

# In Pursuit of the Right Idea – Not Just the Great One

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by Jeff Radford

In April of 2006, I was given a somewhat daunting task to look for vendors to provide biomedical services for my hospital. The current vendor's contract would end in December 2006 and my CEO wanted to start looking at either renegotiating the contract or choosing another vendor. I readily accepted the challenge, and the next several months brought a wealth of education for me. Four vendors came to the organization, presented their services and proposed contract pricing. I proudly walked into the CEO's office and discussed my recommendation.

After hearing my recommendation, my CEO asked me to bring in one more vendor. Of course, I was rather taken back by his request because of two specific reasons. First, I felt that my recommendation was the best "deal." Second, this task had been very time consuming and I was ready to be presented with another challenge. However, I did bring in one more vendor. Can you guess which vendor was chosen? Yes, that's right, it was that last vendor. They had proposed the same services we were currently receiving, but at a proposed cost savings of more than \$200,000 annually.

What did my CEO show me? He proved to me that as leaders, we must be diligent in seeking the right answer. Today's fast paced society seems to have hurt the people who enjoy it. When I work on a slow computer, I become frustrated because I want it to work faster. How many people get frustrated when they are forced to wait in the drive-thru lane at a fast food restaurant? Our lack of patience can limit our ability to be creative and innovative in our leadership roles. We may seek the fast answer or the good idea rather than the right one. According to Michalko (2004),

Many times we'll produce one or two ideas and proceed as if they are the answers. But creative ideas.....occur infrequently. So the sensible thing to do is to produce many ideas before we evaluate. Just as a good idea may stop you from going on to discover a great one, a great idea may stop you from discovering the right one. (p. 90)

The key is to develop or obtain many ideas and then find the right one.

## How to Find the Right Idea

So, you may ask, how do I have the time to develop several ideas so I can find the right one? I don't think the responsibility totally lies on the shoulders of leaders. In my opinion, leaders have the responsibility to not only be creative, but to enable others in the organization to be creative.

According to Ellspermann, Evans and Basadur (2007),

Creative thinking can be defined as the sequenced separation of divergent and convergent thinking. Creative thinking is complete only when the divergent alternatives are effectively evaluated, called convergent thinking. In convergence, the focus is on selecting and acting upon good options while resisting the tendency to go back to divergent thinking. (p. 221)

Although there are different creative thinking techniques, I believe there are four foundational steps that need to occur before using one of those techniques.

***Step One: Define the problem.***

Just as physicians first focus on their patients' presenting symptoms, managers must identify their organization's critical problems. This done, they can then diagnose the causes of these problems and, in turn, take action to address them – while avoiding unexpected side effects. (Tushman & O'Reilly, 2002, p.40)

Once the problems are defined, creative thinking can begin to flourish.

***Step Two: Ask a completed question.***

Completed questions, such as Why would I/we want to . . .? or What's stopping me/us from . . .? should be asked (Ellspermann, et al., 2007). For example, if your organization is providing services that are causing a financial drain, you could ask questions such as Why would we want to continue this service? or What's stopping us from discontinuing this service?

***Step Three: Answer the questions in a simple, complete sentence.***

One potential answer is that the service provides great value to the community. That could be a potential answer to spur creative thinking about how to possibly alter the service's delivery instead of no longer providing it at all.

***Step Four: Transform the answer into a creative challenge.***

Ask the question, How might I/we . . .? In my example, I can begin to look at creative ways to change how the service is being provided. This should not be my responsibility alone. Other members of the organization should be invited to provide creative ideas and be challenged to think creatively. This does not necessarily mean that the members of the team should be other leaders.

Tom Peters, author, lecturer and consultant, reveals that 75 percent of the most recent and innovative inventions came from people outside the profession. Apple Computers, for example, was born in a kid's garage – a kid who left the big boys because they would not listen to him. (Jones, 1995, p. 188)

Based on this statement, leaders will be more apt to obtain creative ideas from people who represent a variety of departments in their organization.

Don't be afraid to empower others in your organization to be creative. Accept others' ideas willingly, so that you will not only get a good idea, but you will get the right idea.

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