

HOW INNOVATION WORKS

# FAST THINKING

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# QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Innovation is as much in the approach as in the result. **Ken Hudson** describes the tools of an innovator's trade.

Everyone knows, although seemingly few understand, the most famous equation in the world. Of course it is Einstein's  $E=MC^2$ . But did you know the second most famous one? This was developed by me and it is far easier to understand than Einstein's and will have a greater impact on your performance and work. My formula is as follows:

$$P = C \cdot E \cdot T$$

In this case your performance (P) is a function of your competency (C) and your energy (E). This makes intuitive sense - your results increasingly hinge on your knowledge, skills and ability. To be effective however, you need to apply effort and perseverance to the challenge at hand. This depends on your personal motivation and your

working environment. But is this enough any more? I observe lots of managers who are very competent and work extremely hard but are not among the highest performers. That is where the mysterious 'T' comes in. The letter 'T' is the tool kit you use to solve problems, create new opportunities and improve your performance. I believe that the single biggest driver of improved performance for yourself (and your team) is the tools you use.

In this case I am talking about conceptual tools not physical tools, such as a mobile phone or a laptop. Conceptual and physical tools are similar in that they allow you to improve your productivity and do a better job.

But in today's environment it is new business models and new concepts that create the most

value, so we need a new tool kit that is more conceptual in nature; a tool kit that will improve your thinking and not just physical strength.

Such tools can be used by anyone at anytime for any purpose. They are independent of age, role or education level. I have listed four tools below that will give you an edge in your business. They are practical, accessible and very effective. The first tool, for example has been credited with doubling a medium size PR business in the past 18 months. And they represent a way to tap into innovation and apply it in whatever area of activity is relevant.

## Tool 1: Three solutions

One of the most simple and effective ways to solve problems is to develop a number of different solutions. However, left to your own devices, you typically only produce ideas that are similar to what has been done before. That is why I have developed the "Three Solutions" framework. In this approach you are encouraged to develop three qualitatively

different alternatives. This challenges you to greatly expand potential solutions.

The three alternative types of solutions are called:

- 1) Business-as-usual solutions - solutions or ideas that are an extension of the current approach e.g. a new product feature
- 2) Different solutions - solutions or ideas that are similar to the current approach but are in some way demonstrably different e.g. a new advertising campaign
- 3) Radical solutions - solutions or ideas that are significantly different from what has been done in the past, eg a completely new product or distribution channel.

**One of the major advantages of the Three Solutions framework is that by asking for a radical idea you give people permission to be creative. You enable them to present a left-field idea that they might otherwise be nervous about.**

There is a discipline, however, because you also have to create a business-as-usual (ie similar to what we have always done) and different responses. You and your team will be more likely to entertain a radical idea if you have safer, more predictable solutions in the bag.

When you have designed your three different sets of solutions, you will find that it is easier to rein-in a radical idea than to push people out of their comfort zone. Even a reined-in radical solution is often more rewarding and profitable than the business-as-usual approach.

But another wonderful thing often happens - when people have heard the radical approach they often find the traditional, business-as-usual solution too boring and incremental.

Remember, the three different sets of solutions are not mutually exclusive. An appropriate solution can involve elements from all three.

Many groups that I have worked with have decided to implement some combination of the business-as-usual and a different solution but have also opted to test one of the more radical solutions.

This tool is also ideal for sales people. It provides clients with real choice and will help you differentiate yourself from the competition. Make sure however, that you communicate to your client in advance the new three solutions framework so as to manage their expectations. You and your client will be pleasantly surprised at the results.

## Tool 2: Implications then actions

In a fast paced environment you are often faced with a problem that arises quite suddenly and you need to react quickly. In this situation one of the biggest challenges is to think through all the possible implications of a problem and what actions you should take.

This all has to happen quickly and often under

pressure. I have developed the "Implications then Action" tool for exactly this situation.

The starting point with this tool is to try and separate the implications of a problem from the actions that must follow. The starting point is write down all the possible implications of a problem in smaller bubbles connected to a central bubble (2). The aim is to get as many different implications down as quickly as possible.

Then you construct a corresponding second circle to set out all the actions that must be taken. The simple practice of drawing two related circles rather than using language to write down everything in a logical manner helps to better visually represent all the implications of a problem and define the relationships between all the elements.

If you are stuck, draw the two circles and then write down as many implications and the corresponding actions to a problem that you can think of in the next five minutes.

Then forget the problem and work on something else. Your unconscious mind will still be toiling away. In a short while other implications and actions will pop into your head to the initial problem.

## Tool 3: New questions

Asking the same old, predictable questions (eg how do we increase market share?) can lead to a feeling of sameness and incremental responses.

One rewarding way to break out of this cycle is to concentrate on the questions we ask rather than the answers. This is counter-intuitive because we have all become good at answering questions but paradoxically not adept at creating better questions.

For example, I was working with a large cereal brand and we were designing a new product range and I asked the group to create a range of new, unexpected and original questions. Remember these are questions that are simply interesting to which you don't know the answers.

**Some of the questions were as follows: How do we sell breakfast cereal at a train or bus stations? Why isn't cereal eaten at lunchtime? What does cereal for older people look like? Why does cereal need packaging?**

Out of this discussion the group created some new, wonderful product and format ideas. Most people will initially find this exercise difficult because they are so used to solving problems rather than creating new questions.

Stick with it; this process will ensure that you end up with breakthrough solutions rather than incremental ones.

If you are stuck when you go to a meeting, write down at least one good question that has emerged about an issue. Continue this in all the meetings you go to for the next few weeks. Store all these in a "good questions" file and when you are faced with a difficult issue refer to your collection. It will help stimulate you to ask fresher, more original questions.

## Tool 4: Restating the problem in emotional language

The limitation with using a rational question is that it typically leads to a rational answer. This tool encourages you to try and use your emotional, intuitive mind to develop new solutions.

In essence you have to start feeling the problem. For example, I was advising the leaders of a software company, which was about to launch a new customer information platform. Their objective was to gain five market share points within the next three years. They found, however, that they were only developing a range of safe, predictable and incremental launch ideas. This was a real issue as this new product was planned to be a major growth initiative for the company.

I suggested that they "feel the problem", and they came up with: "we want this product launch to be talked about at every dinner party". With their new marching orders they proceeded to develop an exciting and very successful product launch that more than doubled their initial targets.

The challenge, therefore, is to try and restate your problem in more emotional language. Most people find this challenging initially (particularly the males) but using more passionate and expressive language (without compromising the objective) tends to excite and engage the group. This in turn often leads to more energy and imagination in your solutions.

For example, rational problem statements:

- How can we gain x% market share?
- How can we improve our product quality?

Emotional problem statements:

- How can we have our customers rave about our product?
- How can we encourage our employees to be proud of our products?

If you are stuck, select at random one of the following emotional words and then try to develop a new problem statement using it: passion; love; energy; fun; pride; excite; jealous.

My message is this: the tools you use will increasingly dictate your performance. The more conceptual tools you can master and the more often you use them provides you with a profound edge against your competition and will dramatically lift your performance immediately. ■

Notes:

1. This tool is an adaptation of the work of McFadzean, E. "The creativity continuum-towards a classification of creative problem solving techniques", *Creativity and Innovation Management*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, UK. Volume 7, Number 3, September, pp.131-139
2. This is similar to Mindmapping - see for example, Wycoff, J. 1991, "Mindmapping: Your Personal Guide to Exploring Creativity and Problem solving", Berkley Publishing Group, Berkley Books, New York.

*DR KEN HUDSON is founder of The Idea Centre - ken@ideacentre.com.au*