Solve Problems Like a Creative Genius
Techniques Borrowed from Walt Disney

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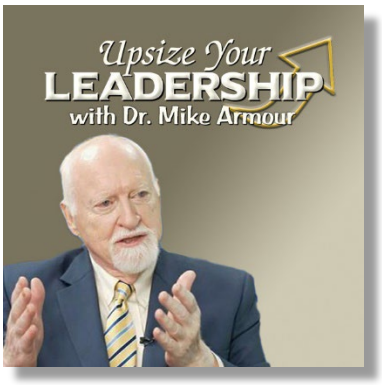

In my experience, businesspeople – and especially business men – are a pretty pragmatic group. They are not particularly enamored of touchy-feely stuff. Or anything which might be remotely akin to it.

So, when they hear a word like "neuroscience," their frequent response is somewhat "ho-hum."

If that's your inclination, let me ask you to set it aside briefly. Allow me a few minutes today to summarize some powerful, practical insights drawn from research on the brain. While these insights are valuable to anyone, they are particularly advantageous for business owners, senior executives, and managers.

In roles like these, you make decisions routinely. Most are not particularly challenging, and you can dispatch with them quickly. But occasionally a situation is so complex or pivotal that addressing it effectively demands the best that you can muster in terms of creativity, imagination, and innovation.

For times like those, think about how helpful it would be to have a problem-solving methodology designed specifically for these very types of decisions. If you can see how beneficial that could be – not just for business owners and executives, but for anyone – then stand by.

In this podcast and the one next week, I'm going to lay out two different techniques for maximizing the creativity and imagination which go into your decisions. Both sets of techniques are time-proven. And they can be utilized for either individual or group decision-making.

I like these two methods – and use them myself – because they provide a powerful decision-making framework for those times when you need to be visionary in finding new paths forward. Or when you need to be innovative and imaginative in resolving critical problems. In a word, these methods bring out your most creative self.

They are both simple to understand and easy to implement. But one is more streamlined and compact than the other. And since it was developed by one of the most creative, trail-blazing business leaders of all time, I will focus on it today. So, buckle up. The next 20 minutes promise to upsize your leadership.

I know that it may seem simplistic, but the fundamental reason that you're a leader is because there are challenges to be met and problems to be solved. Take away those challenges and problems, and the world has little need for your services.

However, over 23 years as a business consultant, I've observed that few business owners and executives have an established procedure for making highly consequential decisions. What I see most often is something of a scattergun approach.

That is, our thought process spreads our focus all over the map. Take a typical group meeting to resolve a thorny issue. One minute we're throwing ideas on the table as to what we could do. The next we are arguing over whether a certain suggestion is practical. Then suddenly we are playing what-if games with still another idea, and then moments later, questioning the reliability of data on which we're basing our assumptions. Like I said, a scattergun approach.

And we follow a similar pattern when we problem-solve alone. We may not be listening to voices scattered around the room. But we are constantly hearing an inner dialogue, with different points of view interrupting one another, taking issue with one another, even making light of one another, each contending to hold our attention.

Needless to say, this is hardly an efficient way to resolve complex issues or situations – especially those which call for solutions which are creative, imaginative, or innovative. And here's the reason. A process like that interferes with those parts of the brain which are most instrumental in unleashing creativity. The scattergun approach is capable of reaching good decisions, to be sure. Otherwise, humanity would have abandoned it long ago. But when we're unwilling to settle for a merely good solution, but seek a truly imaginative one, it's unlikely to serve us well.

Let me explain. Most of us are aware that the brain is divided into regions, each one with a unique function to execute. Early in the history of neuroscience, research tried to match individual regions with specific mental processes. Considerable progress was made in that direction.

As technology improved, however, we were able to peer into the brain with greater clarity. And what we discovered is that a one-to-one relationship between regions of the brain and a given mental function is not possible. Dependent on the nature of the function, different regions of the brain coalesce into alliances to carry out the function interactively. (And incidentally, "alliance" is my word for this coalition. It's not the strict scientific term for it.)

When you're compiling a list of things to do, a particular alliance manages the task. When you're performing a quality control check, a different alliance takes over. When you're reading a manual, still another alliance is dominant. When you're conducting an accountability conversation, the governing alliance shifts once more.

When individual alliances come to the fore, they create or contribute to a certain state of mind. Some states of mind center on emotions. Excitement. Sadness. Joy. Others are a reflection of how the mind is oriented. Focused. Distracted. Disengaged. Then there are those states of mind in which we experience a given mood, such as anticipation, curiosity, expectation, determination, frustration, or weariness.

Notice that we refer to these as "states," a word derived from the same root as "static." States are somewhat static. Unlike thoughts which can flit through our mind rapidly, states – once

activated – tend to linger and to dissipate slowly. And apart from states like fright or shock or surprise, they normally require time to ramp up to full strength.

Take curiosity, for example. You rarely snap immediately into a state of curiosity. You notice something which seems strange or out of place or just not quite right. Perhaps you're tempted to dismiss it at first. But something keeps drawing your attention to it. And you begin asking yourself, "What's the explanation for this?" The state of curiosity is starting to build. As you continue to investigate, your level of curiosity probably builds steadily, until eventually you may be totally absorbed in curiosity. Most states reach peak intensity in a manner similar to this.

As humans, we are wired to experience a vast number of states. Out of curiosity myself, I once began a list of English words which describe states, just to see how many there were. In relatively short order, the list extended to almost 250 items, and it still was not exhaustive. Moreover, we can experience multiple states at once. Think of approaching a giant roller coaster for the first time. As you draw near, you experience a state of anticipation, a state of excitement, some anxiety, perhaps a little trepidation. We generally experience states in clusters like this. At any given moment, however, one state in the cluster will be more prominent than the others.

Now, let's come back to the challenge of creative problem-solving and tie this discussion of mental functional alliances and clusters of states together. All states are expressions of some underlying alliance. An alliance of brain functions which engenders fear differs notably from an alliance which begets hope.

While every alliance is laden with capability, it attains its highest potential only when its associated state (or states) is highly energized. To attain that level of intensity, states must be protected from constant interruption. Yet, constant state interruption is characteristic of the scattergun approach. The scattergun discussion in the room – or the scattergun dialogue in our head – moves rapidly, back and forth, from questions which stoke curiosity to analysis which invites detachment to critique which calls for a skeptical state of mind. Just as one state begins to establish itself, another elbows it aside. We never gain the full benefit of what our most productive states could provide.

Allow me to illustrate. Imagine that you're attending a stirring theater performance. You are drawn into the story, the character development, the flow of the play. Time seems to evaporate because you are so caught up in the moment.

Now picture yourself in that same seat at the same play with the same actors on stage. But this time, seated behind you are two people who are intent on conducting a conversation while the play is underway. Unfortunately, they are talking in elevated whispers which continually interrupt your concentration. What happens now to your enthralling experience in the theater? It's thoroughly compromised, isn't it? You can't get the full benefit of it.

To make matters worse, their voices get louder. A moment ago, you were being disturbed by their muffled whispers, which you could sometimes ignore. But now, you can actually make out their words. And they are making fun of various actors and costumes on stage. Gone is the possibility of you ever recapturing that moment when time evaporated because you were so engrossed in the performance. You can't be engrossed and distracted at the same time.

Creativity calls for certain productive states to have unhampered opportunity to emerge, establish themselves, and persist uninterrupted for extended periods. Protracted states of mind

are notably well-versed at drawing on the deepest recesses of the unconscious mind, tapping the creative potential which lies there.

To give the unconscious mind this opportunity, we must find a way to carry out each stage of the creative process within a discrete space or time frame which is dedicated only to that one stage and fenced off from all states not conducive to it. Within this space or time frame, we want to encourage multiple concurrent states which support this particular phase of the creative process. Remember, our roller coaster example. Multiple states can be active at once.

For example, a critical step in the creative process is to compile a list of possibilities. Developing this list may call for a combination of states. It obviously requires us to be imaginative. But we also need to be curious. Inquisitive. Receptive to suggestions. Open to novel ideas, just to cite a few of the desired states.

At each stage of the creative process, we create this kind of protected space for the states which are most appropriate for that stage. And I use the word “space” figuratively. We have the option of executing each stage in its own designated location. Or we may proceed through all stages of creative problem-solving in the same physical location, but with specific time frames in a specific sequence allotted to each of the respective stages.

For my purposes here, I think it’s more instructive to think of discrete spaces dedicated to individual phases of the creative process. Let me borrow, therefore, from the way that Walt Disney did it.

No one questions that Disney was both an artistic and business genius. Beginning in the 1930s, his prolific studios developed numerous breakthroughs which literally changed the entertainment industry. The first colored animation. The first full-length animated film. The first animation in which animals moved naturally. The earliest super high-speed video cameras. The first nature documentaries. The list goes on and on.

These creative innovations were brought to life through a three-part process which he followed slavishly. Each component of the process had its own designated space in the studio. It began with what some would later dub the Dreaming Room. It was a spacious, brightly lit conference room with colorful cartoon characters lining the walls. This was where Disney and his associates retreated to foster core concepts for their creative initiatives. It was the room in which to dream.

There were certain rigid rules for the Dreaming Room. Any idea which came to mind was captured in writing, with no further discussion and certainly no critique. No idea was dismissed. This was time singularly devoted to what the unconscious mind might bring to the fore. Once no more ideas were surfacing, the group identified two or three to explore more fully.

Now the action moved to a second space. This was the room where the animators and videographers worked. They were asked to make a stab at producing a very brief film which turned these promising ideas into actual footage. Here the creative sides of both the unconscious mind and the conscious mind teamed up to translate the underlying idea into a tangible reality. They were basically developing a prototype, even though Disney never used that term, so far as I’ve been able to determine.

In the course of producing the prototype, the animators and videographers were to abstain from critique of the original idea. Their job was to generate a full-bodied expression of the idea. In

effect, this is where the idea was given a reality check. Can it be carried out realistically? Is it workable? Is it doable?

With this short test film in hand, everyone retreated to a small, cramped video room, where the footage was projected. Now was time for critique and evaluation. Where did the footage fall short of expectations? Did anything not feel right about the animation? If so, what was it specifically? The critique lasted as long as necessary. But only critique was allowed. No suggestion of ideas about how to overcome inadequacies. No recommendations on how a given element might be animated differently. Those inputs belonged in another room.

Next, the group retreated to the Dreaming Room. Here they listed the things which needed improvement. And they dealt with each one independently. Each issue, effectively, was a new problem which needed a solution. The operative question was, “What are our ideas about how to fix this shortcoming?” Again, promising ideas were taken to the animators to revise the prototype. Then back to the video room to review their effort. This process kept repeating itself until the product passed muster in the critiquing room.

Notice the rigid discipline. The Dreaming Room was only for conceptualization. The animator’s room was only for implementation. The film room was only for critical analysis. Can you see how each of these discrete functions, operating within its assigned boundaries of activity, summoned a unique blend of states which mutually supported the governing function? And these supportive states were given abundant time to make their optimal contribution without being brushed aside.

To cite a single example of how this process could play out, Disney’s team was disappointed early on with their inability to make animals move realistically. This was not such an important issue as long as they were only producing animated cartoons about Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. But when they began to dream of animated features like Snow White and Cinderella, their goal was for animation to imitate real life. Both humans and animals needed to move in ways which were natural and did not distract from the story line.

But how to do so? In the Dreaming Room, they developed the idea of creating a very high-speed camera and sending it into the Sierras with cameramen to record animals in their natural habitat. The animators would then be able to study the film frame-by-frame to make their drawings more nearly true to life. From the Dreaming Room, the idea passed to engineers, who succeeded in building high-speed cameras which were small enough and light enough to be ported into the wild and operated. The final camera design passed muster in the critique phase.

In time, the inventory of animal footage was taking up an extensive amount of space in the studio. It was too valuable to the animators to discard it. But was there some way to monetize this asset? Back to the Dreaming Room with that question. And what resulted was Hollywood’s first nature documentaries.

Can you see the benefit of how Disney structured this process? The creative portion of the brain had an opportunity to make its contributions unhampered. Then the implementation portion of the brain was given the same opportunity. And finally, the critical part of the brain was given full license to make its contribution.

Now, in Disney’s case, they were using this process in the actual creation of a product. In problem solving and planning, you would not create a prototype. Your product is a plan of action. That’s what you develop in your equivalent of Disney’s second phase. Then in the critical analysis phase, you would play devil’s advocate with that plan. You would then take any

inadequacies back to the dreaming space or the implementation space, whichever is appropriate, to improve on the solution which you've created.

As I've indicated, you can utilize Disney's approach when you're looking for solutions by yourself. I have a soft, comfortable chair in which to dream, a small work desk at which to plan, and a porch bench outside on which to critique. I do have one valuable suggestion, however. Do all of your work – the generation of ideas, the mapping of a plan, your critique – with paper and pen or pencil. Again, there's significant brain science to support this technique.

Because we all write at a far more measured pace than we type, the process of writing down potential solutions or translating one into a plan takes longer when handwriting is your mechanism. But that time plays to your advantage. Because your brain operates so much faster than your hand, and because you are experienced enough with writing that you need little concentration to do it, your mind needs something to occupy itself while you're jotting down your thoughts. And what it does is to continue to work on your problem in the background while you are writing. Many of my most creative breakthroughs have come in mid-statement as I was committing an idea to writing.

You don't get that benefit with a computer, where you can dash off a thought quickly on a keyboard, then move on to another idea. Using a tablet creates a distraction of its own. Whereas most of us can write by hand or type on a keyboard instinctively and without much thought, we are not so adept on a tablet. We have to be more purposeful and deliberative in deciding where to strike the keypad. We are thus so distracted by the typing process that we rob our mind of precious time that it could be using to generate new ideas.

So, leave the technology behind. And I would even encourage doing so in group decision-making. Have people take notes by hand, not on a laptop.

And with that, we put a wrap on this episode. I'll use our next visit to introduce you to another framework to bring greater creativity to your problem-solving and planning. It's a bit more complex than the one which we explored to day. But like Disney's approach, you can implement it easily and your

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