



Vol. 3, No. 8, September 2006

Focus on Innovation

Focus on Innovation is a monthly electronic newsletter designed to provoke thoughts and ideas on how to bring innovation to life within the organizations in which we work.

For Those on the Run

There is often a belief that having a sharp critical eye is preferred by managers and leaders. The fact is a negative bias can kill creativity. This month's newsletter explores the impact of negativity on the creative process and how to channel negativity into a positive direction.

Negativity: A True Enemy of Creativity

We all know people who are constantly negative whenever creative ideas are proposed. These are the people whom immediately dismiss an idea or mock it for being utterly ridiculous. We often hear them saying "That will never work," or "That's a bad idea". You may even be such a person yourself, always looking for and finding flaws in ideas. Negativity is a style of thinking, and when it flourishes, the organization or team doesn't. It can lead to behaviors that reduce productivity, creativity and effective problem solving.

The biggest danger when people are too often negative about new ideas is that very often their automatic negative comments can stop creative ideas in its tracks. People who are negative at the early stages of the creative process when others are trying to come up with solutions will stifle all the creativity in the room causing people to get discouraged, embarrassed or angry and not bother to risk contributing any further ideas. In many cases, people who are always negative and critical of new ideas are not really trying to make the ideas better but may actually be trying to hurt and insult the person(s) who came up with the good idea. When negativity becomes consistent and automatic within a team or organization, the danger is that negative thinking can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Is being negative about new ideas always bad? The idea that negativity can damage creativity feels intuitively right. However, people who can pick apart and criticize new ideas can actually be very helpful in some stages of the creative process. For example, in the Creative Problem Solving process, convergent thinking (making critical and judgmental comments) is equally important to divergent thinking; however it is critical to use it appropriately (for more information on the Creative Problem Solving process check out the Creative Problem Solving and Idea Generation Techniques Tool in the Ideas section of our website at www.foursightconsulting.com/ideas). People who are frequently negative towards and critical of ideas are often able to easily spot what is wrong with an idea. Their ability to easily see flaws can actually make them a very important contributor to a project. The key is to *be able to delay the negativity* until more

constructive ideas come out, especially in a brainstorming session.

How to Turn Negativity into a Positive Direction?

- **Negativity Test.** People who are always negative often have a hard time being creative themselves; the constant negative "inner dialogue" gets in the way of being open to and coming up with creative ideas. Take the negativity test - this coming week count how many times you disagree with others ideas and how many times you agree. Catch yourself in the process of being 'negative'. Don't allow yourself to substantiate your negativity and discount it. Watch others being negative as well (note negativity can be disguised). Be honest with yourself - this is for your own assessment only.
- **Model Positive Behavior.** If you are talking in a negative way, others will follow. No matter what happens, stay positive. Cynicism and negativity are enemies of the creative spirit. Practice thinking positively and maintain a constant vigil that you do not become the person that causes negativism. Adhering to a practice of positive thinking can help you turn problems and negative situations into opportunities.
- **Acknowledge Negativity.** You can't ignore negativity and hope that it will go away. Acknowledge the frustration and negative comments; empathy can go a long way. Do not try to convince the person or people that they shouldn't have their negative comments. Remind the person or people that they'll only improve their situation or solution by figuring out what does work.
- **No Should Never Be the Answer.** A simple *no* should never be the answer. Instead, figure out how an idea can be tweaked and finagled to result in a successful solution. Respond to any idea with *yes*; yes, we can figure out a way to do it, but we all have to work together. Using yes will not only help your team come up with some creative solutions that haven't been thought of before but will also help foster a sense of teamwork that comes from an positive environment.
- **Manage Negativity During Meetings.** Dominating, negative persons may need to be reminded that with a number of people present, they really only have a right to their proportionate percentage of time. If that approach doesn't work with a particularly negative person, then the group itself must unite and encourage the individual to be more positive or, as a last resort, simply ask the person to remain quiet (this can be a tough thing to do).
- **Look for and Identify the Positives in All Ideas.** When a person comes up with an impractical idea, refrain from quickly dismissing it. Many breakthrough ideas have been built upon the foundation of an out-of-the-box impractical idea someone risked. Identify the effort while gently discussing the idea. Find the positives in the ideas, build on it, and talk about them. Building trust and respect to the point where people feel secure enough to express new ideas without fear of censure is critical.
- **Refrain from Collusion on Negativity.** It is easy to get caught up in negative conversations, i.e. general complaining and griping. When faced with these, take a leadership position to change the subject or refocus the person or team in a positive direction ("Let's talk about something more productive." or "What would need to happen to for this idea to be successful?")

What's the Bottom line

A person who judges creative ideas, who refuses to listen to a new way of thinking or simply criticizes it, is a creativity killer of the first order. Cynicism and negativity must be channelled into a positive direction for creativity to flourish.



Please feel free to pass this newsletter on to others.

If you would like more information about the ideas and topics listed in this issue, contact Judy Laws, Ph.D. at jlaws@foursightconsulting.com.

For more ideas on creativity, innovation, to join or be removed from the newsletter distribution list, visit www.foursightconsulting.com.