

State FFA Officer Web Page

FEATURE ARTICLE

JANUARY 2005

Creative Thinking...by Curt Friedel, Graduate Student, University of Florida

New ideas are continually shaping our world making our lives better. With 6.4 billion people in the world, one would think that most of the simplest ideas would have already been discovered. This, however, is not the case. Take for example wheeled luggage. The suitcase and the wheel have both coexisted for a long time. Nevertheless, it wasn't until 1988 that Robert Plath, a Northwest Airline pilot was so tired of carrying his luggage through the airport that he attached inline skates and a retractable handle to his suitcase. The rest is history. Plath's creative solution to his problem has changed the luggage industry forever.

The ability to find problems is a direct measure of creative thinking (Runco, 1994). Chances are, if you enjoy finding and solving problems, you are creative. As a presenter wanting to enhance creative thinking, you will want to start with a vague or ill-defined problem. Here's an example: You have a bull in a corral with no way to move him into a trailer to take him to the sale barn. How do you get the bull in the trailer? As one can see, a wide variety of solutions can be used to solve this problem.

Once an ill-defined problem is posed, ask your participants to individually develop a creative solution. It is important to remember that people have different creative problem solving styles. These styles include being more adaptive or more innovative (Kirton, 2003). More adaptive people have one or two excellent ideas that make the solution more efficient and typically do not challenge established rules or directions. An idea from a more adaptive group may include backing the trailer to the fence to make a chute to guide the bull into the trailer.

More innovative people have several experimental ideas and maybe one good idea that can be implemented. This group tries to make the solution different instead of efficient, and they typically challenge all rules and directions. An idea from a more innovative group may include feeding the bull a sleeping pill and somehow dragging the bull into the trailer. A third group of people will fall somewhere in the middle of these two creative styles. It is critical to remember that both groups of people are creative in their own way. For example, Thomas Edison was more adaptive and Albert Einstein was more innovative; both were extremely creative.

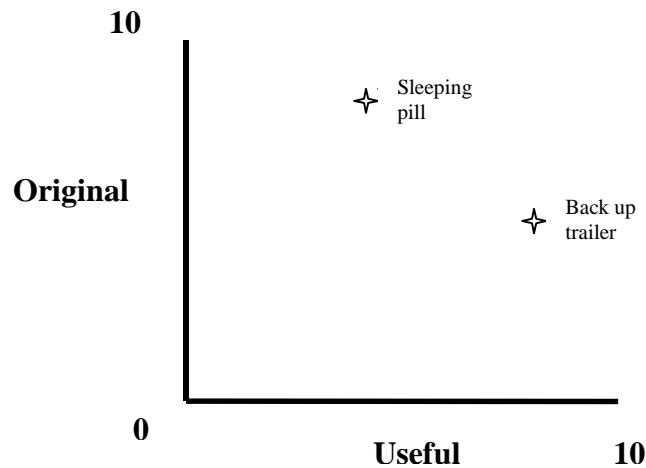
Knowing that people creatively solve problems in different styles is instrumental in choosing techniques to help your workshop participants solve problems. Even though anyone can learn to use all creative thinking techniques, a person will prefer a technique that is consistent with their creative style. A more adaptive person may prefer a problem solving technique known as the Ishikawa design, also known as the fishbone technique. A detailed description of this technique can be found at: <http://mot.vuse.vanderbilt.edu/mt322/Ishikawa.htm>. A more innovative person may prefer brainstorming. A list of guidelines for brainstorming can be found at <http://www.jpb.com/creative/brainstorming.php>. There are also creative problem solving techniques that work for both styles such as SCAMPER, which people tend to have strengths in certain steps because of their adaptive or innovative style. Steps to SCAMPER can be found at <http://me.odysseyofthemind.org/SCAMPER%20your%20way%20to%20creative%20thinking.htm>.





Let your workshop participants choose which technique to use.

To evaluate the creative solutions generated, you must determine how original and useful the solution is in solving the problem. Of course, problems can be solved with unoriginal ideas, but is that creative? Alternatively, original ideas can be presented that are not useful, but are you then solving the problem? To finish your presentation, ask for volunteers to share their creative solutions, while you graph them on a chart like this:



In our example of getting a bull into the trailer, one can see that although the sleeping pill is original, the usefulness of the idea is questionable. How do you feed the pill to the bull? How do you drag the bull into the trailer? Backing up the trailer to the fence to create a chute is useful if it works, but not too original. Many cattle ranchers use similar tactics to guide the bull into the trailer. One will also find that originality increases with more constraints, such as a muddy corral, a mean bull, no people to help, etc.

As leaders in agriculture, we need to stay on the cutting edge of new ideas and concepts and encourage individuals to think of different and efficient ideas that make our world better. I encourage you to try the techniques listed above in your presentations to engage participants and foster creative thinking.