

3. How to innovate - strip them down, tie their ankles, make them run

 By Douglas Kruger

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Here is a curious thing about human thought and creative processes: If you apply no rules whatsoever, you will tend to get poor results. Present your people with a 'white page' and they generally won't know what to do with it...

Strangely, however, impose *some* limitations, and you can actually get much richer thought offerings. Difficulty is one of the birth-places of innovation.

The dynamic tends to play out like this: if you ask a person to name as many blue things as they can, you will tend to get a fairly limited number of answers. Most people will start to struggle after around ten items, and most will tend to start by naming the sky and the sea. The answers are both limited and obvious.



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Now give them a set of restrictive parameters. Ask them, for example, to think of as many blue things as they can name *inside a shopping mall*. Having provided restrictive parameters, you will tend to get more answers numerically and more creative answers qualitatively. People might start volunteering interesting observations like 'the eyes of a shop assistant'; 'a car on display in the main court'; 'Pepsi cans'; 'the metallic bars protecting a jewellery shop after it is closed'; or even 'the mood of overtaxed shoppers'.

If you impose parameters on people's thinking, you can enjoy greater rewards. Twitter, with its 140-character limit, was initially criticised for being too restrictive. But just look at how successful it's been. The limitation focuses thinking, rather than cramping it.

Ernest Hemingway was once challenged by his friends, who said he couldn't write a complete short story in just six words. Hemingway won the wager. He wrote: 'For Sale: Baby Shoes. Never used.'

Strict parameters can greatly enhance our thinking.

Here is how you can benefit from this approach when your team sits down to brainstorm. Try imposing one of the following parameters and see how much more innovative their thinking becomes:

- Remove one key thing, such as funding, or important people. Ask the group what they could do under such circumstances.
- Impose crazy time limits and force them to think: what's the best we could do under those circumstances?
- Tell them to imagine a scenario in which all their current tools - their 'delivery mechanisms' - are removed, yet they still had to provide the same essential service to existing clients. They can acquire new tools and they can go about it in new ways, but they may not go about it the way they did before. How would they do it?

The merit of the third suggestion is that it helps to reveal threats. If *your* people can think of different ways of providing your service, surely someone else can, too. This may be your opportunity to beat them to it.

The first reaction to your 'limited parameters' exercise will tend to be feigned outrage and playful sarcasm. That's fine. Let it run its course. Then insist: 'So, what *could* we do?' After this, your job is to keep them going, even during the lulls: 'And what else?' Keep probing for more. You want to get beyond the obvious answers in the initial outpouring. The gold lies in the weirder suggestions that will come later on, when thinking requires a little more struggling.

Note that you are practicing a sort of 'duality thinking' in this scenario. You don't actually have to apply any of these constraints in the real world. This exercise is carried out simply so that you might benefit from the product of the thought process created by the experiment. The entire point is to initiate a state of 'what-if' thinking among your team. 'What if' is a powerful starting-point for real-world innovation.

The wrong way to think about it: *Imagine you're free to do anything...*

The right way to think about it: *Imagine you are severely limited. What could you do that would be most effective given the limitations?*

ABOUT DOUGLAS KRUGER

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