



**The Chartered Management Institute's Short Course Programme
in association with ProSeminar**

Turning on your creativity

Philip Moon explores the 'Creative Thinking Process'

Got a management problem? Need to identify new business opportunities or ways of doing things? Got a report to write, a presentation to make or a training course to run? If so, you'll be wanting to harness your creative thinking capacity to generate new and effective ideas. In this article Philip Moon looks at the creative thinking process and how it needs to be combined with the rigour of analytical thinking to equip managers and professionals with practical tools for problem solving.

The starting point for enhancing creativity is to recognise that we've all got it and got it in greater abundance than we give ourselves credit for. Albert Einstein declared '*Imagination is more important than knowledge*'. He probably meant that there are many people who know about a subject, but few who can think about it imaginatively. Clearly problem solving requires both imagination and knowledge. Einstein saw imagination as the rarer, and therefore the more valuable, commodity but there is creative capacity in each of us – what we have to do is use it.

But don't wait around for the spark of creativity to strike. Remember Thomas Edison's oft-quoted '*Genius is 1% inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration*'. This doesn't just mean that there's a lot of work to do once you've had your bright idea in order to turn it into a practical reality, it means that you've also got to expect to do at least some work before the bright idea strikes. Great ideas don't just come out of thin air - intuition isn't magic.

Short Course for Management & Professional Development

www.proseminar.co.uk info@proseminar.co.uk

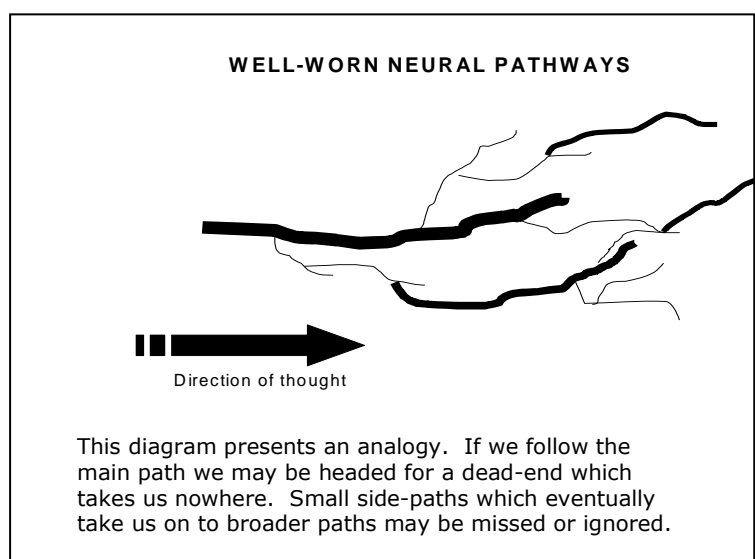
The Creative Problem Solving Process

- Immersion
- Incubation
- Inspiration
- Exploration
- Implementation

Neither do your best ideas come when you're in the midst of working on a problem. They come when you step back from it and your conscious mind relaxes. Your unconscious can then take over in its own quiet and unobtrusive way. That's why your best ideas often come when you're out walking the dog, having a bath, going for a jog or arrive as a flash of inspiration in the middle of the night.

Two valuable tips for creative thinking come from this recognition. First: work on the problem (immerse yourself in it) - don't put it off in the hope that inspiration will strike. Secondly: don't push too hard to get a solution too soon - allow time for 'incubation'. Too often, particularly in meetings, there's a drive to get everything done, dusted and tied up. Sometimes it's worth saying *'Okay we've explored the problem, now let's leave it for a while'*. I know that I've agreed a way of doing something, only to find the next day (and too late to make the case) that a much better idea strikes.

Why do these creative ideas come when we switch off and how can we use this power when we need to 'force' the creative process? A major constraint on creativity is that the conscious mind often finds itself following the trammels of 'well-worn neural pathways'.



At the neuro-physiological level the thought process is constituted by electro-chemical interactions between the various cell neurons of the brain. The number of cell neurons in the brain is huge and the number of possible interconnections is even vaster.

Put simply, this means that one idea leads to another. Unfortunately if we let our ideas flow too freely we'd never be able to concentrate on anything, so we teach our conscious mind to constrain the process – *'that's not relevant'; 'that's not the way to go'*. When our conscious mind relaxes our thoughts become less constrained and more random. Consider how your mind seems to wander as you drift off to sleep or how your dreams quickly move from one loosely connected scenario to another.

For creative thinking we need to use techniques which loosen the constraints and allow our minds to generate new connections. One of the best-known (but often inappropriately practised) techniques is brainstorming. Correctly practised, brainstorming involves freewheeling, recording every idea, suspending judgement and going for quantity rather than quality.

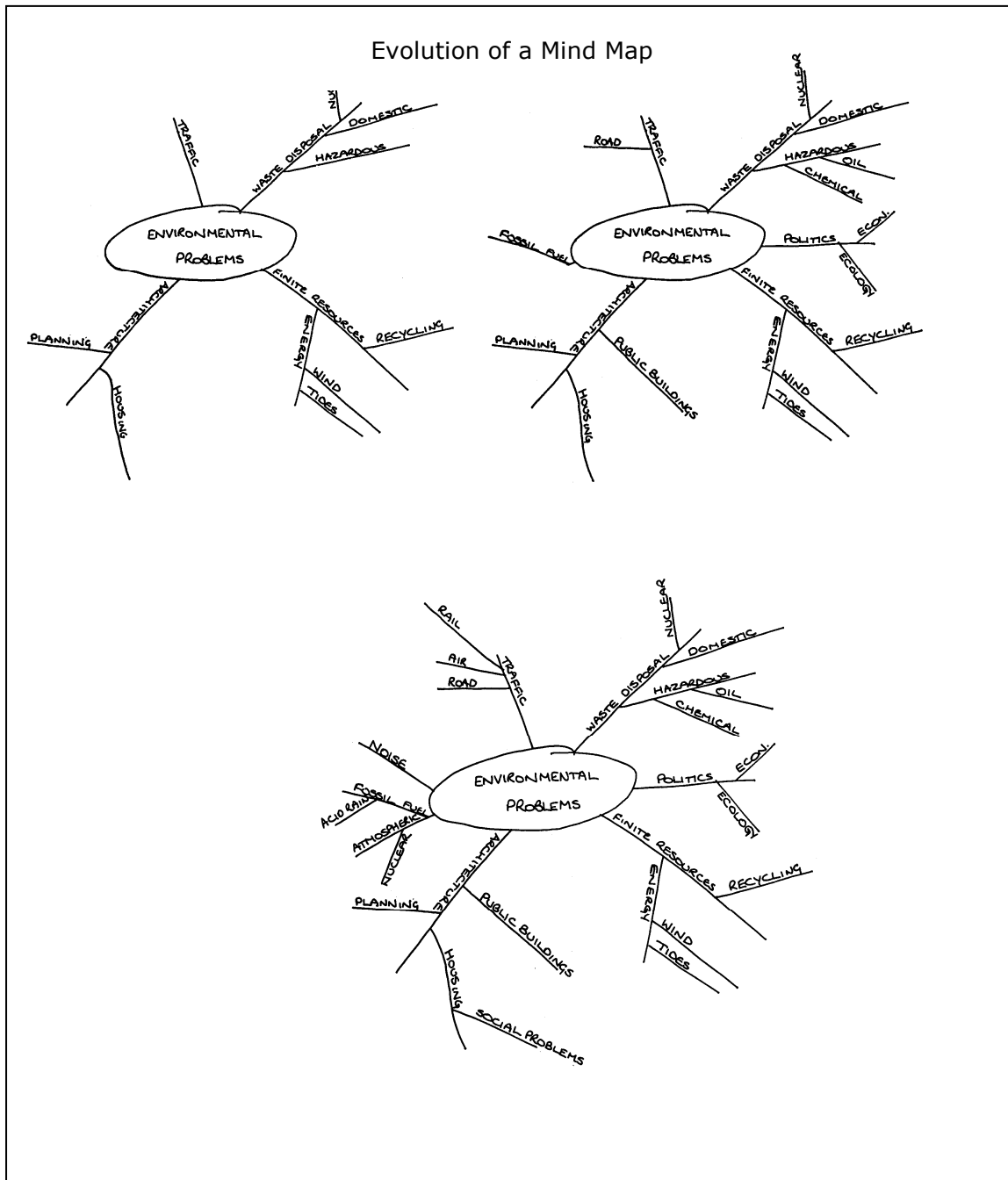
Another well-known technique is Mind Mapping™, popularised originally by Tony Buzan. Mind mapping allows the mind to wander as one idea leads to another while providing a structure into which the ideas can be fitted. This allows ideas to spark in different directions thus overcoming the constraints of traditional linear thinking.

Mind mapping can be used for a variety of purposes from study notes to meeting notes. It's often a very good starting technique when faced with the problem of having to write a report or article, carry out a piece of research, or develop a presentation or training course. When I was first asked to design and present a course on 'Creative Problem Solving', I found the technique extremely fruitful. My immediate reaction to the request was *'I don't know anything about this'* but suppressing this thought I had a go at doing a mind map. I was really quite surprised by how much I knew and the range of dimensions to the subject I could develop. The mind map also threw up areas for further research.

The principle of allowing ideas to flow in a more random way also lies behind the lateral thinking techniques popularised by Edward De Bono. Lateral thinking is literally approaching a problem from the side (different angle) rather than hitting the problem head on.

With groups, random stimulation techniques can be used to facilitate this process by getting the mind to think along less conventional routes. One technique is to open a dictionary or a

magazine at random to choose a word and then to generate all the associations the word provides. This can provide a kind of creative break and, on returning to the 'real' problem, facilitates a flow of new relevant ideas. A variation can be to choose two words at random and try to make as many links as possible. A picture, selected at random from a magazine, can be used in much the same way.



Another variation is to prepare a series of (say 20-30) picture cards – large post card size. This can be done quite easily using clip art. Ask three members of the group each to select a card blindly. Stick the three selected cards onto a flipchart each at the head of a column. Ask the group to generate associated ideas under each column. Once the flip chart is filled, introduce the problem/issue you want the group to address and then ask them to make linkages from the words on the list to the problem now being explored.

Group working, particularly combining people with different backgrounds and perspectives can be a useful way of creating innovative approaches to old problems. Unfortunately group working can often fall prey to some of the negative aspects of group dynamics, particularly the dangers of 'group-think'. This describes the process when an idea put forward by one particularly dominant member of the group gains acceptance without being properly examined. Individuals perhaps feel a bit intimidated, don't feel confident (or safe) enough to express a contrary view or don't want to rock the boat. They take everyone else's silence as agreement and, not wishing to be the odd-one-out, keep mum. *'Everyone else seems to think it's the way to go, so why should I go against the consensus'*. The danger is that each of the other members of the group may be thinking something very similar. Rather like Hans Christian Anderson's story of the Emperor's clothes. No one wanted to be the one to tell the Emperor the truth that his clothes weren't magic and that he was actually stark naked.

A conflict of ideas, as opposed to a conflict between people, is a healthy part of the problem solving process. To facilitate this it's useful to have a shared understanding of De Bono's concept of 'thinking hats'. His six hats – white, red, yellow, green, black and blue – each symbolise a different thinking mode. The white hat, for instance, relates to taking a neutral look at facts and data, while the yellow hat is for supporting and building on an idea. Most important from the point of view of this discussion are the red and black hats. The red hat is for legitimising intuitive thinking - allowing participants the protection of raising ideas without necessarily having supporting data or clearly worked out reasoning. The black hat allows for, and legitimises dissent, or even encourages it. *'Let me put my black hat on here'* provides an opportunity for an individual to play the Devil's Advocate. If no one seems to be in disagreement, it can be wise to invite group members to put on their black hats to explore and identify potential problems with a proposed solution.

The danger of group-think means that it can be valuable to use techniques which allow individuals to use their creativity before pooling ideas with others. An example of this is a tech-

nique sometimes called 'Post-It's™ on the Wall'. This involves distributing yellow sticky notes to all assembled, presenting the problem and asking each individual to write their ideas on to a note. Each idea should be written on a separate note and participants should be encouraged to produce at least five or six ideas each. Once this stage is completed, one individual should be invited to post their notes on the wall, creating a separate site for each different set of ideas. A second person can then be invited to add their ideas to the established sites and to create new sites as necessary. A third or fourth person can be invited to repeat the process and then the rest can be mobilised to follow suit. After a little tidying by the facilitator, small sub-groups can be allocated to each site and asked to explore the ideas further and report back. Thus the independent flow of an individual's thinking is combined with the group discussion to hone and develop the ideas towards making practical recommendations.

Practical recommendations depend on blending creative with analytical and action thinking. Many innovative ideas get nowhere because they are inadequately refined and the route to implementation is not made sufficiently explicit. This involves the second instalment of Edison's 'perspiration'. Once you've had a bright idea, test it. What are its limitations, what objections might be raised? Then think creatively to get round these difficulties so that your ideas are not so likely to be shot down by a sceptical audience or management committee. Lay out the action that will need to be taken if the idea is to be implemented, provide schedules and costings - make the decision process easy for those you have to persuade.

The bottom line? Turn on your creativity but don't turn off the other thinking modes you need for successful problem solving.

Philip Moon is a ProSeminar's Managing Director and course tutor for 'Creative Thinking & Problem Solving'. This two-day course is available on an in-company basis – further details on request.