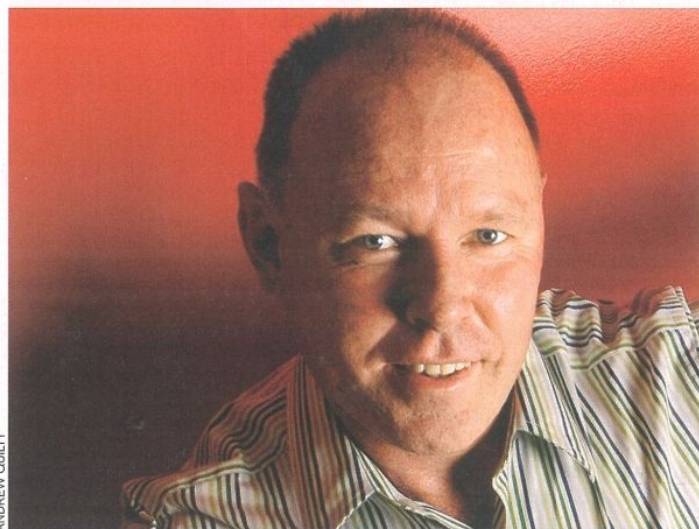


Creative juice goes with the flow

VALUE YOUR MOST SUBVERSIVE AND ARGUMENTATIVE STAFF. They just might be the ones who will help your business anticipate the next big thing, Ken Hudson, director of consultancy The Idea Centre, says. It is the mavericks in an organisation who are often also the most creative people – the out-of-the-box thinkers – Hudson says, and the trick is to identify them.

Before establishing a business based around “unlocking innovation” in 2001, Hudson developed his weather-eye for the latest business trend at Citigroup and American Express, where he was head of marketing, as well as stints in advertising and management consultancy. His clients have included Dupont, AMP, Nestlé and the Disney Channel.



ANDREW CUILTY

Ken Hudson: Mavericks in an organisation are often also the most creative people

How do you harness creativity in an organisation?

There's a paradox about innovation. Managers say they want to do things differently, but they are still using the same process, methods and teams – the way they've always done it. That's inconsistent: innovation is about freshness, newness, about creating stuff that hasn't been done before. By definition, you're not going to do that by using the same old processes. Finding the out-of-the-box thinkers is one way of doing it.

How do you identify these creative thinkers?

Not all people are comfortable with innovation, or equal in terms of how they view and embrace [change]. Out-of-the-box thinkers are more adept and like working with new ideas, like provoking change, like challenging the status quo. What's interesting about these people is that if you view them from another lens, they're often identified in a large organisation as non-team players, as difficult to manage, as pains in the arse. But large businesses increasingly want to grow organically through innovation; paradoxically, these are the people who are most likely to give you that growth. In practical terms, we identify them in two ways. First, through peer nomination: we ask everyone in the firm, “who in your opinion consistently comes up with left-field ideas?”. This is a good start, but it's biased by an individual's length of

tenure and by their degree of extroversion – people are more likely to know of you if you've been there a while or are very outgoing. To overcome that, we also conduct an original thinking quiz [with questions like] “how many uses can you think of for a shoe?” It's less about logic and more about metaphor and lateral thinking. It tests your ability to make connections between unrelated things. Those with the highest scores in terms of number of responses and originality then form an out-of-the-box team to work on creating the next big thing.

What are the challenges of building a team out of maverick individuals?

One of the hardest things about the group [can be] remaining focused. If you have a whole bunch of people who are good at challenging things, they love working with people who see the world similarly to them, they love bouncing ideas off each other. What they have more trouble with is keeping on track and staying focused. Practically, one of the ways we address this is to have senior management regularly attend the meetings [and working towards a short deadline] of a presentation after a couple of months.

Your clients are mainly in creative industries – advertising and communications companies – or creative areas of other businesses, such as marketing departments. Does innovation in “creative” areas differ from those in more technical ones?

Historically, about two-thirds of our work has been with marketing and one-third other functional units. But the future for our business will reverse that, I think. Increasingly, my work is with human-resources directors. They really respond to this method of identifying out-of-the-box thinkers as a way of recognising talent and a way of addressing current stereotypes of people being mavericks and unconventional. I think the HR directors of the future will be innovation directors because innovation in any organisation is about people, skills and, most importantly, culture. Innovation is a mindset rather than a function.

GINA McCOLL

‘Out-of-the-box thinkers like working with new ideas, like provoking change, like challenging the status quo’