



Applying Creative Problem Solving to a Critical Business Problem

By Wayne Lewis

During the early part of the 1990s, I spent a considerable amount of time in the company of Scott Isaksen and his team from Buffalo, learning about creativity and its application within organisational change. I was so convinced of the value of his work that I introduced Scott to the company more formally through regular training programmes. This started a long and fruitful relationship, that made Creative Problem Solving (CPS), a household name in almost every corner of the organisation. The following is a case study of one particularly memorable CPS application session.

I was asked by the Director of Customer Services (a \$50 million division of this global company), to design and facilitate a two-day workshop. His division had recently restructured, and the team, consisting of new members and a new manager, was only about a month old. None of this cross-functional team (sales, marketing and product design) was specifically trained in CPS.

The challenge for the team, as explained by my client, was a multi-million dollar revenue shortfall against budget. The context was as follows: (a) a very aggressive revenue target (b) dramatic reduction of the cost base; and (c) almost no promotional budget. The goal for the team in the workshop was to over-achieve revenue numbers for the year, reduce costs and re-motivate an already "change fatigued" staff - all in two-days!! During a session with the client to appraise the task, I suggested using CPS in a descriptive manner and not structuring the workshop too heavily, relying on its inherent flexibility to handle all possible scenarios. The client was uneasy at this lack of structure, but trusted me sufficiently to continue.

This company has a dynamic and innovative style, and as a result the team and my client were keen to start generating ideas quickly, rather than listen to a facilitator suggest something new. However, my time with Scott had convinced me that this was one of those times when convergence not divergence was needed first. It was my experience that when ideas are generated before acceptance criteria are developed, the criteria subsequently chosen are often contaminated by personal choice rather than logic. With this in mind, I approached the workshop design and contracted with my client to end the workshop with new ideas detailed enough to be actioned the day after the event.

While appraising the task with the client, it was clear that an underlying issue in the business was a weakness in qualifying potential business

opportunities. The morning of Day One was therefore dedicated to creating a qualification tool for the team to appraise new business. The intention was to use this tool in evaluating revenue generating ideas generated later in the workshop. As ownership of the implemented ideas was key for the company, the process design included the whole team in the creation of this tool.

I warmed the team up by asking them to imagine that another team within the division had already generated a huge number of ideas - some good, some crazy - for extra revenue. I then used a number of CPS tools in succession. I used, guided imagery, to create an image with the team that the business belonged to them and that they had sunk all their personal cash into it. The team then brainstormed with Post Its™, the criteria for accepting the new ideas and then we used a variant of the highlighting tool to converge on a clustered selection of ideas. These were then paraphrased and "sanity-checked" with the client. At this point we had nine acceptance criteria for new ideas.

Intuitively, the team felt good about the nine criteria. The criteria were checked for overlap and level to make sure they were parallel in abstraction and distinct from each other. The criteria were then placed into a Paired Comparison Analysis grid and the team individually ranked them. The results of this exercise were placed in a matrix on a flip chart, with each person's ranking showing against the nine criteria. Total marks were tallied by adding up the accumulated points for each criteria. For fun we developed a "passion" index for each person showing how many points each person gave in total on the PCA.

The team then discussed the major variances in how they had ranked their criteria and resolved all major differences of opinion and issues, to consensus. They agreed to abide by the total weighting and to use it as a "team weighting" for selecting each criteria. These criteria were then placed in an evaluation matrix awaiting the ideas to be appraised. We tested the tool with a number of new ideas that were felt to be good, and it performed perfectly, ranking them in order. The team was now convinced and had confidence that the tool would work.

By lunch time, team members were ecstatic. They could not believe that they had created a qualification tool to appraise new business opportunities, that made sense, that they all agreed with and that the task had only taken four hours. Several members mentioned that it would have taken at least ten management meetings to achieve a similar result and noted that the pain would have been unbearable.

After discussions with the client, I broke the team into two sub-groups and ran brainstorming sessions to generate new ideas for revenue growth. Each sub-group had a facilitator and process buddy. The teams spent approximately 40%

of the afternoon on divergence and the remaining time clustering the ideas and passing them through the evaluation matrix. This split in time of 40%-60%, divergence to convergence, was a valuable tip I had learned from Scott. At 5:00 PM each group gave a presentation of its work showing which ideas had worked well in the exercise. In total, the groups developed eight potential new business ideas that passed the qualification tool with flying colours. To end the day on a high, the teams selected two ideas that they would like to take to more detailed action planning work the next day.

On the morning of Day Two, one of the sub-groups worked on its two selected ideas. I used the CPS strengthening tools ALoU, Assistors and Resistors, and Ladder of Abstraction, to develop a set of action plans for the two solutions. Each plan was detailed, showed clear ownership, displayed timing and resources, critical paths, inter-project dependencies and critical success factors.

The second sub-group took a different route. One of their new ideas was to distribute other companies' products and services. This concept would have real novelty for the company. The team was excited with the idea and wanted to quickly identify and select which products and companies they should focus on for action planning during the remainder of the day.

As the facilitator, I was concerned about the effects of focusing too early on content. I suggested there would be benefit in using the available time to determine how they would go about making their selections in the future, rather than focusing energy on doing it now. I used the analogy of a sausage factory. We could either make sausages now, or we could design and plan how a sausage factory might look and develop a plan to create it. This would allow them to make sausages, i.e., select products and companies to do business with, at a later stage. The discussion on the merits of this approach took some time, but on the basis that they would be producing "transportable technology" again, just as they had in developing the qualification tool the previous morning, they agreed.

I used guided imagery here again. I asked them to image what a successful company doing business in this way might look like and they brainstormed the constituent parts of such a business. By imagining all the different elements of this business, the team generated a vision of their proposed solution, a successful product dealership. At this point, pleased with their progress, the team decided to develop a qualification tool for supplier and product selection. They did this by the identical method they had used the previous morning. At this stage, they had all the components of their new business. Using gap analysis, they created project plans which they built carefully over the next two hours. The content outcome was a complete project plan, showing resources, people, process improvements and likely business results.

At the end of the day, the two groups came together to present their results - each very different - but of enormous value to the team. They were so pleased with their results that they decided to spend a little more time on creating a communications plan to tell their colleagues and staff about new proposals and plans.

The delighted client listed the workshop outcomes: A qualification tool for new business opportunity appraisal; A project plan to process re-engineer a part of the business; At least eight new revenue generating ideas, with low risk and high potential; Four detailed action plans for taking forward immediately; A communications plan; Over twenty further ideas to examine more closely and appraise at their leisure; One very tired, but satisfied and motivated team; One very happy and relieved client; and one team of exhausted facilitators.

Since writing this article, this team has significantly overachieved all of its goals in all areas for the year. It is now the top performing division in a 6 billion dollar global company. Although I would like to claim total credit for this success, other factors, such as the quality and motivation of the people involved, also played a major role in the success of this division.

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