide range of interests and they are very observant. This enables them to acquire knowledge in many areas. They are usually self-confident, though not arrogant. They simply believe that they have the inner resources to accomplish tasks they are faced with. Though they are generally good at working independently, they are also likely to enjoy and get along well with other people. They can foresee the effects of their words and actions on their relationships with clients and co-workers.

Creative people are passionate about their work. They are self-motivated, and are able to maintain intense concentration and overall absorption in an assignment. They are persistent; they can tolerate both ambiguity and disappointment. They can recognize and appreciate the way projects must flow or progress, and use this knowledge to organize the steps they will take towards reaching their objectives.

Perhaps the most important factor is that creative people aren't afraid to "think outside the box". Though this phrase has become quite the cliché, it does accurately describe the essence of creativity. Creative people know that conventional wisdom and traditional mindsets are not always accurate, and will consider a problem beyond the bounds of generally accepted solutions. For example, they work to break free of rigid categories such as gender-based role expectations. They would see nothing wrong with men becoming master nurses or women becoming accomplished neurosurgeons; both men and women are seen as potentially nurturing parents or teachers.

This unbounded approach is achieved by using a technique called lateral thinking, as opposed to the more commonly encountered approach known as vertical thinking. Vertical thinking is an logical thought process that usually yields a single possible solution to a problem. Lateral thinking, on the other hand, results in a number of potential solutions being generated for consideration. It’s as if vertical thinkers climb directly up the trunk to the top of the tree using the most commonly traveled route, while lateral thinkers investigate as many of the branches as they can along the way during their climb.

Lateral thinking helps creative managers and employees to generate new ideas, practices and business models. It was lateral thinking that led Saturn Corporation away from a traditional commission-based sales strategy and towards a salary-based system - a move that radically changed the public’s car-buying experience and rewarded that company for several years with more orders than it could fill. It was also lateral thinking that challenged the conventional wisdom holding that gamblers demand glamor and glitz of established gambling towns like Las Vegas, and that the quality of Native American life would
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be harmed by casino operations. Instead Native American casinos have made millions and the quality of life on many reservations has measurably improved.

Lateral thinking is not magic. Creative types who think laterally tend to use a specific process, or system involving a series of recognizable stages while tackling problems. Anyone can think more creatively by emulating this method.

The first step in creative problem solving occurs when a problem is recognized. Having identified a problem, creative problem-solvers then tend to immerse themselves in learning as much as they possible can about that problem. After this period of study, creative problem-solvers generally take a break and step away from their quest for a while, allowing time for their newly acquired information to incubate or digest. Taking a break from study gives the brain time to work with the information, unconsciously integrating it with other knowledge, and rearranging it into meaningful new patterns. Before long, and generally at an unexpected moment (perhaps while the thinker is exercising or is on the verge of falling asleep) the reorganized information will erupt in a flash of insight, sometimes called an "Aha!" experience and — Voila! — a creative solution is born. Once a solution has presented itself, the creative problem solver must write it down, and then work to verify the truthfulness and accuracy of their insight as well as whether it is possible or practical to implement.

**Developing Your Creativity and Problem Solving Abilities**

One of the keys to becoming more adept at solving problems creatively is to practice strategies that encourage and develop mental flexibility. The goal is to learn how to tap into your intuitive mind. Mental flexibility exercises are a valuable tool you can use towards that goal.

Some suggestions of ways to enhance your creativity and mental flexibility include:

- Practicing creativity-enhancing activities that require you to draw on knowledge from a variety of fields and sources such as working crossword puzzles
- Making it a habit to stay alert for opportunities. Don’t you wish you had noticed the need of consumers for overnight mail and package delivery, bottled water, organized closets, or gourmet coffee? Noticing these opportunities and being willing and able to act on them has made fortunes for various entrepreneurs.
- Using all of your senses when you are looking for solutions to problems. For example, what kind of look and feel should a display have? Would the addition of scents further the reception of your product? Should dealers be able to try out a product to get a kinesthetic sense of what the customer would experience?
- Keeping an enthusiastic, positive outlook. Creativity is enhanced by a positive, hopeful attitude; a critical, judgmental attitude limits creativity.
- Talking with users and consumers of your products or service whenever possible. If your products are sold through a distribution channel, stay in close contact with their salespeople. In this way you can learn how people are using your products and services and what sort of improvements they would like to see. At the very minimum attend professional conventions and trade meetings and talk with others who also work in your business.
- Making it a habit of carrying an idea notebook to jot down ideas whenever you think of them. Thousands of great ideas have been designed on napkins in a restaurant or jotted on paper in the middle of the night. The important thing is to systematically record your creative ideas and to be able to do so at home or work - even if that requires more than one notebook or computer folder.
- Try to look at information from different points of view. It is very useful to talk with individuals in related fields. Such talks may expose you to innovative ideas or strategies that could benefit your group or project. Also try to stretch your imagination by spending a little time every day asking yourself what-if questions, "What if "XYZ" happens?" (where XYZ is a problem you are worried about). Generate a bunch of ideas for handling a given problem first, and only then judge their feasibility. Finally, play the role of an advocate and try to come up with ideas that would help you in negotiating and implementing your ideas.