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Creative Combinations

Creative Combinations can be done individually or by small groups of people. This process is often valuable at stimulating new thought and deep dialogue between colleagues and management teams. The approach should be playful, for many of the connections that you make can and should be absurd. But this is more than just an ice-breaker. This is a disciplined approach to seeking out new ideas and innovations. Just because it's serious work, however, doesn't mean it shouldn't be fun.

Define the Topic

Begin by selecting the topic you wish to better understand. For this example, let's leave the topic fairly general - organizations and investing. By focusing this topic either narrowly or broadly, you begin to define the kind of experience you will have and the kinds of results you will achieve. Broad topic definitions often lend themselves to general and abstract insights and connections. These are often very interesting, intellectual explorations with lots of exciting possible connections, but frequently these connections do not have a lot of depth. The more narrowly you define your topic, the more difficult your search will be, but success might prove more concrete. Meaningful metaphoric connections deep within a particular discipline can be difficult to find. The search is valuable, however, because radical new insight on this level can prove tremendously beneficial. As you set up your search, therefore, keep in mind the kinds of results you want to achieve and the kind of experience that you want to have.

Select the Concepts

The second step is to select your Concept Cards. Again, different approaches to this selection process lend themselves to different kinds of results. In selecting your Concept Cards, you can look for either direct connections between the concept and your challenge, or you can look for metaphorical connections. To make direct connections, look through the list of Concept Cards for titles that seem to apply directly to the topic that you have defined. If you are interested in specific investment techniques, then look for titles related directly to market behavior or investment tools and techniques. This approach should provide you with some interesting insights, but this approach is best for learning and applying existing models to your mental models. This tends not to yield dramatic new innovations in your discipline. Of course, applying existing models (especially proven models) is a very important part of the improvement process and tends to produce good results on a more regular basis.

Make Connections

If on the other hand you are looking for revolutionary ideas, you may want to take the metaphorical approach. To make metaphorical connections, select two of the Concept Cards at random. Your assignment now will be to brainstorm any and all connections that you can between these two concepts and the topic that you have defined. Many of these connections will be extremely tenuous, and at this point in the process, that is the way that it should be. Do not be concerned about whether these ideas are "correct". Instead, allow ideas to flow, to connect to other ideas, and record as many of them as you can.

In the brainstorming process, use pointed questions to guide your thoughts. What are the connections between these concepts and the topic? What are the assumptions imbedded in the concepts, and how are those assumptions different than those in your discipline? Finally, if you assume that these concepts apply directly to

your discipline, build a model of how the discipline would operate differently.

As you brainstorm, record your ideas in some way. Write down notes about each idea you come up with, and include enough information in your notes to be able to make sense of the idea later.

Let's try an example. We selected two Concepts Cards from the 2002 Thought Leader Forum - #031 Norman Johnson's "Rat Studies of Maximum Carrying Capacity" and #014 Geoffrey West's "Hierarchical Branching Network Systems". Our topic is defined broadly as organizations and investing. We ask ourselves the questions above, and we come up with a list of observations like the one below.



1. The rat studies tells us that animals tend to take a behavior learned in one environment and apply that behavior in new environments where it is no longer appropriate - even to the point where the old behavior kills them. Investors might do the same thing - apply investing models that have been successful in the past to new investing environments, even if it "kills" their performance.
2. The rat studies also inform us about culture change, especially in organizations that have merged or been acquired. The "old environment" will have changed, but the "old behaviors" must be very diligently sought out and retrained.
3. Geoffrey West talked about the qualities of the overlapping, hierarchical networks in the human body (including the nervous system, circulatory system, etc.). These networks fill all available space in the body, and the terminal branches (end points) are "invariant units", meaning that they are all the same. This might tell us something about communications networks in organizations. First, there will be several, overlapping networks in the company - probably the formal one, but also informal and underground communications networks as well. It is these informal networks that are most likely to resemble these human-body networks, especially in the realm of "energy efficiency". Somehow the informal network can let everyone in the company know that a layoff is coming. The formal communication system (top-down) is structured quite differently, and is often not so efficient at getting "the message" out. Perhaps we should explore how to build our formal communications systems much more like the informal ones.
4. The invariant units in organizational communications networks might be the humans involved. All communications, after all, start with a human and end with a human. Some communications (especially formal communications) might not take this into account. The informal network functions so well because it is extremely personal. Again, how does this change our design for formal communications?

Extrapolate

As you go through the brainstorming process, some of the ideas will lead you to other ideas that might not be directly related to either the topic or the Concept Cards that you have selected. Take the time now to pursue some of these ideas that are once or twice removed from the initial exercise. Remember, it will be many of these

tangential ideas that will prove the most fruitful.

Test the Ideas

Finally, take a step back and look at the collection of ideas that you have developed. Sort through them to group the ideas into different categories. Look for the patterns in your thinking, for many of the ideas tend to be variations on a relatively few major themes. Synthesize these categories of ideas into a rough model that you can present to others - what your big idea is, where it comes from, and what implications that it might have for the topic that you have selected.

Present one or more of these models to someone else. This person must understand the purpose of your exercise, and ideally, this person (or people) has done the exercise and has some models of their own to present. Share your ideas, ask questions to better understand new models, and then explore how these models might lend insight to the challenge that you are facing. If several of your colleagues have gone through this exercise along with you, this should provide the foundation for a very engaging conversation. Have fun with the discussion. Remember the goal is to explore ideas, not to be "correct". Present one or two of your most absurd ideas while you are at it - you never know what idea might spark someone else to find a brilliant insight!

Repeat

This should be a process that you undertake on a regular basis - explore new ideas and imagine how they might impact your discipline. Use different Concept Cards. Focus on different topics. Share ideas with different people. When you run across an interesting idea, create your own Concept Cards, and throw them into the mix.

The process of creative combinations cannot guarantee innovations, but it does provide a structured approach and toolset for learning and applying the "big ideas" from the CSFB Thought Leader Forum. Use the Concept Cards to help you explore, share your results (except for the truly revolutionary ideas, of course) with others.

Until the next Thought Leader Forum, then, explore, combine and enjoy!

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