

## Contextual Thinking

### The Key to Success in Communicating Innovative Proposals

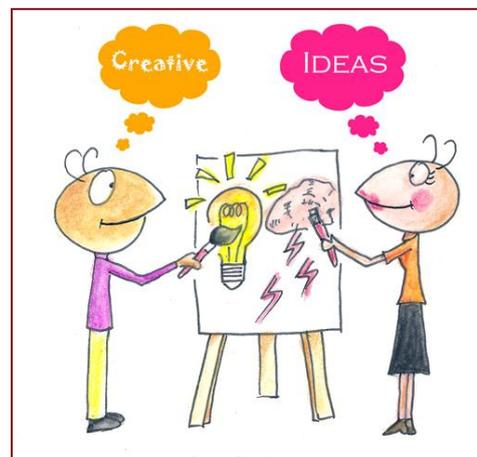
By Hector Ramos

You may have heard and read much in the last few years regarding creativity and innovation. Or you may even have attended a creativity workshop that you found interesting, fun and helped you come up with some new ideas. Now your current employer may be requiring innovative input. However, you find that your suggestions are mostly ignored or frowned upon. This is mainly because nobody has told you ‘the secret’.

In the case of creativity and innovation, not only do managers have different ideas of what they mean, but they find it difficult to express them in a consistent manner. This results in resorting to clichés such as out-of-the-box thinking, or ideas producing bottom-line results. If there is such a variety in opinion, what can you do as a potential or current employee to provide the required creative and innovation input?

#### 7 Steps to Develop Creative and Innovative Thinking Skills

- 1) **Do not get excited about it** (or at least control your excitement). Your innovative idea has flaws that your managers and colleagues see a mile away. However, they seem to be blinded to the financially rewarding innovative insights that you find obvious.
- 2) **Do not get frustrated by rejection** (or at least control your emotions). This comes with the territory. Instead you can deflect negative criticism by asking for constructive input: How would you improve this idea? How can we overcome this hurdle? (people usually do not give much feedback, but if they do, it can help you improve your idea and keep them quiet for a while).
- 3) **Start asking some appropriate questions.** Your aim is to know what your managers understand by creativity and innovation. What is their “box” when they use the “out-of-the-box” expression? How do they see the development of the products and processes and the technologies supporting them? This step is essential in discovering “the secret”.
- 4) **Continue to collect relevant information.** What is the market or technological trend that you can use to back your future innovation? What are the innovations from other players in the industry or similar industries in your country or abroad? What are your customers looking for? How can you meet their current challenges?
- 5) **Generate many ideas.** Stretch your mind to go beyond the 2nd best to the best option. Once you have generated many options you will get a better understanding on the different innovative possibilities facing you. Nobel Prize winner Linus Pauling said “The way to get good ideas is to get lots of ideas and throw the bad ones away”.



- 6) **Be selective on your ideas.** How does your perfect solution look like? You will start building a series of criteria that will guide your selection and future building up of a valuable solution. (This is crucial to find “the secret”).
- 7) **Start building up ideas into solutions.** You can proceed by identifying potential flaws (your colleagues will volunteer to help you do this) and refining your idea to remove those flaws or turn them into leverage points. The weakness of an idea can become its strength in a different context. For instance, the product Post-It™ was the result of a failed attempt to create stronger glue for paper.

## 6 Guidelines for Making People Accept Your Creative Input

Some basic guidelines to adopt when giving creative and innovative input are as follows:

- ❑ **Start small.** By providing small feasible improvement suggestions you can start providing quick benefit to the company.
- ❑ **Consider the resources** you need in terms of knowledge (what do you need to know) and manpower (who can help you). For instance, following up on competitors’ product history, usability reports or global technological trends in similar or different industries can help you gather insights for your innovative input.
- ❑ **Persevere and persuade.** The innovation process may not be easy. You need to become a diplomat, be careful communicating calculated risk, testing periods, and never oversell your proposal on excitement.
- ❑ **Don’t listen to your VOJ.** This is the small Voice of Judgment critical to all novelty in ideas even before they have been deliberately analysed and selected. As Einstein once said “If the idea is not absurd at first, there is no hope for it”. The process of making sense or connecting the idea to reality is a separate one.
- ❑ Remember that **suggestions need time** and have their time. Some of them may flourish at a later date.
- ❑ **Learn from every mistake** as much as you can. The more you learn, the more your managers will appreciate your work (these lessons will be applicable in future innovation initiatives).

Finally, use “the secret” from the first to the last moment of the process. This is simply stated “the ability to perceive, understand and value creative and innovative input from the other’s (your manager) perspective”. You may even get to the point where the ideas that you produce resonate so much on your managers that they will themselves carry them out. This ability is learnt through insightful questioning and deep listening but it all starts with the intention (desire) to discover and understand deeply the cultivated (reasoned) viewpoints of others (try practising with friends or relatives).

The leverage to “the secret” is that the more you build trust in the existing managerial paradigm on creativity and innovation the more you will be able to stretch that paradigm to enable the company to see beyond to the possibilities of new business models, markets or even re-defining one’s industry. Are we not after all in a “City of Possibilities”?

## About the Author

**Hector Ramos** is a Managing Consultant of COE based in Singapore. He holds a Master of Science degree in Creative Studies and Change Leadership by the University of New York, USA. Hector can be contacted at [Hector.Ramos@COE-Partners.com](mailto:Hector.Ramos@COE-Partners.com).