



IDEA GENERATION

BY EDWARD D. MILLER

Here are three myths associated with idea generation:

- *You have to wait for the muses to inspire.*
- *Logic will lead you to the best ideas.*
- *Some people have good ideas, others don't.*

The polite word for these common beliefs is “Nonsense!”

You Have to Wait for the Muses to Inspire

If you believe that, it's likely to be a long wait. You can—and indeed must—prime the neural pump to activate whatever muses reside within. Picasso, when he knew he was going to be using the color green in a painting, would go for a long walk in the woods subconsciously soaking up the shades of chartreuse until he had what he called “green nausea.” Then he would return to the studio and paint, his brain saturated in the color green.

Most of the effective techniques for idea generation force associations of things not normally thought of together. For example, the neural activator might be a metaphoric question: “How is a newsroom like a circus?” The resulting ideas are likely to involve three rings, clowns, elephant dung,

high-wire acts, or who knows what. This activation of the brain through association takes it along an unexpected and potentially creative path.

Logic Will Lead You to the Best Ideas

Not necessarily. Logic will lead you down a path of logical connections that link what you know about the topic. Brilliant ideas are the results of leaps out of that narrow path. More than half a century ago, 3M invented a new adhesive for industry. No industry was interested in buying it, and management actually ordered an engineer to burn the samples. The engineer took some samples home. There he observed his teenage daughters forming their spit curls with the stuff. Later, he persuaded 3M that what it had was not an industrial adhesive but a *consumer* product. That product became Scotch Tape. Logic is essential to problem solving, but for idea generation it may *only* get you halfway.

Some People Have Good Ideas, Others Don't

This is more mirage than myth. All people are potentially creative; some need different settings in which to exhibit that creativity. For example, some of us are *divergent thinkers*, people who seem to pluck thoughts and flashes out of the air. These “ideas” may make no sense or have little practical applicability to the problem at hand, but it doesn't seem to matter. As others are finding the logical flaws, we're pressing forward with more ideas.

Other people are *convergent thinkers*. They can listen to the endless babble and blither of the divergent thinkers and see patterns, connections, and associations. They can bring together silly idea #1 and random thought #2 and see a third idea that makes sense. The

strategy of idea generation is to let the divergent spew out everything they can, and then quiet them down as the convergent put the pieces together in patterns. The fundamental truth is everyone can play an important role in idea generation; it simply won't be the same role for everyone.

Here are five principles of idea generation:

- **Defer Judgment While Generating Ideas.** We are conditioned to be judgmental creatures. Consequently, when we brainstorm, we spend most of our time imagining all the reasons why an idea can't work.
- **Generate as Many Ideas as Possible.** Imagine a pearl diver bringing up only one oyster, rowing to shore, and opening that one to see if there is a pearl before rowing back to dive for another. We too often produce one or two quick ideas and proceed as if they were the only answers. A quota helps generate quantity. Thomas Edison had a quota: a minor invention every 10 days, a major one every six months.
- **Record Ideas as They Occur.** We overestimate how fast our mind works and how much focus we have. Write everything down.
- **Elaborate or Improve upon Ideas.** Edison did not invent the light bulb; his genius was to perfect the light bulb as a consumer item. He took an idea and elaborated on it. Later when Alexander Graham Bell announced his work on the telephone in 1876, Edison immediately went to work on ways to elaborate on it. Out of this effort came the phonograph.
- **Let the Subconscious Incubate Ideas.** “Sleep on it” is still good advice. ■

Edward D. Miller is the managing director of the Newsroom Leadership Group and an affiliate of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies. This article originally appeared in the free e-newsletter *Reflections on Leadership*.

TEAM TIP

The five principles of idea generation can also be useful for groups that are identifying issues as part of a systems thinking intervention. Capturing these items is the first step in creating causal loop diagrams and recognizing the balancing and reinforcing forces at play. For one method of moving from generating ideas to creating an action plan, see *Designing a Systems Thinking Intervention* by Michael Goodman et al. (Pegasus Communications, 1997).