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Tools & Techniques that Make Idea Generation Fun

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Executives measure success in a number of ways, many of which involve evaluating the present-day state of their organization. A short-sighted view often focuses on the immediate future (one to two years) and fails to take into account the growth of the organization in five, 10 or even 20 years. It is important for executives and their teams to think beyond the immediate future to consider how core competencies may evolve in the long-term future. Creating a strategic plan and pinpointing milestones is not enough to remain competitive.

By envisioning the future, leaders can explore innovative solutions and better position their company as different from other companies. They can bolster core competencies and develop new strengths and resources that can add value in the ever-global and increasingly competitive marketplace.

When is the last time you envisioned the future? Chances are, you recently envisioned going to the movies or dining out at a restaurant and didn't even realize it. During this mental process, the visual cortex of your brain was triggered and a decision was made on what movie to see or what restaurant to dine at based on your previous experiences and current thoughts and feelings in the moment. Leaders use the same brain function to make strategic solutions that address present-day problems and anticipate future trends. Research published in *Competing for the Future* by Gary Hamel and C. K. Prahalad states that "40% of senior executive time is spent looking outward, and of this time, about 30% is spent peering three, four, five or more years into the future. Of the time spent looking forward, no more than 20% is spent attempting to build a collective view of the future (the other 80% is spent looking at the future of the manager's particular business). Thus, on average, senior management is devoting less than 3% ($40\% \times 30\% \times 20\% = 2.4\%$) of its energy to building a corporate perspective on the future" (4).

“What will my organization be?”

Take a moment to think about what you want your organization to be. What evidence will help you pinpoint success? The goal is to fill in the blank as many times as possible.

Step 1:

I/my organization will be: _____
I/my organization will be: _____
I/my organization will be: _____
I/my organization will be: _____

Step 2:

Go back to each statement in Step 1 and identify the following:

Concrete Future Goal

When will the goal be accomplished?

Step 3:

List each statement as it should be completed chronologically. For each statement, envision the goal being reached.

Great leaders have the ability to connect the future with the present. They create a compelling vision by focusing on their constituents and harnessing the energy they get from their constituents to implement change. Leaders use their strengths to ensure that their corporation is utilized and that priorities are in place to help make innovation possible. Otherwise, the company can lose its competitive advantage (Dealing with Darwinism, 10). To overcome this obstacle, leaders approach innovation from multiple perspectives—top-down and bottom-up.

Using Future Technology to Solve Problems Today

We are all aware of how quickly technology has taken over our lives. Even the past ten years have seen such things as the iPod and the iPhone, GPS in our automobiles, and radios that have virtually unlimited range. Looking back even at a 20th-century world makes today's technologically dominated world futuristic—not at all what we imagined at that time.

Campbell Brown, on CNN on Christmas Eve, 2009, hosted a program called Future Fast Forward. Her guests were Jeremy Gutsche, from Trendhunter.com and *Wired* magazine's Nick Thompson. They discussed what can be expected in our futures.

Communications and communications technology were high on the topic list for predictions for the future. Nick Thompson predicted that our cell phones would bring what he called augmented reality. That is, a more powerful cell phone will enable you to pay your bills and get into the metro, for instance. Also, supposing you were walking on 58th and Eighth Avenue, your phone will tell you the history of the area. You visit a fruit stand, and your phone will tell you where a particular orange came from. He predicted that we'll have massive amounts of information at our fingertips than we've never had before.

Jeremy Gutsche pointed out that their office was already paperless. Everything they produce is digital content, he said. Paper books and paper newspapers will probably be a thing of the past in the future, he predicted. He also predicted a tablet that's somewhere between a computer and an iPod on which in the future you'll read everything you've read in paper versions before such as magazines.

Gitsche also predicted that in the near future, robots would increasingly take over many things that humans do now. Chefs, bartenders, nurses, hairstylists, for example.

An excellent way to increase ideation (and ultimately enhance innovation and creativity) in an organization is through future gazing or storytelling about the future.

Storytelling about the future can be used effectively to see opportunities for a company today. Tam Thao Pham, a consultant at Deloitte Consulting, LLP, believes that achieving long-term opportunities begins with short-term goals. People are biased by nature toward what is relevant today. In Pham's experience, out-of-the-box thinking naturally occurs when executives shift perspective—when they are taken out of their day-to-day environments and physically engaged in “off-site” meetings. To get executives thinking creatively about the future, Pham tells them stories about competitors, a tool she calls the “story-telling exercise. She explains, “Executives see themselves in their peer group. The story-telling exercise helps them find concrete details for growth. The visuals from storytelling give them a sense of where they are going.”

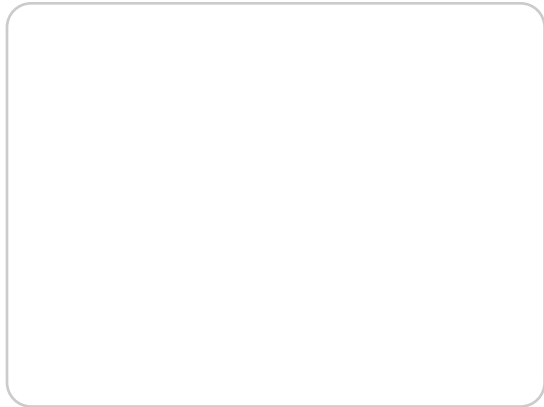
Terrence L. Gargiulo, an organizational development consultant, has come up with nine functions of stories for the purpose of experiential learning:

1. Empower a speaker (they have the effect of entertaining.)
2. Create an environment of trust and openness
3. Bind and bond individuals by eliciting stories from others
4. Engage our minds in active listening so we will understand context and perspective; identify the root cause of a problem; and uncover resistance and hidden agendas.
5. Negotiate differences by revealing diverse points of view; they can shift perspectives in order to see each other, experience empathy, and enter new frames of reference. They also help us become aware of operating biases and values.
6. Encode information by creating a working metaphor to illuminate an opinion, rationale, vision, or decision.
7. Act as tools for thinking by establishing connections between different ideas and concepts to support an opinion or decision
8. Serve as weapons
9. Bring about healing by leading people to think outside the box to generate creative solutions and breakthroughs.

Imagining our futures and even telling stories based on our imaginative speculations can be a very useful tool.

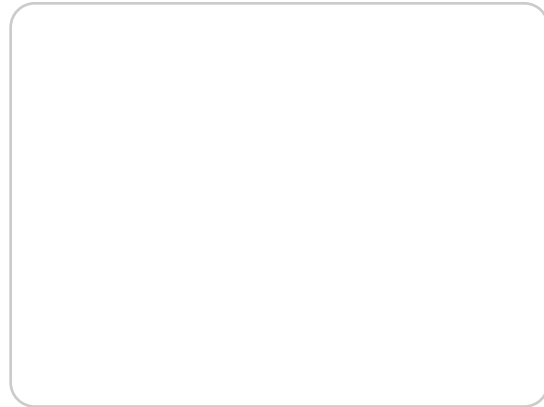
Use the Storyboard Tool

Storyboard Name	Client		Title	
	Spot		Job #	



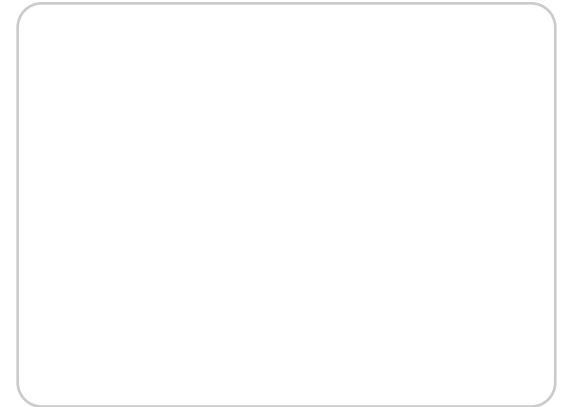
Shot 1:

Music:



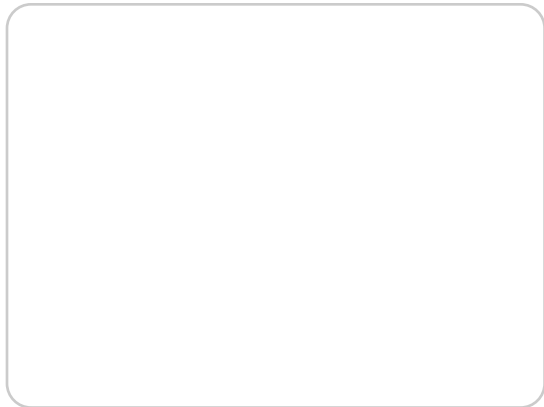
Shot 2:

SFX:



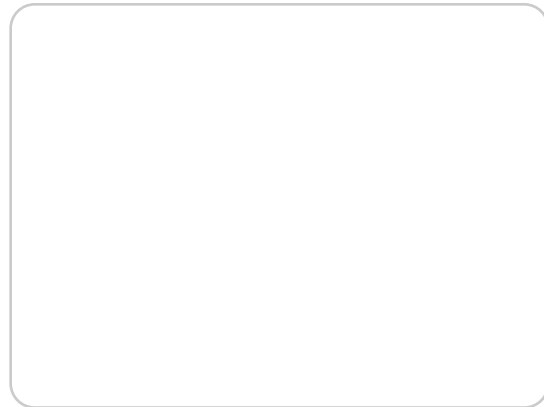
Shot 3:

Music:



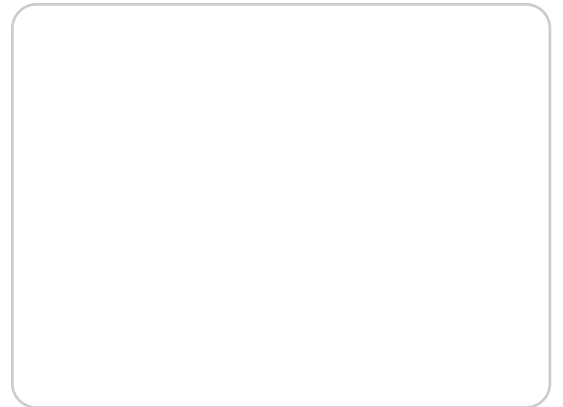
Shot 4:

Music:



Shot 5:

SFX:



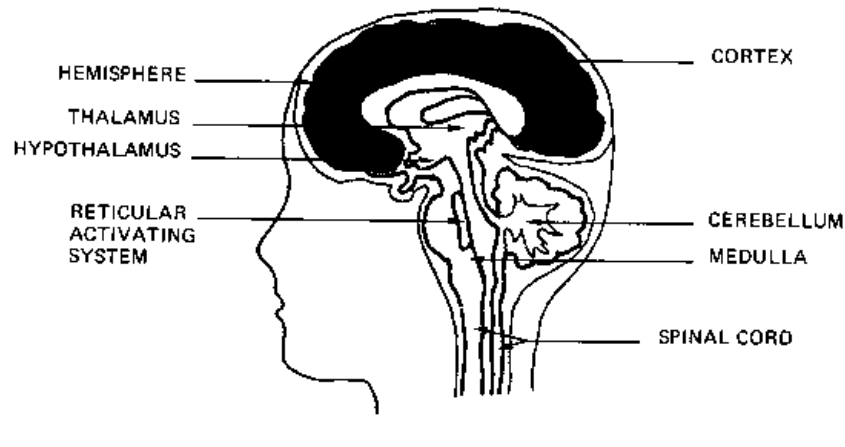
Shot 6:

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How to Envision the Future

Before competing for the Gold, Olympic athletes mentally rehearse every aspect of their athletic challenge. Studies show that our physiology responds as we envision peak performance and the success of an ideal outcome. Borrowing from this concept, it can be hypothesized that following similar mental exercises can and will significantly enhance the growth of a person's organization.

When someone envisions the future, he or she stimulates the reticular activating system of his or her brain, which is the first step in becoming consciously aware of a situation or concept. Daniel Gilbert's research in his book *Stumbling on Happiness* reveals that the visual cortex is "activated when you inspect mental images with your mind's eye" (130). In fact, when "people imagine sounds, they show activation in a sensory of the brain called the auditory cortex, which is normally only activated when we hear real sounds with our ears" (117). See the figure below for an illustration.



Envisioning the future reaches beyond analyzing current data to predict future trends; it involves combining present thought and feeling to strengthen existing or develop new core competencies that are or will be crucial to an organization remaining competitive in five, 10, 20 or even 100 years. The result is powerful foresight, ultimately leading to innovation. Executives can practice envisioning the future in a number of ways.

The outcome of engaging creativity through visualization is powerful foresight, which ultimately leads to innovation (or life changes.) Everyone can practice envisioning the future to enhance his or her creativity.

Start Building a Vision for the Future

1. Add mandatory "vision time" into every meeting. Executives can make creating a vision part of quarterly meetings with the executive team and board of directors.
2. Get everyone involved in the discussion: (a) what the major changes the future will bring and what the significance is to the organization and (b) how and what will people be doing in this industry in thirty, forty or fifty years?

3. Encourage everyone to read about the technologies shaping the world to get their creative juices flowing.
4. Offer training that will help groups/teams better understand the “anticipated” future.
5. Devote time to exploring new forms of communication and activities that encourage collaboration across teams.
6. Offer experiential workshops with themes like, “What will “xya industry” be like when “abc” product or service is made obsolete.
7. Try to visualize yourself in the future, looking back on the present. What do you see? Explain the steps you took to get to this future state.

Executives can start by developing long-term goals and envisioning expected outcomes. One way to start planning for the future is by taking closer look at the core competencies and strengths of the organization, the current market and customers, previous success and areas of differentiation.

Developing a vision for the future starts with asking questions. Here are a few questions to start the process. After each question, take a moment to visualize the desired outcome. For example, an advertising agency decides to specialize in developing product and branding strategies for biotech firms. After visualizing the outcome, the executive would write down and quantify the necessary steps to achieve the “anticipated” outcome. In a team setting, the executive would facilitate discussion around how current core competencies and strengths position the organization to achieve this outcome.

Start with the end in mind

- How will consumer needs change in two, five or ten years? What markets will dominate in the future as a result of these changing needs? How are you uniquely positioned to enter or benefit from this/these markets?
- What competencies would the organization need to grow and develop (2x, 5x, 10x) beyond its current state?
- How will your organization differentiate, gain market share, sustain a competitive advantage, or add value and enhance the customer experience?
- How will you assert yourself as a thought-leader or your organization as a market leader?
- Write down the characteristics of the ideal market, the ideal organization?
- How would the stakeholders (internal and external) and customers (current and future) benefit from the growth of the organization?

- What processes or infrastructure are required to achieve the “anticipated” outcome?
- What resources and strategic alliances will position the organization to achieve this outcome?
- How will your workforce change? What additional training will you and the organization need to achieve this outcome?

Content adapted from: Pfeiffer Annual Consulting, submitted by W. Normal Gustafson, editor Elaine Biech, 2007. Reprinted with permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

The Innovation Output

Paul Siebert, director of corporate strategy and brand development at Steelcase, a global provider of innovative office furniture, and graduate of IIT Institute of Design, is passionate about innovation beyond its typical definition of implementing new products and/or services. Steelcase typically envisions the future seven to 10 years down the road and incorporates evidence-based scenarios to shape corporate strategy. Siebert believes that Steelcase’s approach is to “see the future at the edge of the present.”

Foresight development at Steelcase is a necessary luxury. The company has individuals dedicated to thinking about the future—culturally, socially and technologically—and also about overall shifts in values. The result is the ability to synthesize trends, themes and emerging customer values with such accuracy that the practice is similar to an art form. In addition to employing visionaries, Steelcase utilizes secondary research and conducts primary research to facilitate meaningful dialogue about the value Steelcase brings to the consumer market through its brand(s). By envisioning the future, Steelcase discovers actionable items in the present that lead to innovation on a number of levels.

In his work, Paul frequently relies on an innovation toolkit developed by Vijay Kumar, an innovation expert. The Innovation Toolkit outlines an “innovation planning process supported by structured methods, tools and frameworks”.

(http://www.id.iit.edu/141/documents/innov_toolkit.pdf) “The rigor and discipline these tools bring to the innovation planning process is a key benefit. The process model and the tools are built on knowledge and inspiration from a wide range of disciplines such as social sciences, anthropology, behavioral sciences, design, engineering, business, statistics, library sciences and economics. The tools and processes are conceived holistically to enhance the work processes of multi-disciplinary innovation teams and to integrate the multiple drivers that contribute to the successful adoption of innovations”.

The Innovation Toolkit by Vijay Kumar

Vijay Kumar is an Associate Professor at the Institute of Technology in Chicago and has a consulting team also based in Chicago. He presented his toolkit for innovation at FUTUREGROUND International Conference in 2004.

Kumar advises companies to be constantly proactive in innovating and to avoid the complacency that comes with success. This only happens, says Kumar, when robust planning practices are followed and continuously practiced. His plan has eight modes:

1. **Sense Intent**
There should be an initial intent at the outset and a rough goal, hypothesis, gut feeling or some kind of initial prompt for innovative design to get started. Three activities are carried out in this mode: see changes, diagnose conditions, and form initial strategies. Some key tools support these activities:

- » Trend map—used to visualize broad emerging trends
- » Diagnostic system—used to visualize results of diagnostics
- » Concept space—diagramming tools to organize problems, issues, and opportunities and to frame up the concept space

2. **Know People**
Keeping in mind that the intent is innovation, the focus in this mode is to understand people. Market research can be helpful. However, innovators must ferret out innovative opportunities by discovering people's unmet and not-yet-spoken needs. Some of the observational research used in social sciences can be helpful here as well. Kumar recommends observing people going about their daily lives as the best way to uncover unmet needs.

3. **Frame Insights**
Finding patterns in the data and generating insights is the purpose of this mode in the innovative design process. It's important that the data be looked at in as many ways as possible. Examining people's daily activities can reveal grouping patterns by activity as well as the priorities that people assign to them. Framing up of the insights and patterns that come out of this is what makes this mode important.

4. **Explore Concepts**
An intense focus on the concepts that have come from the insights and opportunities that have been identified will make this mode in the innovative design process successful. The teams will engage in concept exploration, organization, evaluation, and systemization. It's helpful to maintain organization under useful categories and hierarchies to achieve the greatest efficiency.

5. **Make Plans**
Roadmaps for the future employing actionable plans will come out of this mode in the innovative design process, making certain that whatever the teams come up with is in alignment with the research findings and the intent. Teams will consider how the concepts they've been working with can add value to companies as well as to people. The teams should be coming up with innovative products, communications, services, systems, organizational processes, environments, and brands.

6. **Realize Offerings**

Now the abstractions and proposals will become concrete—prototypes will be designed that will be tested in pilots. It's better to test the concepts early on and on real people before they are introduced. These prototypes give opportunities to refine the concepts and ideas. The teams need to develop evaluation criteria for each of the iterations of the design.

7. **Foster Uptake**

Some care should be taken here to foster an environment for successful adoption of the new approaches for your innovative design.

Kumar's toolkit emphasizes that the initiation of a project for innovation in a company or organization can come from various sources, even a gut feeling that this is something that needs to be done. However, the modes of his toolkit are well-worked out beginning with research that focuses on ordinary lives of ordinary people and deducing from those observations patterns and opportunities. He also recommends that prototypes be devised and then tested with a view to refining the concepts and going back to the drawing board if necessary. He also suggests that fostering of the environment for the introduction of the new approaches should be a part of the planning.

All in all, forward-looking leaders believe in finding opportunities that build upon core competencies. They find ways to creatively delight customers and encourage meaningful interactions with their brand. Creativity can make customers' experience with your organization memorable and meaningful.