

BASIS POINTS

LITTLE THINGS THAT HELP YOUR BUSINESS GROW

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Welcome to Basis Points! Each month, Basis Points provides you tips and techniques that we've gleaned from a variety of sources to help better your business life. This month we look at "Problem Solving", and show you a variety of ways - some quite surprising - that accomplished individuals use to solve their toughest challenges.

The Freedom of Discipline

While it may seem like an oxymoron (think "jumbo shrimp" or "plastic glasses"), the most creative problem-solving ideas reflect discipline. No matter how clever or revolutionary your imagined solution might be, it only becomes real when it fits into your scheme of doing business, is embraced by others and converted into action.

Next time your team brainstorms its wildest and most 'out-of-the-box' ideas, remember that "unharnessed creativity" takes you only halfway. To complete the journey, it's essential to apply critical thinking and to rigorously evaluate every possible solution on its intrinsic merits. The acronym, POWER, serves as a useful tool to guide this evaluation.

Positives - What's good about the idea?

Objections - What's bad about it?

What Else? - Are there other applications we can explore?

Enhancements - How can its strengths be improved?

Remedies - How can its weaknesses be corrected?

Note that with each of the POWER questions, the intent is to fine-tune and improve, rather than to find fault with and discard. "Getting to yes" is simply another expression for "solving the problem".

Source: *The Think^X Productive Thinking Model*, Creative Education Foundation

"When solving problems, dig at the roots instead of just hacking at the leaves."

- Anthony J. D'Angelo

Socratic Questioning

One of the earliest problem-solvers was the classical Greek philosopher, Socrates, whose structured series of questions enabled his followers to fully explore and understand the key issues of the day. Socrates posed his questions to achieve one of six underlying purposes (shown below). To this day, the "Socratic Method" is at the heart of critical thinking. When you next tackle a problem, guide the discussion as Socrates might have: by asking questions that help reveal underlying meaning. You'll likely come to fresh new insights.

Purpose

To clarify
To probe existing assumptions
To discern evidence
To invite new perspectives
To consider consequences
To question the question

Example

Can you express differently?
What could we assume instead?
How do we know? Why is this true?
What's another way to look at it?
What will the effect be?
Why does this matter?

Source: "Critical Thinking", Richard Paul; 1993

Lateral Thinking

"Lateral thinking", a term coined by Edward de Bono, a Maltese psychologist and writer, is a problem-solving technique that discards existing conventions (i.e. logic) and tackles issues from the side, rather than head-on. Logical problem-solvers organize data, look for patterns and base judgments on order, simplicity and closure. Lateral thinkers look for gaps and incongruities. They 'zig' where others 'zag'. Look at the following list. Wouldn't you rather be a lateral thinker?

Traditional Thinkers

Think they know best (and often do)
Give directions and orders
Discourage dissent
Cherish results first, people second
Reward results

Lateral Thinkers

Rely upon the abilities of others
Ask questions, solicit ideas
Encourage dissent
Cherish ideas first, innovation second
Reward creativity

Source: "The Leader's Guide to Lateral Thinking Skills", Paul Sloane; 2006



Five Useful Ideas to Help Problem-Solve

- 1 Seek input from others.** Choose 3-5 people whose thinking you respect. Invite their input at two stages: identifying the problem, examining possible solutions. Purposely include people who aren't as familiar with the problem.
- 2 Don't look for solutions before understanding the problem.** Guard against bias: how one states a problem often, even invisibly, reflects a preconceived solution.
- 3 Try working backwards.** This is especially helpful when the goal is clear, but current circumstances are ambiguous. Challenge current assumptions. Accept nothing at face value. Remember: a maker follows a plan, but a creator produces a plan.
- 4 Start in the middle.** The time-honored order in producing a film used to be: idea, script, director, actors, studio, filming. Rearranging the process (i.e. start with an actor, select a director, commission a script) can lead to very different outcomes. Don't be constricted by conventions.
- 5 Change perspective.** Imagine you're a child. Or a visitor from another planet. How would the problem appear from this new vantage point? If this concept seems silly, remember that, in developing his theory of relativity, Albert Einstein spent hours imagining what he would see and feel when riding on a beam of light.

Source: "Introduction to Problem Solving", Robert Harris