

Making sense of ideas

The model route to innovation

Ideas are the raw material for innovations that have become so vital to achieving and then sustaining business success. Generating ideas is often the easy part. It is putting them into action that poses the real challenge. As former US politician Ron Brown once remarked, “every new idea is an impossibility, until it is born”.

Effectively articulating ideas is a constant problem within many organizations. Having an inspired thought is one thing, while making others see the light appears a different matter altogether. Using words and numbers is an obvious starting point. But this method alone sometimes does not produce the desired effect and meaningful understanding frequently remains somewhat elusive.

A symbolic solution

It is common knowledge that people have different learning preferences and a key belief is that many individuals learn by doing. Shrewd operators seem to appreciate this and have turned to the realms of art and science in the quest to provide clarity and enlightenment. And how is this achieved? Through the creation of models that encompass two extra dimensions in addition to those reflecting height, width and depth. Movement creates a four-dimensional structure that is subsequently transformed into 5-D by its myriad of figurative effects. This fifth dimension is arguably the most crucial as it helps convey meanings via different symbolic agents such as images, signs, objects and stories. Seeing is believing and this “metaphorming” process enables visual depiction of ideas using these movable structures incorporating styles that can differ substantially in terms of their degree of concreteness or abstraction.

Although appearing visionary, symbolic modeling is nothing new. It originates way back in prehistoric times in the shape of earthenware, pottery and carved images on cave walls. Routine deployment of figurative devices like metaphors and similes illustrates how common it has become since then to transfer meaning between subjects as a means to improve our understanding of various concepts. Metaphorming goes much further though as it enables the creation of new and unique linkages to emerge from the associative thinking it advances.

To appreciate the potential of the process, think of a more refined version of brainstorming that involves four separate stages:

1. *Connect*. During this initial phase, various ideas and associations are considered.
2. *Discover*. The aim here is to narrow down options so that those displaying most potential can be further explored. Awareness grows of the different ways connections can be made and possibilities begin to take shape.

3. *Invent.* At this point, the focus advances to transforming potential into reality as feasible practical outcomes are deliberated.
4. *Apply.* Invention is executed to become a working innovation when this final step is reached.

Metaphorming clearly possesses tremendous scope to enhance any firm's innovation capabilities. But unless those involved show perception, rigor and determination, success will not come easy. A willingness to embrace new ways of thinking is another must.

The dynamic form of the structures enables each dimension to be modified, revamped or edited to serve different purposes and contexts. Illumination and development of innovative thought and ideas is critical and without doubt enhanced by this flexibility that the process offers.

Ideas often fail to see the light of day because of their complexity or abstract nature. Metaphorming helps overcome such barriers by stimulating both cognitive and affective processes. The result? Creative abilities can reach their optimum level and thoughts and feelings previously considered indeterminate suddenly become much more tangible and lucid. That can only be positive where innovation is concerned.

The team factor

The potency of symbolic models increases further when teamwork is deployed to create and develop insights. A team richly diverse in knowledge, skills and backgrounds is able to create models that exude a wide array of ideas and inventive solutions. The secret is to blend individual and group inventiveness as a means to nurture mutual regard for communication skills and creative vision. Engagement with a team-oriented ethos is likely to see members become more willing to expand ideas and less likely to challenge or oppose them.

American communications giant Qwest provides a perfect illustration of how metaphorming can help promote the harmony and collaboration that is essential to the attainment of innovation goals. The corporation formerly known as US West held workshops that involved a cross-functional team with a mandate to enhance voice, video and data for high-speed internet product and service offerings. Executive members were drawn from a wide range of areas including strategic planning, product development, operations and marketing.

Such situations invariably give rise to different, and often conflicting, interests and agendas. But building the models meant that a collaborative spirit soon negated any fragmented thinking that prevailed. That functional boundaries and internal politics were so easily overcome highlights how metaphorming can transcend conventional barriers and divisions to spawn greater unity. In this case, inclusiveness and greater flexibility for inter-department collaboration served to strengthen the focus on customer needs.

These workshops helped Qwest to identify and explore potential new offerings for its wholesale and retail divisions. One breakthrough concept led to the integration of public and private networks able to transmit data needing large bandwidth capacities. Using symbolic structures is also credited with helping the organization acquire an ability to envisage outcomes in advance. Not surprisingly, this has raised its competitiveness to new heights.

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Modeling the future

The process can also be utilized to explore ways of attaining specific goals. This occurred when Japanese corporate behemoth NTT Communications acquired US web-hosting company Verio. Assessment of the newly-merged company's strengths and weaknesses led to the identification of an appropriate structure and knowledge of where to leverage key capabilities.

A 5-D model that symbolized the organization's strategic plan was created and helped align the respective cultures and improve communication and teamwork within and between groups. Shared understanding of common goals and future direction followed and leaders were equipped with the knowledge needed to make vital decisions that helped the company retain its industry-leading position.

Construction of symbolic models together with subsequent individual and collective analysis and reflection often results in new or unexpected discoveries or solutions for those involved. Such outcomes are possible because the process enables people to engage better with ideas to the extent that they are able to perceive simplicity in something ostensibly much more complex. This is perhaps the real jewel in metaphorming's crown.

Comment

The review is based on: "Pointing your way to success through metaphorming," by Todd Siler. It is argued that poor understanding of initial ideas hinders innovation within many companies. Siler proposes metaphorming as providing an effective solution. In this insightful piece, he details the process and how the use of multi-dimensional symbolic models enables people in the organization to connect better both with ideas and each other to enhance collaboration and inventiveness. Examples of how symbolic structures have been created and deployed within certain major organizations helps illustrate many of the valuable points made.

Reference

Siler, T. (2010), "Pointing your way to success through metaphorming", *Journal of Business Strategy*, Vol. 31 No. 4, pp. 47-58, ISSN 0275-6668.

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