



NUGGETS FROM THE NURSERY – RECONNECTING WITH YOUR IMAGINATION

'Daddy, where do ideas come from?' is one of the few questions rarely asked by inquisitive three year olds'. They don't need to ask because three year old humans are the most curious, creative and ideas-filled animals on the planet!

In this Leadership Conversation I shall reflect on what happens to this creativity and why it seemingly deserts us as we grow older and enter the world of work; I will also consider what we can do to re-connect with this long lost skill.

This is important now, more than ever, as one public sector CEO recently said to me, *'We are faced with some very interesting times'*. In Sensei we know that if we are to help our clients achieve better results, we need to help them implement better quality, innovative actions, which we know arise from better quality opportunities and which in turn derive from better quality ideas...

The source of ideas is a concern for all forward thinking leaders, or at least it would be if they stopped the hamster wheel of activity long enough to actually think about it! As part of our research into how leaders create strategy, we asked CEOs where they usually have their ideas. Over 90% of them said variations of *'not at work'*!

Where are **you** when the flashes of inspiration that occasionally sear through **your** mind occur? The chances are that you too will not be at work!

We seem to have defined places of work purely by the activity and output they create. Stopping to think is not encouraged! Indeed, if you are caught simply

thinking, quietly contemplating a problem or developing an idea, it will not be long before somebody interrupts your chain of thought by asking: *'What do you think you are doing, have you got nothing to do?'* Do it too often and people will begin to think you are odd, very odd!

In a world that craves new solutions to many of the same old problems, the creation of new ideas and the way we think at work has to be worthy of some reflection. The trouble is, we rarely think about the way we think about things, we just think about them. Innovation's dirty little secret is that it is often fear that prevents ideas flowing, the fear of seeming odd!

I remember one bright young manager declaring to his colleagues that he occasionally wondered what the 'ideas box' in the office was actually for. He had referred to it on several occasions but had never got an idea from it yet! This of course produced the laugh he expected and re-affirmed the underlying culture that it is 'cool' to be critical rather than creative.

This culture is pervasive and is the key challenge to face up to if you are serious about letting ideas flow in your organisation. You need to make suggesting new ideas 'cool' and remove the image risk that prevents many people from contributing their thoughts. Too many ideas are killed before they have had the chance to draw their first breath and this slaughter has to stop!

Fortunately, however, there are things we can do to counter this and enable people to re-connect with their innate skill to think creatively. A good place to start is to recognise that the vast majority of humans

are competitive animals. It is a basic instinct, so don't fight it, use it! Make idea generation a game and set targets. I once told a group that a previous group, dealing with the same problem (I said from a different department to add spice), produced over 50 ideas in 8 minutes. This group promptly produced 55 ideas in the same time. No one likes to be second best given the chance to be the best!

Humour has a key role to play. Watch children play – they are always having fun! Adults forget this is a key ingredient that enables new ideas to flow. The whole brain needs to be active; accessing the right and left hemispheres and our subconscious is required if new thinking is to emerge. Humour is one of the quickest ways to reach this state.

By humour, though, I don't mean start cracking jokes! Simply laughing at ourselves and making light of the situation may relax the mind and put us in touch with thoughts that are blocked when we are under stress but, bizarrely, the total absence of stress is not the



Sensei is an international consulting firm that helps their clients deliver business results by improving human performance and optimising the value of team and leadership interactions.

We focus on areas where companies can raise the bar on performance, productivity and profit. We ensure that any work we do has clear line of sight to specific business outcomes of value to the organisation, so that a solid return on time, energy and investment is realised.

We are experts in the process of unlocking potential and focusing this in the right ways on the right aims; and we excel at emotionally engaging leaders and teams to own the change, take accountability for it and deliver it. In short ... **'We do the really hard part of the soft stuff.'**

answer. After all, a diamond is no more than a piece of old wood put under sustained pressure and there is some truth in the old adage that 'necessity is the mother of invention'. We do seem to relish a good crisis and with our backs against the wall, new ideas and thoughts soon begin to flow. So, as long as desire has not deserted us, we have to care!

In business, creating a 'War Game' scenario where we deliberately attack our well thought through plans from a different, potentially hostile perspective, is enjoyed by all. Turning these attack plans into polished defence plans can be more challenging, but our 'War Game' process is a proven tool for developing new insights and creating robust action plans worth fighting for.

I often start client sessions with a few simple exercises that are deliberately designed to destabilise the prevalent thinking in the room. Increasing people's tolerance to the state of 'bewilderment' is my initial aim. Bewilderment is a much underrated state of mind; let the mind re-learn how to wander and it will surprise you! Many of us have trained ourselves to leap from 'problem' to 'solution' then into 'action' without the application of any real thought!

We have many tools designed to dramatically increase the productivity of idea generation. Foremost amongst these is the ability to create safe 'idea zones'- in effect, greenhouses made of time and space that can be created anywhere. Ideas need to incubate before they are exposed to the harsh world in which they will need to survive.

We create working environments where reality is asked to step outside for a moment so that your mind is allowed to wander. A key skill is the ability to shut up 'Self II', the critical voice inside your head that all too often dominates and distracts. Tell it to shut up, you need a break...

The one 'person' I always invite is my good friend Sarah N Dipity. Whilst wondering if this topic worked for this month's Leadership Conversation I happened to switch on Radio 2. Simon Mayo was interviewing Dave Stewart, who was plugging his new book 'The Business Playground', which tackles the same theme. I thought 'How odd!' and started typing!

Malcolm Follis, May 2010