

# THE IDEA GENERATOR

Tools for business growth

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## INTRODUCTION

The business world is moving at an ever-increasing pace. Product life cycles are getting shorter and shorter. Consumers and retailers want better products, sooner. Shareholders demand higher performance and faster results. Employees expect a better work/life balance and want their bosses to act in a responsible and sustainable way.

But just as managers are facing these spiralling pressures they are being given fewer people, a smaller budget and, perhaps most importantly, less time. As a result, many managers and leaders feel stranded or 'stuck'. They know intuitively that what has worked in the past will no longer work in the future. Their business school education no longer equips them with the tools to address the realities of a changing marketplace.

The biggest challenge is to look at these issues from a fresh perspective. For example, by redefining the circus experience, the Canadian troupe Cirque De Soleil has been able to achieve great success. It was not bound by what a circus had been, but what it could be.

I call this process 'becoming unstuck'—moving beyond a rigid view to a more dynamic and productive one. Changing your mindset enables you to out-think and out-imagine your

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competition. And to achieve this goal you need a new set of tools.

### Stuck

- Trapped by precedent
- Incremental growth
- Familiar ideas and solutions
- Career blockage

### Unstuck

- Set free by imagination
- Non-linear growth
- Breakthrough ideas and solutions
- Unlimited opportunities

*The Idea Generator* provides practical, effective tools that will improve the productivity of your thinking. The tools in this book can be learned by anyone, at any level, regardless of role or education and have been tested over a number of years in hundreds of business workshops.

### The Idea Generator model

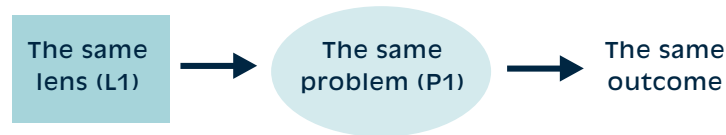
In most situations there are two elements: the problem (the challenge, goal or opportunity you are currently dealing with) and the way of 'seeing' this problem (your lens, mindset or perception).<sup>1</sup>

I have called the current problem 'P1' and the current lens in use 'L1'.

If you always use the same problem or P1 and you view this problem with the same lens or L1 then it should not surprise you when you obtain the same outcome.

For example, if your P1 is how to increase customer satisfaction, and you continue to look at this problem with the same L1 it is the responsibility of the customer service manager—then the outcome will probably not vary considerably from last year's results.

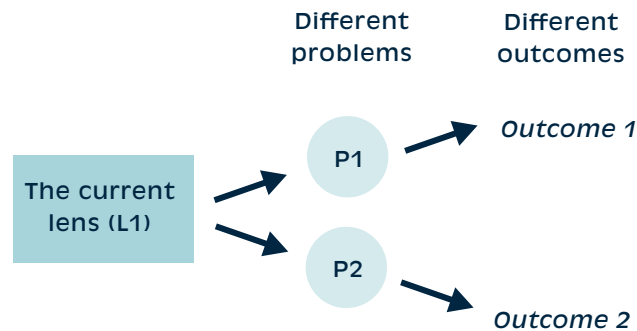
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If you need a different and potentially better outcome, there are two key strategies:

### 1. Change the problem (what I call P2)

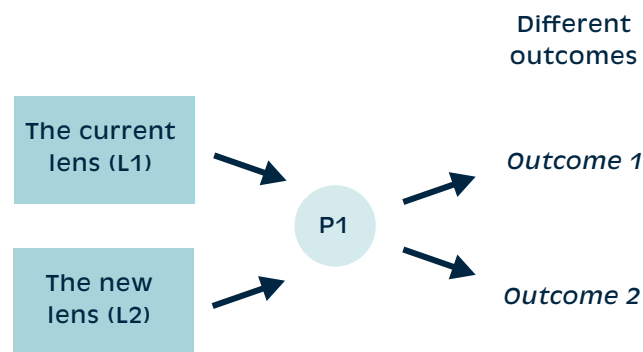
Let's continue with the previous example. If you change the problem to 'What would it take to make our customers feel more passionate about our business?' (P2), this immediately leads to different ideas, such as inviting customers to solve their own complaints or encouraging customers to visit the business and meet the staff.



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### 2. Change the lens (what I call L2)

Another key strategy is to look at the problem with a new lens (L2). For example, what if you looked at the previous problem from a purely financial point of view? You might decide that trying to improve customer satisfaction for every customer is uneconomic. From a financial perspective, it may be better to dramatically improve the service for your profitable customers and reduce service levels for the unprofitable customers.



In both of these examples, the twin thinking strategies of either changing the problem and/or changing the lens has opened up an array of new ideas and possible solutions. My experience is that the process of shifting from P1 to P2 and/or L1 to L2 is one that can be learned by anyone using the range of tools outlined in this book.

Here is a real life example of this approach. The leaders of a major garbage bag brand were struggling with how to grow their market share and improve profit margins. When I began working with them, their collective mindset (or L1) was



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that garbage bags were a ‘low interest and low involvement’ category (marketing speak for a category where consumer engagement is low, compared with mobile phones where interest is high). It defined the direction of all their marketing efforts, and consequently their emphasis on price promotions. My suggestion was that they needed to create a new way of seeing garbage bags. They tried the lens, ‘garbage bags can be interesting’, which enabled them to generate a number of breakthrough ideas. These led to the development of deodorising garbage bags, which have been launched with great success.

Then I challenged the leadership team to create a range of new problems. They had, for instance, accepted as a given the consumer belief that putting out the garbage is messy and unpleasant. So they asked: ‘How can we make garbage bags easier to use?’ This resulted in the creation of a garbage bag on wheels, which is the next product to be tested. The leadership team is now brimming with new ideas and opportunities to grow their brand and business. The garbage bag itself has not changed. What has altered is their lens and how they redefined the problem of using a garbage bag.

### The single lens error

These new ideas seem obvious only when you view garbage bags through a new lens. Why didn’t the management team see these opportunities before? The answer lies in the nature of your mindset—the lens you use to perceive the world. Your mindset enables you to interpret and make sense of your environment but it also can limit your view to a narrow and well-explored range of possibilities<sup>2</sup> that are informed by your previous experiences, values, assumptions and beliefs.<sup>3</sup>

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Information (e.g. a market trend) that is consistent with your mindset tends to be reinforced while information (e.g. a competitive inroad) that is inconsistent with your mindset is often downplayed. This is why industry leaders find it so difficult to develop bold, innovative products. They are limited by the lens through which they see the world. To create an 'out of the box' product literally requires you to think outside the box to understand what your current lens is and then move to another one.

Consider, for example, a house being renovated. What do the various people involved in the project 'see'?

- The homeowner 'sees' a home.
- The builder 'sees' a steady income stream.
- The tradesman 'sees' a job.
- The neighbour 'sees' noise and disruption.

Which lens is correct? The answer is that all are correct and equally valid. But each lens only represents a partial view. Hence, The Idea Generator method involves shifting your current lens to obtain a more complete or different view of a situation.

The tools in this book will enable you to change your lens at will. This means new ideas and opportunities because the shift of view can be quite dramatic, much like the Mona Lisa, which reveals more of its character from different viewings. Consider the following comment from the former CEO of General Electric, Jack Walsh:

They [a future leaders team] said we needed to redefine our current markets so that no business would have more

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than 10 per cent market share. That would force everyone to think differently about their business. This was the ultimate mind-expanding exercise as well as market-expanding breakthrough. For nearly 15 years, I had been hammering away the need to be number one or number two in every market. Now this team was telling me that one of my most fundamental ideas was holding us back. I told them I loved the idea.<sup>4</sup>

For another example, think about how business leaders are viewing their environmental footprint. In years gone by, 'being green' was seen only in terms of an increase in costs. Now, more and more leaders see a huge business opportunity. General Electric, through its Ecoimagination program to cut carbon emissions, has delivered over \$10 billion in sales.<sup>5</sup>

Creating a new lens to see a situation more clearly can also be used in your personal life. My eldest daughter Charlotte loves horses, and I was determined to support her desire to learn how to ride. But I was very nervous when I approached my horse, which in turn made the horse difficult to control and further increased my reluctance to get on it. This stand-off was resolved when I created a new lens (L2)—'the horse was just like a big dog'. I love dogs and have always been very comfortable around them. This new lens led to an instant calm that enabled me to ride the horse and enjoy the experience.

### The single problem error

The other barrier to innovative thinking is the belief there is only one way to define a problem. My experience is that continuously using the same problem (P1) narrows the range of possible solutions. Some P1s may be more appropriate than others but each can lead to a new, workable solution. For

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example, I recently facilitated a group that was trying to create new ideas to combat kids' obesity but our ideas were following a well-worn path. So I encouraged the group to develop a new way of looking at the problem (a P2). They decided that a more fertile challenge was to consider ways of enhancing kids' health. This meant that the group could consider the problem in a more holistic, proactive way. They realised that weight was only a part of kids' health. What about their physical, emotional and even spiritual wellbeing? This new challenge led to a much broader and more original set of ideas, which have since been presented to many government agencies.

Another reason for the continued use of a single P1 is the belief that there is a single best answer. This might be so for mathematics but the real world does not function with the rigidity of numbers. In business, there are many different, interrelated factors to consider when making any decision and many ways of defining a problem. The nature of business changes day by day and what works today may not work tomorrow. By not challenging a P1 in a dynamic world you are bound to fail.

People in business are encouraged to be action-oriented, with rewards and recognition going to the people who are good at solving problems. This emphasis on problem-solving has many benefits but comes at a cost. By focusing on solving problems, you can neglect the importance of creating more original questions. Spending more time on defining a fresh set of questions can unlock new solutions.

### **Becoming 'unstuck'**

Together, the single lens error and the single problem error

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amount to a feeling for many managers of being 'stuck'. The significance of this feeling is profound. Having a limited array of options or ideas means that your performance suffers as pressure mounts. Your results tend to be slow and incremental. What's more, it creates a negative cycle where your expectations of yourself remain low. This in turn affects your performance and confirms your low expectations.

You need to interrupt this way of thinking. The biggest irony is that being 'stuck' is largely due to factors within your control.

Try this exercise:

How many different uses can you think for a mobile phone? Most people give between five to eight answers.

Now try to answer this slightly different question (P2)—How many unusual uses can you think of for a mobile phone?

Try a third way of looking at it. Imagine that you are an ant (L2). What possible uses can you think of for a mobile phone? You'll be surprised by the new possibilities you've just imagined.

The mobile phone is a metaphor for any problem, challenge or opportunity. Your responses to the initial problem are limited by your life experiences and assumptions. By redefining the problem (P2) and/or using a new lens (L2) you have created a rich array of new possibilities from which to choose a better outcome. Suddenly you have movement and a way forward.

The challenge for anyone in business who wants to gain an edge is to learn how to move on more quickly than the competition. The Idea Generator provides a practical, tangible way for

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anyone in business (or life generally) to create a better, more fulfilling and productive future.

### A note on the tools

The tools described in this book have all been tested and proven to be effective in many different businesses across a vast array of industries and circumstances. Some tools will be more appropriate for your situation than others; much will depend on your personal preferences. Understanding that it is within your power to find solutions and get ahead in business is the first and most important step. Use the tools in the following pages as a starting point to push you in the right direction.

### The structure of The Idea Generator

Each chapter contains ten tools, which are described on the left-hand pages. Examples of how the tools can be applied are given on the right-hand pages. The tools are flexible and can be used in many different situations. Each chapter includes tools that follow the two key strategies of changing the lens and/or changing the problem definition.

### How to get the most out of this book

There is no right or wrong way to use this book. You can start at the front and work through methodically. Or you can select a tool at random and apply it to the situation at hand. The aim is to try to master a number of tools to create different solutions. After reviewing each tool, ask yourself 'How can I apply this specific tool to my business?' By answering this question, you can customise the tools to your brand, business or career.









## TEN TOOLS TO SOLVE PROBLEMS IN A MORE POWERFUL WAY

- Tool 1** Think in threes
- Tool 2** Restate your goals in emotional language
- Tool 3** Find new measurements
- Tool 4** Create new eyes
- Tool 5** Develop a range of business-as-usual, different and radical solutions
- Tool 6** Solve a bigger problem
- Tool 7** Ask new questions
- Tool 8** Find a solution that initially won't work
- Tool 9** Use a new simile
- Tool 10** Find a paradox



**TOOL**

## Think in threes

Business people often think in opposites: right/wrong, accept/reject, pass/fail, yes/no. This kind of thinking tends to restrict the possible number of solutions to a problem to two and make everything seem black and white.

But the world is not binary. High performers must think in a more expansive way. Effective human resource managers for example, not only have to find innovative ways of attracting people to a business but also how to develop and retain them. Marketing managers have to attract, improve the profitability of and retain customers. If you think in terms of only two of these tasks then you will miss vital opportunities.

To overcome the limitation of thinking in twos try drawing a triangle to remind you to think of a third possibility for every new problem or opportunity.

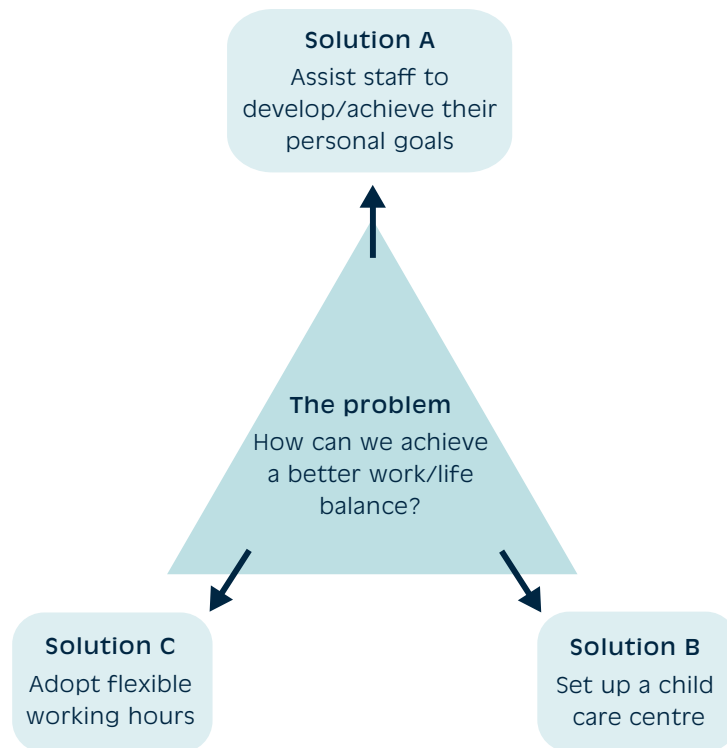
This new lens (L2) can also be used to make brainstorming more effective. Send out a brief 24 hours before your brainstorming session and ask every participant to bring along three ideas. If you have ten people and everyone does their idea homework, in the first few minutes you could potentially have 30 new ideas.

## SOLVE PROBLEMS IN A MORE POWERFUL WAY

### Application

Select a problem and place it in the middle of your page within a triangle. Try to develop at least three distinct solutions to the problem.

*For example:*





## Restate your goal in emotional language

Most goals or challenges are framed in a rational way for example, How can we increase our market share by 5 per cent? which often leads to small and incremental solutions. To bring about a new set of ideas, try redefining your goal (P2) in emotional language. Use words like 'passion', 'energy', 'fun', 'excite' and 'engage' when you reframe your problem. This will increase your chances of creating an imaginative solution.

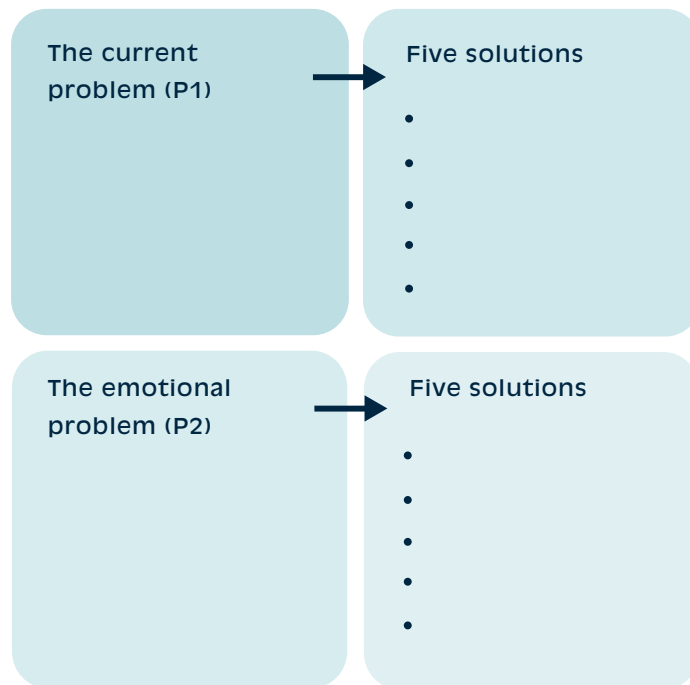
For example, I worked with a software company that was about to launch a new product. Their stated objective was to obtain a 70 per cent unprompted awareness of their new product among their target audience. While this made sense it led to a range of familiar ideas. To push the group out of their comfort zone I encouraged them to redefine their challenge as 'How can we have our latest product talked about at dinner parties?' This opened their thinking and led to an array of bigger ideas.

Ask yourself Which of these two challenges would I rather work on? Which challenge leads to a greater chance of new ideas and solutions? For most of us the second one is the preferred option. The key to creating more innovative solutions is to keep the challenge or goal essentially the same but to use more expressive and engaging language.

## SOLVE PROBLEMS IN A MORE POWERFUL WAY

### Application

Focus on a particular problem you are currently facing (P1). Develop five possible solutions. Then redefine the problem using emotional language (P2) and create five new solutions. Select the most original response and test it.





**TOOL**

### Find new measurements

When solving a problem, you are often a prisoner of the measurements you use. For example, market share movements, while useful, are a reactive measure. They tell us what has happened rather than predicting what might occur in the future.

The measurements you use also tend to limit the possible solutions to a problem. By changing or adding a new array of measurements you can open yourself up to a new view of the problem (L2) and possibly a new range of solutions. Remember that measurements or key performance indicators can be both objective or subjective.

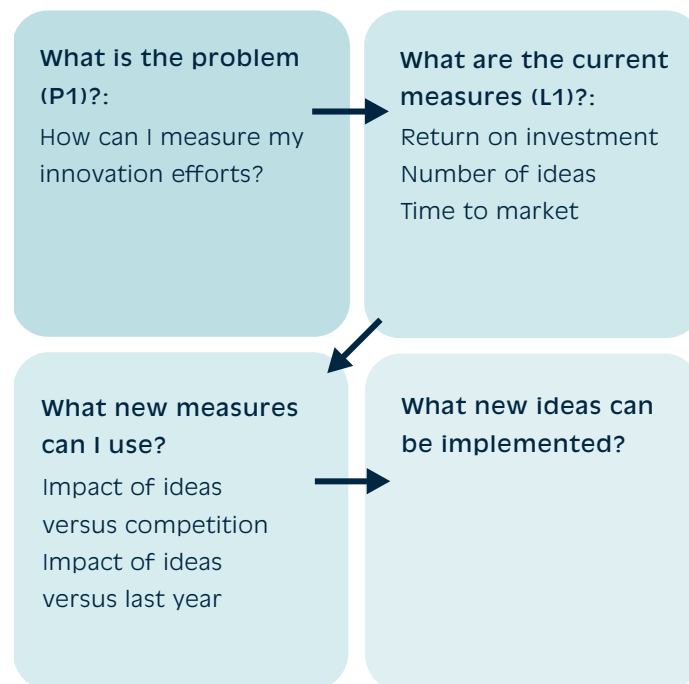
For example, consider the problem, 'How can we improve the satisfaction of employees?' One way of assessing this might be the number of days staff are absent. But what about another, complementary, measure such as the level of passion in the workforce? For instance, ask staff how passionately they feel about their job or the company. To be sure, this measure is more subjective, but it provides another way of evaluating the problem.

## SOLVE PROBLEMS IN A MORE POWERFUL WAY

### Application

Write down the current problem (P1) and the typical way you measure the solutions to this problem.

Now consider a number of new measurements for this same problem. Next, create some new ideas to tackle the original problem using the new measurements.





TOOL

4

## Create new eyes

This is a very effective way of bringing about a new range of solutions. Using this tool, deliberately consider a problem from a number of different perspectives (L2).

Each one of us has a different perspective or lens, based on our assumptions, values, beliefs and experiences. And while we can never know how someone really sees a situation, we can imagine how they might perceive a problem or challenge.

For example, if you are about to make an important new business call to a potential client, you should consider who might be at the meeting and what their lens could be. The managing director, for example, might see the situation in terms of long-term growth opportunities, while the sales director might be more interested in the short-term impact on sales. By imagining your clients' different perspectives (L2s) you can better tailor your message to the way they see the situation.



## SOLVE PROBLEMS IN A MORE POWERFUL WAY

### Application

Select a letter at random. If you selected 'a' then think of a role, person or animal starting with this letter, for example, an astronaut. Now consider the problem (P1) from a range of different perspectives (L2s) using this letter.

Then ask yourself How would an architect or accountant look at this problem? Write down as many responses as you can in the next few minutes.

*For example:*





## Develop a range of business-as-usual, different and radical solutions

When faced with a problem (P1), try to develop a range of business-as-usual, different and radical solutions as quickly as you can. This new lens (L2) pushes you to develop a greater range of solutions and gives you permission to offer those really left-field ideas.

The business-as-usual solutions are a continuation of what has been done before. The different solutions are a departure from what has gone on before. The radical solutions are a departure from what has been suggested before. Think big! Then select the best outcome (it could be one of the options or a combination of several).

For example, consider the problem, 'How do we retain our best managers?' A business-as-usual solution might be to pay high-performing managers more. A different approach could be to expand their responsibilities or move them to a completely new (perhaps struggling) department. A radical approach might be to provide them with a 6-month sabbatical or give them a small company-owned business to run.

This framework is also a very powerful way of selling your ideas. It is a good way of providing the client with real choice. Start by outlining the business-as-usual solution, then outline the different approach. Leave the radical one for last. Clients are often more willing to entertain the thought of a radical idea if they have the more bankable tried-and-true option on the table.

## SOLVE PROBLEMS IN A MORE POWERFUL WAY

### Application

Place the problem (P1) in the middle of the triangle, then try to develop five business-as-usual solutions, three different solutions and at least one radical solution in the next five minutes.

