

The Creative Activism Guide shows readers how to use formal problem-solving techniques for social betterment. Topics covered include problem definition, idea generation, structured problem solving, idea evaluation, decision analysis, and the selling of ideas.

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Chester Davis

Chapter 1 – Creating a Strategy

Social innovators need to take a strategic approach to innovation. Likewise, it can help to have a strategy for weaving new brainstorming and problem-solving methods into your work. Some questions need to be answered at the outset. Do you plan to work alone or involve other people? Which people should you “recruit”? What are your broad objectives – to sell an idea, to raise money, create an innovative public education campaign? Are you primarily concerned with problem solving, with getting new ideas, or with adopting existing ideas?

Another question to consider: How big do you need your problem solving efforts to be? How many people need to be involved? How many people do you intend to serve, educate, or influence? What is the geographic scope of your efforts? Are you starting a Web site, working with a community group, working in a nonprofit with national programs? How much money do you have?

The size of your organization will influence what you can accomplish in a given amount of time. The scale of the problem you want to address will also influence what you can expect to accomplish in a given amount of time. The scale of the problem may also influence your need for new ideas versus adaptation of original ideas. The complexity of a problem, and most social problems are complex, will influence your decision to focus on problem solving versus creative thinking about the problem. If you are starting a nonprofit, or want to start one, you may need both to analyze the issue that interests you and engage in some formal brainstorming to determine the best approach for your organization.

Advocacy efforts require creativity in crafting a message and reaching the appropriate people. Activists need to devise new demonstrations. Die-ins, people lying around pretending to be dead, used to be new and interesting. Maybe die-ins need to be replaced by something new, something that will better communicate the desired message to the desired audience. New strategies for effecting a certain change may be helpful, depending on the organization’s resources and the results that the existing strategy is getting.

Conventional fundraising methods are fine, in the sense that they usually work reasonably well. What if you just want a new idea, one that might give better results for less effort? Maybe a nonprofit needs to find a good fundraising strategy that will work without access to a grant writer or a big mailing list of potential donors.

Education at all levels needs creativity in marketing schools or classes and in other areas. Software can help people design exercises for students, teaching

materials for new subjects, innovative school policies, and after school programs. Adult education programs, whether run by nonprofits or universities, need to be advertised successfully.

Policies for nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and schools need work sometimes. Even if the policies don't need work they could probably be improved. Policies sometimes need to be "sold" to others who must vote on a policy or decide whether the policy will be implemented in an organization. Novel but practical policy designs might be valuable. Creative ways of selling the audience may also be needed. For businesses, an activist group may want to create a new policy that will achieve the activist group's goal while protecting the interests of management.

Programs for arts and culture nonprofits and for activist groups need to be designed or redesigned. The programs or the ways of marketing them can be improved in some way, perhaps. Brainstorming software can help people find ways to improve programs. Maybe the United States needs an alternative to the traditional financial management classes that are sometimes advertised to low-income people.

Social services organizations need to develop programs, administer programs, and improve programs. Maybe efficiency needs to be increased. Maybe the outcomes of a program, as measured by results, need to be improved. A high ratio of overhead to program costs, spending more than 25% of the organization's funds on overhead, for example, can look bad. The country's largest fundraising campaign, the Combined Federal Campaign, will reject an organization with operating costs are too high

Schools aren't very different from nonprofits when it comes to creating a strategy for integrating formal creativity methods and formal problem solving. You may want to use collaboration software if you work in a big school system, like the University of California. A school district may also need collaboration software. Brainstorming and problem solving meetings might be feasible. Schools and nonprofits also have budgets that probably won't support a large and expensive training effort. You may not be in a position to an expensive procurement effort started.

How many people do you want to be involved in this effort? You should probably start small. Try to recruit one or two people to study and practice brainstorming techniques, to use one example. Maybe you can start a bigger group. Maybe you can convince the big shots in your organization to invest in training or in enterprise software. Starting small is probably a better idea.

Determining the best starting place for your individual or group efforts is not too difficult. You only need to consider whether to go it alone or to involve

other people. If you are striking out on your own then you have several options. You could begin rather simply, by reading a book on creativity or on problem solving. You could download trial brainstorming software and give it a try. The more ambitious sorts could start off by attending a class on lateral thinking, for example. Some training organizations do host classes that are open to the general public. More likely though, you would have to participate in company-sponsored training. The classes can be hard to find and can be rather expensive, over \$1500.

The next steps are easy enough: buy more software, recruit someone to work with you, get someone to come to your organization and teach a class. The Resources section of this chapter lists places you can go for more information on trainers and software.

But do you really need to form a group or can you work alone? If you are responsible for bringing ideas to the group or solving a problem then the answer is simple: take the initiative to learn something and use it. Most of us actually work with others on solving problems, implementing new ideas, or starting an organization. If that describes your situation, you could still stick with doing things on your own. Or you could recruit someone else to work with you. Ask someone to read the same book you read and discuss how to apply the techniques. Encourage a computer-loving partner to try the brainstorming software you've been experimenting with.

If you are willing and able to start a group the first question to ask is whether you can meet physically or if virtual meetings make better sense. Most of the time you will be working with a local group or an organization that has one location and relatively few locations. Given that the world is becoming more connected and activists can collaborate with people across the globe, there are times when some form of "virtual brainstorming" makes the most sense.

Challenge Finding

The world is full of both problems to solve and opportunities to exploit. The near future is full of potential problems and potential opportunities. Entrepreneurs, managers, and executives are keenly aware of those facts. Likewise, many people in the social sector are familiar with the practice of looking for problems and opportunities real or potentially real. That's not the issue here. Making it a habit to systematically explore the social environment for current opportunities and for potential future opportunities is important. Being aware of real or potential problems is also important. Sure, problems usually become apparent at some point because they are problems. The

symptoms present themselves and we decide to take action. Maybe our response is good enough to solve the problem and maybe not. It would almost always be more effective to see the problem coming and take steps to prevent it or to develop a coping strategy. Can we prevent global climate change or merely adapt to the effects?

Some problems really can't be solved, at least by you or by your organization. A workaround of some sort needs to be devised. A nonprofit that uses a raffle as its principle fundraising tool may find that raffles are going to be illegal soon. The organization can't expect to stop that legislation; the only solution is to find a new source of revenue. Substance abuse can't be stopped, but we can come up with better ways to discourage substance abuse or to mitigate the impacts on peoples' lives. Maybe there are some unrealized opportunities in mitigating the impacts of substance abuse on your community?

Some opportunities are obvious and important. Opportunities that aren't so obvious may be quite valuable anyway. Finding opportunities to raise more money, serve more people, get better results, or gain media attention for issues are always welcome. Some opportunities or potential future opportunities are going to come to our attention in the normal course of our work. Others will only appear if we can spare a little time each week to look for them. Ditto for potential future problems.

Strategic Thinking

Any strategy has to have a focus. What do you want to achieve? How, in general, do you want to achieve that goal? What process will you use? What interim objectives do you want/need to reach? Does your objective relate to changing behaviors, educating people, recruiting volunteers, or changing something specific in the law? Answering such questions should be the beginning of any strategic approach to innovation in the social sector. Of course those are only a few of the possibilities. You need to decide if your real aim is public education, a specific social change (such as outlawing abortion), raising more money, getting more people to enroll in a government-sponsored program, or something else entirely. Once you've got that answer it will be easier to know whether you should focus on learning creative thinking techniques or problem analysis or decision analysis, or design thinking. In any case, you'll benefit greatly if you can learn and use one new technique in each of those areas. Several possible processes could be helpful. There are general techniques of brainstorming, systematic idea generation (logical forms of brainstorming), problem analysis, and decision analysis. There are also

comprehensive approaches to innovation. Engineers have TRIZ (theory of inventive problem solving). Social innovators have lateral thinking®, design thinking, Einstein thinking, and other comprehensive procedures for getting workable new ideas.

Your strategic goal could be to educate the public so that some critical mass of people recognizes X as a problem. People will start to demand that corporate executives or government officials do something about X. Maybe there is a political gap to be filled. We need a law or regulation or policy. You can't track current events for more than a few days before you encounter some person or group who wants a particular law, policy, or regulation.

You may want to start building a strategy by scanning the environment. All groups and formal organizations operate in a social environment consisting of people, laws, regulations, economic conditions, technologies, cultural values, and natural resources to name a few elements of the social environment. You may want to institute a formal scanning process to check out the social environment. Systematically assessing the strengths of your organization, its weaknesses, threats from the social environment, and opportunities in the social environment constitutes the dominant process of scanning the environment. This SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis, as it is called in strategic planning literature, is standard practice and can be learned without too much difficulty. Many organizations rely on facilitated strategic planning workshops because this ensures that professionals are leading the analysis. Those workshops aren't cheap. Small community groups and nonprofit organizations who want to do any environmental scanning or strategic planning will need to substitute time for money. Check the end of this chapter for resources on strategic planning and environmental scanning.

Studying the social environment needs to be a regular activity and not something that happens when you decide to update your strategic plan. The best method for content analysis is to read things, lots of things. Read to find information on politics, economic trends, and popular culture. Real and proposed legislation of certain types may also be relevant. New social science research, particularly in various branches of psychology can also be valuable. Your primary sources should be scholarly journals, specialized Web sites, and specialty magazines. Anything published in a newsmagazine or book is probably old news to experts. Popular magazines that touch on subjects like sociology, psychology, and environmental issues may be more timely in the news they report.

Where do you steal ideas from anyway? Well, content analysis may help. You will see a program or policy or education strategy that's working in a

different context. Maybe the education idea was created for high school students. Is there anything to stop you from stealing the idea and using it to educate adults in the community? Nope. Ideas can't be patented or copyrighted. Books and magazines from outside your area of work and outside your personal sphere of interests may also be useful. Maybe you can get a good idea from a magazine on World War II history or a book on goal setting.

Do you need a new idea and not just one that's already been used elsewhere? Content analysis can show you a new idea that you can use. The idea still needs to be adapted to your particular circumstances. This process may be relatively straightforward. Or, you may need to create a slightly different "design" for your borrowed idea. And completely different ideas can also be useful if you apply some imagination. Asking outrageous questions can help. How can a vending machine get inner city poor people more interested in their health? You'll learn a method for answering that question in Chapter 2.

Idea Stealing, Again

Consider design thinking. As Edward De Bono points out the cause of a problem can be something that cannot be remedied or removed, at least by any imaginable human effort. If "human nature" is at the root of the problem, or seems to be a major contributor then you have to create a new way to move forward. You leave human nature alone and find a way to work around it.

Wide-ranging reading interests form the foundation for good idea stealing. How else will you find something to steal? Well, wide-ranging Web surfing and conversation work too. In fact, all three approaches should be part of an effort to find ideas that can be copied, adapted, or combined in some way. Reading about a variety of subjects will naturally expose you to new concepts and innovations that might be helpful in some way. Conversations with people working in different fields or in the same field can lead to new ideas and insights.

In case you need some ideas for new things to read, this list offers some suggestions by subject area:

1. *Advocacy* – psychology of persuasion and influence, social marketing, literature on the selling and diffusion of ideas, sustainable development, copywriting
2. *Education* – social marketing, sustainable development
3. *Fundraising* – business literature on sales marketing, and branding; psychology of persuasion and influence, copywriting

4. *Policy and Program* – sustainable development, policy analysis, social forecasting
5. *Social Innovation* – sustainable development, social marketing, creativity, marketing (especially branding, copywriting, and psychology of persuasion)

Design Thinking

Our culture, including values, norms, beliefs, and technology, may be missing something that's relevant to solving a problem or exploiting an opportunity. Problem analysis is likely to be needed here, so you can identify what needs to be created, changed or improved. Creative thinking may be required to create a workable social innovation or sociotechnical system (a combination of people and technology designed to achieve a specific goal) that can support culture change. Modern factory production is a sociotechnical system composed of factory workers, robots, pneumatic tools, and the actual assembly line. A system of Web sites, collaboration software, and local activist groups would be a sociotechnical system created to promote a certain worldview or policy or social change.

Specific processes and concepts that support design thinking can be learned and used by anyone. Design of social innovations is not some esoteric craft that only the university educated can master. Considering the fit between your idea and the community or organization that's supposed to use the idea is not difficult to do. The point is to consider the value, fit and other elements in a systematic fashion.

And what about the "gaps" in society between how things do work and could work? Those gaps are places where new ideas need to be created and sold. Maybe there are problems that have gone unsolved because no solution that will sell has yet been put forth. Maybe the problem has not, as yet, been recognized as a problem. Maybe you can see an opportunity to improve society in some way. There is no real problem, broadly defined, just a way to do more of something or to do something better. You can probably think of something about society that is not an actual problem but could be made better. Go ahead and think of something, then start reading again.

Creative Thinking

New ideas, variations on existing ideas, and novel combinations of ideas might be needed. Any sort of social betterment effort is likely to need new

ideas from time-to-time. New ideas can mean better fundraising results, more people changing a certain behavior, or an idea that becomes a ballot initiative. There are books, card decks (yes, card decks), classes, and software available.

Starting off with one or two simple techniques applied with the help of a pen and a piece of paper might just do the trick. If not, there are sophisticated techniques that may give better results. Some creative-thinking techniques are intuitive – they are probably the sorts of tools you would think of when you think of brainstorming – but logical techniques also exist.

Creativity can be a solitary effort, but probably shouldn't be! Involve other people to generate ideas, evaluate ideas, or to refine your thinking about what counts as a good idea. Collaboration doesn't even require being in the same area as the other people. The Internet makes it easy to work together on brainstorming, evaluating ideas, improving ideas, and implementing ideas.

Software can help whether you go it alone or work with a group to generate and refine ideas. There is specialized software to facilitate solo brainstorming, group brainstorming, and major efforts to innovate. Creative-thinking software costs anywhere from \$0 to thousands. Some of the software is quite simple to use, like a text-editing program, while other titles are more like professional desktop publishing packages.

Knowledge gaps can be a problem when we need to vote on a ballot initiative, on a politician, or make a significant purchase decision. Do people know what social scientists consider the main contributors to crime, or overuse of credit? If not, maybe their votes or their political activism will not give desirable results. Creative thinking can help us find ways of closing that knowledge gap through innovative advertising efforts. Maybe creating lessons for colleges or secondary schools would work. Information gathering can tell us where the knowledge gap exists and how big it is and even what some of the consequences are.

Decision analysis can help us to choose a good way of addressing the knowledge gap. We can see the likely consequences of a certain decision's implementation. We can also systematically and with reduced bias see the pros and cons of a course of action. We can make better-informed decisions by leaning to prioritize ideas according to an explicit set of criteria.

Scientific Thinking

The desire to make things happen and feel like we are doing something important really shouldn't get in the way of facts, logic, and theory. Facts are obviously important to understanding an issue. But they also help us determine

if our program or project is really working and how well. Focusing on the facts keeps us grounded in reality. How many well-intentioned efforts have fallen short because the relevant facts got ignored? How much money and effort were wasted?

Logic forces us to make arguments that hold together when we examine the premises and assumptions behind our ideas. We can also apply some logic to other peoples' ideas. For activists, this is a good tactic to use in fighting someone else's opposing idea. Logic can lead to insights that change peoples' perceptions of an issue, policy, program, attitude, or behavior.

Theories are not guesses. Theories are descriptions of the ways in which groups of phenomena are related. The theory of evolution is a set of propositions that explain many changes in living things over billions of years. A theory of deviance can help us identify ways of combating juvenile delinquency. Selling an idea based on science rather than an ideologically based opinion about what ought to be done is a separate issue. Good luck!

Social science research can help us understand an issue and can lend credibility to our cause. Of course, that credibility only goes so far, since ideology and emotion tend to trump facts. The research also helps us understand the mechanisms that lead to social conditions that we want to change.

Science is based on facts, logic, and descriptions of relationships between phenomena that can be observed. What does this mean for your innovation or social change efforts? How do scientific thinking, creative problem solving, problem analysis, decision analysis, idea evaluation, and the selling of an idea fit together? Facts are "selling points" for an idea. Statistics, both good and bad, may support your idea and its value. Has substance abuse among teens been on the rise in your community? Don't just tell us that it is so. Give us some numbers and the credible source they came from. Use facts to help you understand the source of a problem. Again, statistics that relate to the scale or nature of a problem can be helpful.

Developing and testing hypotheses about a problem can be even more helpful. Hypothesis testing sounds like an esoteric intellectual exercise, but it can actually be quite simple. You'll learn more about forming hypotheses, testing them, and using the results in Chapter 4.

Logic can help you make a case for something. This much is obvious. But you also need to use logic on your own plans and ideas. You need to think objectively about your cause; objectivity is another trait associated with scientists. Scientists have opinions and beliefs but those things are usually suppressed in favor of a value-neutral examination of the subject under study.

Activists may object to objectivity. We know domestic violence is a big problem. We know domestic violence has to be stopped. How can anyone approach the fight against domestic violence in a coldly rational way, like a machine?

Pure rationality is not the point, and can't be achieved anyway. The point is to try and divorce thinking about what ought to be done, which is rightly the domain of human values, with how things ought to be done, which should be largely objective. Of course values still have a role to play in guiding our selection of strategies and tactics.

Logic can spare us from pursuing silly ideas that we can't sell to anyone and that may not do any good even if they are implemented. Consider the errors in logic listed in this list:

1. Ambiguous terms
2. Unidentified information sources
3. Invalid generalizations
4. Reliance on analogies
5. Selected, supportive information
6. Appeals to authority
7. Red herrings(unrelated issues, tangents)
8. Mudslinging (attacking the other side)
9. Emotionally loaded terms, arguments
10. Slippery slope arguments

Could you get yourself or other people in trouble if your thinking is tainted by one of those logical fallacies? Probably. Your credibility with a skeptical and potentially hostile public or government is on the line. You wouldn't support a plan that rests mainly on the idea that Congress is full of pinhead conservatives would you? Would you? You can't expect the conservative or moderate public to take seriously such weak thinking. It will seem obvious that we are being manipulated. Appeals to emotion – “The terrorists could nuke your city one day!” – are obvious ploys that only work if we already agree with the point you want to make. One likes to think so anyway.

Aside from the strength or weakness of our own logic, knowing the rules can help us fight the other side(s) in a debate. Are they saying a proposal will start an inevitable slide into barbarism? Did they accuse someone on your side of being a crazy communist? Use those two sins against clear thought to show us why we can't trust the other guy. Start keeping a written record of logical fallacies that are being arrayed against your cause.

Numbers are important to any effort at changing society or improving peoples' lives. The right data will tell you where you are, whether things are getting better or worse and whether your efforts are paying off or not. Finding and understanding statistical data is not hard, really. Using the data to help you understand or publicize the issue in question is also not that hard. True, social scientists do use sophisticated techniques to model behavior and describe relationships between social phenomena. You don't need to know much, if anything, about those methods. Some information on those advanced statistical topics can be found in the Recommended Reading section at the end of this chapter.

Many books and Web sites combine to offer a flood of statistics that might help you. It can be a bit like opening your over-full closet and having things spill out closet all over the floor. You can manage this problem by starting with a few tried and true sources. The United States Census Bureau conducts several surveys, including the famous decennial census. Those surveys are an incredibly rich source of economic and demographic data offered at varying levels of geographic detail. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics also publishes extensive data on business and employment. The Environmental Protection agency may have useful statistics on environmental quality. The Department of Justice may be able to furnish statistics on criminal behavior. State governments will generally have the same sorts of data available at the state level. Some city governments will also have statistics available.

As you consider what data you need and how you will use it, there are a couple of often-violated rules you should keep in mind. Rates and percentages are typically more important than raw numbers. Trends are also more important than raw numbers in many cases. What percent of teenagers in your city were arrested between 2000 to 2006? Is the percentage increasing or decreasing? An organization that wants to fight juvenile delinquency by giving teenagers positive things to work for could benefit from asking questions about the rates of different behaviors. That information can help them decide how to focus their energies.

Statistics have at least four general uses. The right data can help people decide how to focus their resources. Statistics can be good public education tools. Numbers are a convenient way to show the scale of the problem or a trend, positive or negative. Statistics could also help an organization raise money through grants or fundraising letters or appeals on Web sites. Finally, statistics can help in attempts to change behavior. A university could fight binge drinking on campus by reporting data on what percentage of students say they never have more than five drinks when they drink.

Analytical Thinking

Study the parts of a challenge and see how they relate to one another. Look for influences from the political environment, the natural environment, technology, demographics, or the local economy. No problem or opportunity exists in a vacuum, as you well know. The point is to take that common sense idea and apply it as needed.

Instead of asserting that the root of the problem is X or Y, state a specific hypothesis about the problem. Identify evidence that would show whether the hypothesis is true or false. Then, analyze the evidence and act on the results. That process is similar to, but less rigorous than, the standard scientific process.

Ask questions about your challenge. Explore the likely root of the problem, the contributing factors that can make things worse (or better!), and the criteria that a solution has to meet. Ask questions about the characteristics of a good solution to a challenge.

Analytical thinking will not replace emotion or ideology. That would be unrealistic and undesirable, at least in the case of replacing emotion with cold calculation. Analytical thinking is more relevant to the arguable useful task of forming a buffer between our emotions and biases and the decision to engage in a particular action.

Market Thinking

Activists, fundraisers, and anyone with an education message or program to promote are participating in a marketplace. The programs, policies, behavior changes and such need to be sold. “Why should I donate to your cause instead of another, or instead of keeping the money for myself?” Social changers have to compete for attention and money with other causes, peoples’ hobbies, and (of course) commercial products and services. It can’t hurt to consider the audience for your message or idea:

1. Who is the audience?
2. How can you reach them?
3. What do they want? What do they care about? How do they think about the world?
4. What benefits can you offer your audience?
5. What evidence can you present to show that your audience will get the benefits?
6. What exactly do you want your audience to do?

All nine elements of the rational activism “plan” work for any sort of social betterment effort. Social activism obviously calls for some strategic thinking and applied imagination. Education, whether through schools or public education campaigns, calls for scientific thinking and a willingness to steal ideas. Fundraising efforts often need a little creativity and a strategic focus. Program and policy development calls for analytical thinking, scientific thinking, and creativity. Activism, program design, policy development, and public education often call for some good marketing.

Social Change and Innovation Strategy

Changing something in the structure of society – including the relationships between different groups of people – may be your strategic focus. You’ll need some tools for determining which structural gap your group should focus on. Then you’ll need to create or adapt ideas. You may need to do some problem analysis first. What is the cause of this problem in the structure of society? How do we act to improve things? Creative thinking can help you identify options. Having specific rules for judging ideas will help you pick a good idea. Creative thinking can help you sell your idea to citizens, corporate executives, or politicians.

Of course you have to implement a strategy for it to do any good. You need to have tactics that you can use, and then you have to use those tactics. How do you develop tactics that will support your strategy? We come back to the issue of creativity. You may have standard tactics you can use in, for example, demonstrations against something. You may find tactics from other fields that would work. Brainstorming using one or more formal techniques may produce workable new tactics.

How do you implement a strategy? In part, this question was answered earlier in the chapter. You have to decide whether to buy a book, take a class, download free software, or talk to coworkers about what to do. Try to learn the software or techniques you read about in a book by working on a real challenge. Why wait to start attacking a problem or trying to exploit an opportunity. OK, so identifying the cause(s) of a problem may be the right first step. The right first step may also be to look at approaches to an opportunity that you’ve discovered. How can you best proceed and take advantage of the opportunity? What is your first move? What is your second move?

Where will you implement your strategic approach? If you head a nonprofit, then the answer is obvious. Or maybe the answer isn’t so obvious. Maybe management staff only needs to be involved. Maybe some program staff and

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volunteers need to be involved. What will you do first? Telling everyone to read a particular book is a good start. You could get some used copies online for a reasonable amount of money. I've seen used creative-thinking books for under \$5 on Amazon.com

Do you need to get professional help? What sort of help do you need? There are three possibilities to consider. You could hire a consultant to walk your group through a problem-solving exercise or a strategic planning session. This is certainly a reasonable approach. The second option you have is to call in a trainer to teach lateral thinking, problem analysis, or other tools and techniques. You may need an outside consultant to install and configure software. Some collaborative software is quite complex. The third option involves consultants but may not be so obvious: hire a consultant to help you reproduce a program/service/solution that's being used somewhere else. You could figure out to copy almost anything on your own. Hiring an expert will save time and money and probably considerable frustration.

Chapter 2 – Innovation Tools & Tactics

Everyone knows about brainstorming. Most of us have done some informal brainstorming. Maybe the results were useful and maybe not. Some people have learned formal techniques for generating new ideas. This chapter describes some of those techniques and the two options for using the techniques: pen-and-paper, or computer software. Individual and group techniques exist. You should know something about each sort of brainstorming. After all, most of us work with other people sometimes. Software can only be described in a general way since products and manufacturers come and go. I will mention some titles that have been around for a few years and seem to come from stable companies.

Problem solving in general is another process we are all familiar with. Just as there are formal techniques for brainstorming, there are many formal techniques for problem solving.

Solving the Right Problem

Much of what goes before can also apply to problem-solving methods. Your informal analysis of a problem may be adequate, or not. Often social problems and problems in organization's have multiple causes. By definition, the cause of a problem is not known. A problem is any deviation from the desired performance, where the cause of the deviation is unknown as defined in *The New Rational Manager*. A formal approach offers more structure. Relevant facts, relationships, and hypotheses are more likely to get attention. Our own biases and perceptions will tend to color an informal analysis of the problem. This coloring effect is likely to be especially acute in advocacy or social activism. We have decided that we know what to do. We need to ban this or regulate that, or stop people from doing something. When we have "discovered" the source of the problem we tend to go right to a specific solution, specific strategies, and specific tactics. This is not a bad thing really. We depend on being able to find standardized or routine responses to the problems we encounter. Edward De Bono made that point in *New Thinking for the New Millennium*.

In creating new social institutions, programs, policies, and education initiatives we have the additional problem of emotions and ideological biases. We see the solution in our own emotional reactions, reaching for one certain solution that occurs to us. Or, we find a solution in a certain ideological perspective. The radical leftist finds a leftist solution and starts to work. Sometimes people do good things when they go on emotional and/or

ideological crusades. One woman got dozens of nations to stop using land mines. Adam Walsh, whose son was kidnapped and beheaded in the 1980s, founded the highly successful Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

Still, the general point about structuring your analysis of an issue stands. The techniques you will learn about in Chapter 4 will help structure the problem solving process. Use the techniques and you will be able to make better decisions about how to proceed. Studying the factors contributing to a social or environmental problem can only improve your solution. At the very least, you will have a better chance of selling one of your ideas if you can present supporting facts.

Knowing What to Do

These thoughts about creativity and problem analysis are all interesting, but we already know what needs to be done. You may have had that thought while reading. Maybe even before you opened the covers of this book. You would naturally know what to do after being involved in an issue or cause for some time. But do you know the best, *practical* thing you can do to change peoples' minds, design a better policy, or create a better social program? What if someone challenged you to come up with a way to do more with your budget or create better results for clients with no more money or staff? Do you know how to analyze an idea for weaknesses? Is there some opportunity that you have overlooked?

Taking a formal approach to creativity and a structured approach to problem solving is the way to cope with those kinds of questions. When you know a reliable way to generate ideas, evaluate them, and strengthen them you will never go for long without a workable new idea. A shortage of money or staff becomes both a creative challenge and a way to sell your bold new idea: "I have this idea for streamlining our work so we can handle 30 extra cases without another staff person." A structured problem solving approach may lead to different conclusions about a problem. Is your novel approach to teen drug abuse really addressing the source of the problem?

Many political proposals address nothing in particular. They are created so government officials can say they are doing something about an issue that citizens are complaining about. Companies are not much better in this regard. They pretend to be "green" or "socially responsible" and create advertising campaigns to tell us they care. Governments create ideologically driven policies and programs that are sometimes created without any reference to facts or analysis. The way to deal with crime is to build more jails and hire more cops.

The reasoning here is probably that people choose to become criminals and so we need to deter people from being bad or lock them up. “Scared straight” programs in schools appeal to conservatives despite any evidence that they do work or could work. Most people don’t carefully consider the consequences of criminal behavior until the act has been committed.

Pen-and-aper work perfectly well so why bother with software. Some of it costs serious money and might be hard to use. Why pay for software? What sort of software should you use? Well, if you are interested solely in brainstorming new ideas, there is reasonably cheap mind mapping software. Mind mapping is a brainstorming technique that you’ll learn more about in Chapter 8. Using software that works in a variety of situations and helps you evaluate your ideas is also a good idea. You can get this type of comprehensive software for under \$200 a copy. Software that allows people to collaborate online, and that is made just for generating ideas, would cost more. A geographically dispersed organization may want to make the investment anyway.

Why pay for mindmapping software in particular? Can’t people just draw their maps? If you are the only one who needs to see or use the mindmap then using pen and paper is no problem. However, software can produce neat and attractive mind maps that are easily exported to presentation software or word processing software. Complex diagrams are almost impossible to create with presentation software or word processing software. Diagramming software like Microsoft Visual Studio is a little too complicated and expensive for simple mind mapping. Some mind mapping software can cost over \$200 but some versions are considerable less than \$100. FreeMind is a free, open-source tool for mindmapping.

Systematic Creativity

The first question that crosses many peoples’ minds is this: Why do we need to use a formal technique or techniques to brainstorm new ideas? Some people will wonder how much creativity is really called for if plenty of ideas already exist. The truth is that hoping for the right idea to present itself is not a good strategy. Hope is not a strategy, as the title of one popular business book advised us. The quality and quantity of ideas that come from informal brainstorming may not be good. You may not have carefully defined what counts as a good idea. That too is part of formal brainstorming. You should spell out the characteristics that a good idea must possess.

Training and Consulting

Innovation and problem solving can both be quite complex. The more factors to consider the harder it can be to do the right thing. The higher the stakes in a given situation, the more important it is to proceed carefully. While most techniques you might need are amenable to self-directed learning, formal training may be in order. Many people, perhaps most people, aren't much good at self-teaching unless they happen to be fascinated by a subject. So, taking classes in Lateral Thinking® or Internet research may make sense. Read on and you'll see the value of Internet research.

Consultants are already experts at dealing with certain sorts of issues or in applying certain methodologies. Assuming a consultant's fees fit the budget, it might make sense to get some professional help. A consultant could expertly run a group brainstorming session, or help you develop a new strategy. The Resources section at the end of this chapter lists places to find consultants.

Good Ideas

Good ideas have several characteristics in common. Like good goals, good ideas need to be realistic. A good idea needs to be logically linked to the desired result. Science and logic will help determine whether an idea really fits the goal. Good ideas are realistic given the time and other resources that are available.

The relationship between the mechanism that contributes to a problem and your idea needs to be supported by evidence. Why will banning handgun ownership in the United States reduce murder rates? This question might seem easy to answer, but don't be so quick about saying so. Reading scholarly research on the effects of gun control might not turn up a clear connection between murder rates and handgun ownership rates. Assuming there is a connection between handgun ownership and murder rates our campaign against handgun ownership makes some sense. Other factors might actually have a bigger impact on murder rates than access to handguns, so we can only say that the idea of banning handguns makes *some* sense. Other approaches may be more effective and/or efficient ways of reducing the murder rate.

Software

Software will take an hour to a few dozen hours depending on the software. Some brainstorming software is easy to use; any computer literate person can

learn to use it in an hour or so. Comprehensive tools like ThoughtOffice® and MindSightss ® are going to take much longer to master. Some vendors offer software for managing organization-wide problem solving and brainstorming efforts. That enterprise software is going to take still longer to master. So, when thinking about software a potential buyer needs to consider cost, learning curve, and complexity. Will your staff be able to easily master the software considering the likelihood that there is no formal training available?

Software costs can vary from almost nothing to tens of thousands of dollars. What you pay naturally depends somewhat on the software's capabilities. The more different things it can do the more it will cost. Software that's designed to be installed on servers and run throughout a medium-to-large organization could run in the tens of thousands of dollars. Fortunately, there is some free or dirt-cheap software that can adequately manage the sort of "enterprise innovation" efforts that a large nonprofit or an activist network would attempt.

Deciding Where to Start

So, cost should not be a huge barrier to using innovation tools in your group or organization. Software is usually not too expensive. Getting a book of two from the library is free. Or, you can get just the titles you want from a large online bookstore and spend less than \$10 a copy. Training and consulting are much more expensive, of course. Idea management software – you use it for managing idea generation over an Intranet or the Web – is expensive. What you pay for is obviously going to depend on a your interest level in innovation, your resources, and your tolerance for risk. Rolling out a big idea management system will be expensive in money and staff time and could be a flop. Or, it could be a huge success. Buying books for yourself and your staff, with the intent of applying the methods described, would be much cheaper. Your chances of at least a modest success are also quite high.

Should you do things yourself or get professional help? Well, you have to know yourself and your staff and coworkers. If everyone in the group is a self-directed learner, then reading a book or two is a good starting point. Buying software and figuring it out is also a viable option. Just keep in mind that no training of any sort is available for most creativity software. On the other hand, most of the software is relatively easy to use.

Learning complicated brainstorming techniques or solving a difficult problem may be something you are confident of handling on your own. Or, you may decide to hire someone. Some training classes are open to the public and not just put on for specific clients. Assuming you can afford the fee, the classes

are a good option. Most people learn better in a structured environment. The classes also tend to come with travel and lodging costs since you aren't likely to find one that's being held nearby at a convenient time.

Using all of these tools and learning to use them is also a significant investment of time. So, as with cost, you need to weigh how much you need to accomplish against the significant time investment. You can start off cheaply, and you can start off with a low investment of time and energy. Get involved in things that are more time consuming as your schedule allows or as your innovation needs demand more powerful and complex tools. Learning the techniques described in *The Creative Activism Guide* should only take a few hours of reading and practicing.

Results

What can you really expect to get out of using the brainstorming, problem analysis, and decision making tools? That's a fair question, so here are some examples:

1. A fundraising campaign could raise significantly more money.
2. A government employment agency could place more people in jobs in less time.
3. A public education effort intended to keep middle-school students from smoking could get more kids to abstain.
4. A school could cut the number of fights (fistfights and shouting matches) by 90%, or more. Edward De Bono reports that fights in a South African mine were cut by 98% after miners learned some "thinking tools" developed by De Bono.
5. An activist group could get more minutes, or column inches of press coverage, which translates to more attention to the group's idea.

Online Innovation Resources

Yes, the World Wide Web is an indispensable resource for activists and others who want to create and sell new ideas. Many Web sites offer tips or instructions covering all phases of brainstorming and problem solving. Mindtools.com offers free information on brainstorming tools and decision-making techniques. Of course, online bookstores offer access to more creativity, innovation, decision making, and problem solving books than you could ever hope to find at a library or a brick-and-mortar bookstore.

Web sites also offer ideas you can use, at least for inspiration. The best of these sites is undoubtedly the Global Idea Bank, where you can find thousands of social innovations described in varying levels of detail. The site also offers books of social innovations. You can even submit your own ideas and possibly win the site's annual £1,000 prize for the year's best social innovation. You may also want to check on the Half Bakery at halfbakery.com or Premises, Premise at premises.com. If one of those sites happens to be gone, try a Google search for "social innovations."

Web sites can also teach you some psychological and sociological concepts, tricks, or tips that can help you get good ideas and sell them. Stealing ideas and working with concepts are two important elements of creativity. You may as well look for ideas to steal at one of those innovation sites. And you can look for concepts to use on sites devoted to sociology and psychology, maybe. (A "concept" is a general way of doing something. Drawing attention to the source of a problem is a concept one could use to get people to change their behavior. Another concept may be to give an example of what to do.) More likely is to find tips on designing successful innovations and selling your ideas to others. You may also discover social scientific research that helps you understand why people and organizations work. If you understand your audience and their social environment you have a much better idea of successfully implementing a new idea.

Business Ideas

One of the key components of creative problem solving is the ability to find and adapt ideas that are being used successfully in other areas. The business world offers a great source of ideas for nonprofits, governments, schools, and social entrepreneurs. Businesses have products and services to sell. Businesses try to position themselves in customers' minds as the best solution for some problem that consumers have. Businesses obviously engage in marketing efforts of all sorts. Businesses are always looking for new products, services, products, and marketing tricks. Would-be social changers could learn a few tricks from the business world. The trick is to know how to find ideas and how to adapt them to the social sector.

Consider some common marketing tricks that businesses use. Maybe those methods will spark ideas. Maybe something from the list that follows will spark an idea you can use. Of course you'll start out by defining a problem or opportunity that you'd like to tackle.

Chester Davis

1. Coupons
2. Midnight madness sales
3. Clearance sales
4. Special events, like fashion shows and celebrity autograph sessions
5. Sponsorships, especially of sports teams

Figure out what counts as a good idea for your particular circumstances, and then think about a business practice to borrow. Defining a focus for your efforts, evaluating the possibilities and deciding what to do are all necessary steps in a serious innovation effort. Chapters 3, 8, and 11 offer more guidance on doing those things.

The Marketing Mindset

You will probably not be able to accomplish much on your own. Changing society, improving the community, and starting a new project in an organization all take some degree of salesmanship. Nowhere is this truer than in social marketing: getting people to change their own behavior for their own benefit (as opposed to promoting behavior change to sell more stuff) self-help books). Thinking like a marketer means keeping a couple of things in mind.

The most important element of thinking like a marketer is to remember that you are selling something. You are selling the idea that people need to vote a certain way, adopt a certain behavior, think a certain way, or stop a behavior. It can only help your case if you can appeal to peoples' interests. You could tap into one of the things that motivate people. Psychologists identify and classify desires in different ways, including the motivators in this list:

1. Acceptance
2. Acknowledgement
3. Contribution
4. Consistency
5. Family
6. Novelty
7. Physical Security
8. Power

How could you use one or more of those motivators in an advertisement, editorial, letter to the editor, essay, Web page or speech? You could even try tapping into one or two motivators with a sign or banner or small newspaper ad.

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Appeal to peoples' interests/needs/wants. People are always reading an advertising message and wondering what's in it for them. What's the benefit for me if I swear off meat? What do I get out of going to all of the trouble to find locally grown organic produce? If you don't know, then you don't have a viable social marketing effort.

In *Jump Start Your Business Brain*, Doug Hall presents two more ideas that could be transferred to the world of social change. What is the real reason to believe that if I do what you want I will get the benefits you claim? Marketers also use a unique selling proposition (USP), a benefit that consumers can only get from that product or service. What benefit can your program, service, or idea give people that they can't get, at least in equal measure anywhere else?

The Creative Activism Guide shows readers how to use formal problem-solving techniques for social betterment. Topics covered include problem definition, idea generation, structured problem solving, idea evaluation, decision analysis, and the selling of ideas.

The Creative Activism Guide

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