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Creativity as a Problem-solving Tool

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Problem solving must become a creative exercise rather than a merely administrative or managerial one, in order to manage change with success. A simple method of first identifying the problem, looking at it from a different perspective, using existing knowledge and possible opportunities, turning ideas into solutions and then putting them into practice using innovation - can make the entire exercise more meaningful for the individual as well as the organization.

"There is nothing more difficult to carry out, more doubtful of success, or more dangerous to handle than to initiate a new order of things"
- Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527)

In a world where knowledge leads the way to success, creativity finds its place just a step behind the first one that is taken to acquire knowledge. It is not strange that creativity is most often the solution to problems even though modern-age managers and administrators might consider creativity to be an exclusive preserve of artists and performers.

But what are managers of today if not performers? If performers on stage, canvas or in other aesthetic surroundings do so to lend expression to their literary, moral or other innermost feelings so that they reach the outside world, the hope in some corner of their minds is that perhaps their performance will change the viewer or listener in some way, to make him a better human being. All creativity, in fact, has this intention that may or may not be expressed: of changing things in howsoever-small way.

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Today's managers, too, attempt to do just that. Managers can no longer presume that they will keep enjoying their perks and comforts without delivering. The demands on them are rising with every passing crisis, and more than a mere solution is required for diverse situations.

Since every new situation needs new solutions, initiating a new order of things becomes imperative in every environment - household, work place or industry. But as the Machiavellian saying goes, there is nothing more difficult to carry out or more dangerous to handle than to initiate a new order of things.

Initiating a new order of things, however, becomes much easier if a creative input is added to the initiative and the whole exercise is accepted as the next move in the whole, big game of settling problems. There never was a problem that cannot be solved. Daring ideas, Goethe is said to have observed, are like chessmen moved forward. They may be beaten, but they might start a winning game. The conclusion is: problem solving must become a creative exercise rather than a plain managerial or administrative one.

Creative problem solving is all about managing change with creativity by identifying opportunities and assessing them for what they are worth. Goals, whether in business, professional or personal life, must form part of a dream of personal or organizational success.

Going about creative problem solving is not something esoteric or compartmentalized: it has to become a part of life, every day, every moment. It is about thinking differently, taking an unusual view of the problem, getting involved and bringing accumulated knowledge to the fore, so that it can be used effectively. The method applies to individuals as well as organizations of all kinds, in every kind of environment.

Making a difference

Right from step one -- identifying a problem rather than brushing it under the carpet - the intention should be to make a difference. Even if others have identified a problem earlier, your approach should be different. For example, if all others view a problem as having its genesis in inefficiency of the staff, why can't you view it as being a result of weakness of the infrastructure? Or perhaps, think about it as having the wrong person at the right place? The solution, then, can be easy to find.

It is important to generate views that make a tangible difference to the way an organisation does its business, or lead to important changes in both daily life and work, including dealing with complex issues or every day problems be they short-term or long-term challenges to the individual or the organization. Such ideas are possible if a creative approach is adopted to even mundane issues.

Using creative talent helps focus your thinking constructively and promotes team work, collaboration and diversity in any setting. By considering possible opportunities and challenges, one can identify a constructive goal to pursue.

It is not very difficult to go about promoting creative thinking in your work place. What one needs to do is to learn to look for information and data, adding to one's knowledge base. This can be achieved by reading, talking to people and colleagues on a cross-disciplinary

basis and analyse available information and data from different viewpoints, focusing on the most important elements of the task or situation. This means considering what you know, what you need to know, who needs to know it and getting to the heart of the matter you are dealing with.

After this assimilation and being richer in knowledge, the next step is to frame a problem. It is important to even conceptualise a problem, from different contexts, and try to get an answer by using the "how we can" approach rather than "we cannot because" approach.

The next logical step is to search for ideas. The ideas can be varied, extraordinary or unusual, developed from a new perspective and then focus your thinking by identifying ideas with potential to refine, develop and put to use. The next obvious step is to develop solutions using and applying variously the available tools, situations, human resource, infrastructure and, most importantly, time.

Needless to say, it will only be the practical and reliable tools to turn "good ideas" into viable solutions. Simultaneously, it must be kept in mind to acknowledge resistance and practical difficulties in the way of putting ideas into practice. The need is to build support and develop conviction through realistic ways to carry out and evaluate the results and their effectiveness.

The widest acceptance of solutions thus created will help implement ideas more successfully. A maximisation of resources through correct application for the scenario at hand will eventually lead to increased chances of success.

However, it needs to be kept in mind that creativity - coming up with new ideas - is not enough. We need innovation - the taking of new or existing ideas and putting them into action. This requires the application of existing knowledge and the development of appropriate new knowledge.

The way to success

This brings us back to where we began: knowledge leads the way to success.

It is an undeniable fact that despite the widespread availability of information, most managers do not give enough time or importance to acquiring knowledge - be it through reading, discussions, using the database on the Internet or even in-house references. Creativity often is misunderstood for trying out new ideas without considering existing knowledge, on the basis of which new and appropriate knowledge could (and should) be developed.

In one oft-used quotation, David Birchall says "You can be creative without being innovative but you can't be innovative without being creative." The meaning is very simple: creativity lies at the heart of innovation. Innovation owes its emergence to thinking differently, which pre-supposes acknowledgement of all existing thoughts and ideas. Where do these "existing" ideas come from? These come from the vast resource of available information. It is important to first take all available solutions into mind because, often, just slight modifications or change in perception in the existing solution means a world of difference, and unexpected results.

Creativity and innovation are at the cutting edge of knowledge management. Our challenge today is to build effective technology-based systems that support us in making knowledge productive and take into account the ways in which we think and behave.

Among the examples of how creative thinking can be used to arrive at a conclusion is positive thinking at times of a problem. It means that one has to visualize at the outset itself that no problem is insurmountable. There has to be a conviction that a solution to the problem at hand actually exists and it is a matter of time that it would be found.

Visualization of a problem thus leads to the next step of looking at it from all directions, so as to break into its essential components. Often imaginary situations and factors are presumed to be parts of a problem, especially reactions of co-workers or superiors. But more often than not, what others are interested in is a solution, not its perpetuation.

Though it sounds simple, but using the simple technique of listing down the various factors on a paper pad is the most effective means of letting your brain work over it constantly, for the impression of the written word has a more lasting value than spoken words. Reviewing of these notes periodically gives a fresh perspective each time, and therefore, leads us closer to the solution.

A classic example often quoted in this regard is the emergence of Japanese watch industry. The Swiss watch-makers, masters undoubtedly in the analogue technique, could not look beyond this technology and looked with disdain at the digital technology. Obviously, they could not look beyond what was in front of their eyes, whereas the Japanese grabbed the new technology and reached new heights of success in the industry.

A realistic assessment of what can be done and what cannot be done is important so that achievable time lines can be established for achieving success. There is no need to lay down imaginary schedules for oneself, but it is important to stick to whatever schedule has been laid down. If you don't have time to impart a creative touch to your work, then hire someone to either do it for you, or to look your work over and then talk about it with you. It is amazing how often people who think they aren't creative can come up with good ideas when they bounce ideas off of someone who is innovative, non-judgmental, and enthusiastic.

Another important thing is to take a few moments off from whatever one is doing and then notice small things around you. Remember how even an apparently-inane piece of information you read in a magazine while waiting for your turn at the dentist's parlour remains buried in some corner of your mind, and comes handy when you least expect it. Or how a simple ditty has the words that hide the answer to some of your simple day-to-day queries. It is important to encourage this inexpensive habit to make your entire thinking process more creative.

Towards the end, it is important to remember the movement of creative and innovative thinking unleashed by Dr Edward de Bono, regarded as an authority in the field of creative thinking and the teaching of thinking as a skill. He has shown that creativity is a component of behaviour in a self-organising information system. His key book, 'The Mechanism of Mind' published in 1969, showed how network of nerves in the brain formed asymmetric patterns as the basis of perception. Leading physicist Prof. Murray Gell Mann, is on record having said that this book was ten years ahead of mathematicians dealing with chaos theory, non-linear and self-organising systems.

If nature itself has devised our brains to think creatively and innovatively, it is but natural that we encourage this process and emerge a winner in all situations.