Conceptual Blocks in Management

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Creative and critical thinking skills are amongst the highest level of cognitive development. To think creatively and critically, we have to use both sides of our brain and understand many aspects of basic knowledge. Both skills are extremely important for achievement and success in the world today. Paradoxically, the more formal education individuals have and the more work experience they have, the less they are able to solve problems in creative ways. Experience in a job often leads to “proper” ways of doing things, specialized knowledge and rigid expectation of appropriate actions. Individuals lose the ability to experiment, improvise or take mental detours (Whetten, 164).

Creative thinking is a blending of different elements to form a new and unique entity. It’s the process of combining parts in such a way as to constitute a pattern of structure that did not exist before. Creative thinkers are able to put ideas together in new or unique ways or create new idea configurations. We often think of artists as being creative, which is certainly true, but scientists, legislators and engineers are also highly creative. They seek to use research and data in new ways to find cures for diseases, design new cars or computers, or draw up new laws for health care. You do not have to be artistic or whimsical to be creative—just imaginative and able to think outside the box.

Toddlers are great creative thinkers because they are constantly using their imaginations to hold “conversations” with toy phones, make “soup” with empty bowls and plastic spoons, and brush their teddy bear’s teeth. As we grow up our creativity sometimes becomes inhibited because we fear failing or looking silly, but in reality without creative thinkers we wouldn’t have Bill Gates, Henry Ford or Spielberg. Creative thinking isn’t just about imagination; it’s also vital
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for problem solving. When kids encounter a new problem and they are able to find a way to solve it without being told what to do, they show maturity and development.

Problems are not only a part of the job; they are a part of life. Within every organization there are problems. A problem simply refers to any discrepancy between the current situation and a desired future solution. Within an organization it is very important to figure out the best way to solve problems that arise. Problem solving is a mental process that involves discovering, and analyzing in order to resolve. Problem solving is an extremely important part of an organization. The ultimate goal of problem solving is to overcome obstacles and find a solution that best resolves the issue. These obstacles are also known as conceptual blocks. Conceptual blocks are some of the concepts that prevent a person from solving problems creatively (Whetten, 164). Conceptual blocks are either pre-established methods or routine human actions that may result in boring or unsatisfactory solutions.

Management is a job in which problem solving is a daily practice. Much of what managers do is solve problems and make decisions. Decision making is a key role of a manager and a leader. Some managers find this to be one of the most difficult tasks to perform. Supervisors are typically forced to address problems early in their supervisory career. Good problem solving skills are fundamentally important if one is going to be successful in his/her career. Problems are something that we don’t particularly like because they’re time consuming; they muscle their way into already packed schedules, they force us to think about an uncertain future, and they never seem to go away. That is why when faced with problems most of us try to eliminate them as quickly as possible (Whetten, 160). New managers often try to solve problems and make decisions by reacting to them before they fully understand all of the possible factors.
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They feel that the quickness of a decision is more important than the long term outcome.

Think outside of the box may be a cliché, but too often we turn multiple issues over and over in our mind without finding an innovative solution for them. That’s because we tend to do all of problem solving in the same way. To get out of that rut, we have to be more creative and see problems from different angles. Creativity and creative thinking is the process of coming up with something new and different such as a product or service, work of art, or a solution to some problem.

Creative problem solving skills have countless uses. Too often people associate creative problem solving with: dealing with a crisis or difficulties or think of it as something that’s used for games and puzzles or special kinds of jobs. Conceptual blocks are some of the concepts that prevent a person from solving problems creatively.

The Four Major Conceptual Blocks Defined

The four major conceptual blocks are: constancy, commitment, compression and complacency. Whetten and Cameron (2002) identify the four major conceptual blocks that inhibit creative problem solving.

Constancy is one way of looking at a problem or using one approach to define, describe or solve it. This is a highly valued attribute associated with maturity, honesty and even intelligence. However, consistency sometimes drives out creativity (Whetten, 168). Once we’ve learned a solution to a problem, we often try to reuse that solution when encountering similar problems. It can be difficult to ignore that solution and consider others. When that solution is ineffective, being fixated on it interferes with our problem solving. Creative problem solving
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requires being able to define and solve problems multiple ways.

   Commitment is seen when individuals become committed to a particular point of view, definition, or solution. Many times these individuals will follow through on that commitment. Two forms of commitment that produce conceptual blocks are stereotyping based on past experiences and ignoring commonalities (Whetten, 170). We assume our current project is like prior projects. In other words, we stereotype things. Creative problem solving requires relaxing our assumptions in order to notice subtle differences and similarities that might help us find solutions.

   Compression is looking too narrowly at a problem, screening out too much relevant data and making assumptions that inhibit problem solving (Whetten, 172). In other words, compression refers to not looking at the “big picture.”

   Complacency occurs because of fear, ignorance, insecurity or just plain mental laziness. Examples are a lack of questioning and a bias against thinking which lead individuals to giving up too easily when encountering problems (Whetten, 175).

   Why Do These Blocks Occur?

   People are creatures of habit and many times change is faced with fear. So when there is an established way—they choose to continue down that path; if a solution was proven successful they continue to utilize it. Since the world it so fast paced and things are done instantly, no one wants to be the person who stops production and is ridiculed for doing something wrong. Therefore, information maybe mishandled and problems are not properly addressed.
Promoting Communication Based Creativity?

Things that leaders can do to promote communication based activities are:

- Leader allows the team to direct the team meeting.
- Enlist outside resources. If you aren’t constantly refilling the creative pool-it will eventually run dry.
- Encourage employees to attend conferences.
- Publicly affirm creative thinking. Recognition is a huge motivator for most people.
- Create a safe environment for dissent. Allow the team the freedom to express themselves without fear of being embarrassed.

My Experience/Personal Application

Two things that I struggle with at work are constancy and complacency. At work, I am very organized and open and I listen to everyone’s views and opinions. However, there are some very strong personalities that often try to convey their way of thought as being the only way. This individual tends to stereotype coworkers as “idiots” because they ask a question or make a mistake. I know there are four ways of doing everything on our 64 slice Siemens Somatron CT scanner. However, I learned one way and that’s how I do it (constancy). I do not like change, partially due to fear or making a mistake or looking stupid (complacency).

The second item that I struggle with is CT guided biopsies due to past involvement with biopsies and a radiologist. Although, I know he cannot proceed with the procedure until I am ready, I end up being physically ill, knowing that I may have to do one (especially on the
weekends/holidays) by myself with him. However, because he makes me so nervous I end up making a mistake and looking stupid.

**Action Plan**

**Purpose:** To identify and assess any conceptual blocks and address them for improvement as a leader and employee.

**Goal:** Recognize, manage, recreate and transform any conceptual blocks that I may have.

**Results/Accomplishments:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action Steps</th>
<th>Responsibilities</th>
<th>Timeline</th>
<th>Resources</th>
<th>Potential Barriers</th>
<th>Communications Plan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identify Conceptual Blocks</td>
<td>I will write down the blocks that I or my coworkers notice</td>
<td>Peer Review: July 2014</td>
<td>EAP (Employee Assistance Program)-Nancy Henry; email, coworker support</td>
<td>Anybody that wants to hinder my progress or who may be jealous</td>
<td>Family, Friends, Coworkers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Evidence of Success** (How will you know that you are making progress? What are your benchmarks?) Reference a list of things that myself and others have composed. At the end of each week, I will do a self-evaluation.

**Evaluation Process** (How will you determine that your goal has been reached? What are your measures?) My measures will be the impact that I have on others as well as myself. I will measure the difference within each relationship and ask others if there has been a difference.
Also when I have my annual evaluation which is done by my peers, I will have seen a difference. No more comments will be made: “need to do more biopsies to conquer fear.”

**Conclusion**

We use critical thinking when we make decisions and solve problems. Good critical thinkers don’t accept information at face value but look inside it for hidden agendas, things that are left out and underlying bias. Identifying the four major conceptual blocks that hinder creativity are constancy, commitment, compression and complacency. Identifying each of these blocks can be effective for leaders, as well as employees. Once identified, employees can be empowered to effectively problem solve without “bottlenecking” the leader with minute problems. It is imperative that creative thinking is encouraged so that as a nation we continue to evolve and develop.
References


