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## Focus on Innovation

Focus on Innovation is a monthly electronic newsletter designed to provoke thoughts and ideas on how to bring innovation to life within the organizations in which we work.

### For Those on the Run

Albert Einstein once wrote, "The significant problems we face today cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them." The ability to cast issues within an even broader perspective will become more and more relevant in the expanding global marketplace. People who can move from linear thinking to "web thinking" - being able to look at business problems contextually, concentrating on the whole of an issue rather than its parts - will be able to make greater contributions in today's workplace.

### The Call for A Different Kind of Thinking

Remember the old western movies where the cowboy has to rein in a runaway horse, and manages to control both his and the runaway horse, successfully bringing them to a full stop? Today's business environment calls for an ability to be like the cowboy or cowgirl of the west - the ability to straddle both the strategic (the "big picture") and the operational (the details) simultaneously in order to solve problems and make decisions. Another way to describe this is to have the ability to be able to see the forest and not just the trees. This ability requires a different type of thinking: thinking contextually and holistically - that is, taking a more "holistic" view of an issue and integrating the myriad of facts that relate to it. Helen Fisher in her book, *The Natural Talents of Women and How They Are Changing the World (Random House, 1999)*, calls the ability to think in webs of interrelated factors and not straight lines, as "web thinking."

Web thinking requires breaking away from the old 'binary' style of thinking - the process whereby too many issues are reduced to polar opposites, e.g., good / bad, efficient / inefficient - to a more integrated thinking approach that causes us to look at a situation or problem from more than one perspective and form a coherent impression that synthesizes the different perspectives. This type of thinking may require a conscious effort. It is motivated by a desire to go beyond our dominant thinking styles and 'expert minds,' and to be open to new perspectives and possibilities.

So what are the attributes of a web thinker? First, web thinkers have the ability to connect the left ("scientific") and right ("artistic") side of their brains to gather, integrate, conceptualize, and analyze more diverse kinds of information. Second, web thinkers do not have one dominant thinking style. Web thinkers have the ability draw on and integrate both linear/detailed and holistic thinking to weigh more

variables, consider more alternatives, pursue more options, and introduce new issues and ideas to come up with stronger analytic insights and recommendations to bring balance and innovation to the business world. Finally, web thinkers have the ability to go beyond their deeply learned specialist thinking and behaviour and allow time and space to acquire new outlooks, and to learn new knowledge and skills. They have the ability to note details *and* the bigger picture, to employ formal reasoning *and* note previously unobserved patterns. They don't get stuck using their expert mind, and can thus see more possibilities.

The ability to web think takes attitude, habit and practice. So how do you develop and strengthen your web thinking ability? Here are some strategies to get you started.

### Strategies for "Web Thinking"

- ***Expect to be a web thinker.*** Just as many athletes imagine their success before they compete, you need to feel confident that you can think contextually and holistically. Perseverance also helps.
- ***Clear your mind.*** To make your mind receptive to different ideas, facts and perspectives, you need the mental equivalent of a blank sheet of paper. We need to get to a place beyond the boundaries and strictures of our thinking. Before you are about to solve a problem or make a decision spend a few minutes in a quiet room; take a brisk walk; or listen to relaxing music.
- ***See from a critical distance.*** Discipline yourself to see a problem from different points of view and to approach its solution from varied vantage points. For example, ask questions such as Who cares? Why does this issue matter? How might its value be clearer from another point of view? What limits are imposed, or do I want to impose? What is assumed or tacit that needs to be made explicit and evaluated? What would constitute adequate justification? Is the evidence adequate?
- ***Clean off your lens and look again.*** Many of us only see what is in front of us, while the most obvious things are often hidden from us. If you are stuck on one idea or perspective, imagine yourself outside the perspective; stand outside of it and look at the issue again from another angle. Imagine literally turning yourself around and facing the problem/ situation from another direction. Ask yourself, what does it look like from over here? If I were X, what would it look like from their perspective? Ask a 12-year-old child for their perspective, or try it out on a cab driver.
- ***Integrate your thinking.*** When faced with a business problem, put the issue in a larger context, as opposed to focusing on the immediate dilemma. Use divergent thinking, e.g., some form of brainstorming first to capture all data related to the problem - both pertinent and what may seem as extraneous or unrelated, and then use convergent thinking to apply judgment and come up with the best idea, response or solution.
- ***Practise the art of' problem posing.*** How can we go beyond accepting the given? One of the best ways is to rethink the problem, i.e., to pose a completely new problem. First, try to specify what you see as "the given," i.e.; list the attributes of situation. Next, for each attribute, ask "what-if-not?" questions, i.e., what if each attribute were *not* so? What could it be called then? Now use these new alternatives as the basis for a radical possibility, posing the problem in completely new terms, and finally try to analyze or respond to it.
- ***Apply the Six Thinking Hats technique*** - a technique created by Edward de Bono (Six Thinking Hats, Mica Management Resources Inc, 1985) that has you look at a decision from six different points of view. Each thinking hat - white, red, black, yellow, green, and blue - represents a different style of thinking. For a brief description of the six thinking hats, see: [http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTED\\_07.htm](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTED_07.htm)

- *Allow time for incubation.* Web thinking takes time. You need to purposefully take time away from the problem or situation and “incubate” . . . and you may need to do this more than once. The mind is an amazing thing that often works best while you are sleeping, showering, or driving your car. Have paper and pen at hand to capture ideas that come your way.
- *Regain your curiosity.* Six helpful techniques to do this include: be observant; look for the imperfections in things; note your own and other's dissatisfactions; search for causes; be sensitive to implications; and recognize the opportunity in controversy (Taken from Vincent Ryan Ruggiero's book, *The Art of Thinking: A Guide to Critical and Creative Thought*, Harper & Row, 1998).

## What's the Bottom line

To deal with complexity, to analyse critical issues, to generate innovative ideas and recommendations, and to make sound decisions, a new kind of thinking is required. Web thinking, the ability to draw on both sides of the brain, and to see the forest and the trees, is likely to prove critical.



Please feel free to pass this newsletter on to others.

If you would like more information about the ideas and topics listed in this issue, contact Judy Laws, Ph.D. at [jlaws@foursightconsulting.com](mailto:jlaws@foursightconsulting.com).

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