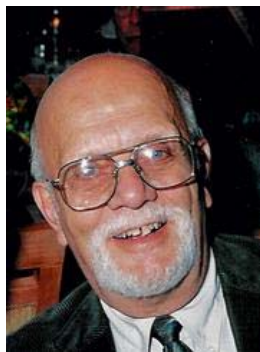


Caller

On Small Business with J.P. Ellenberger: 06.17.08

Brainstorming, books suggest starting points to solve problems



Q. It is one thing to solve a problem that is clearly defined and can be described easily in numbers. However, many of the problems in my business don't fit that mold and solving them can be difficult. Are there any methods to solve such problems?

A. You ask a question that has been around for ages. Through the years there have been many techniques to approach such problems. One classic technique most often is called brainstorming.

The secret is to get many ideas in a non-critical way at the start and then sort them out later. Not being critical is important. Many of the best ideas from one of these sessions result from piggybacking of these "wild ideas" on each other.

Eliminating the criticism in the idea stage is called a right-brained approach by psychologists. The right-brain approach essentially is free form. This is as opposed to a left-brain approach -- highly structured and mathematical, similar to a spreadsheet-type solution.

In my experience a combination of the two approaches works best. I was rather fascinated by solutions like those in Russell Ackoff's book "The Art of Problem Solving." They, however, might be considered a little dated now. It is exciting that there are two books out now that cry out the superiority of the back of a napkin for solving such problems.

We all have doodled on the back of a napkin, or taken a note of a phone number or other data for use later. This is the basis of these books. It is interesting that they both approach the solution from different directions. Dan Roam's book, "The Back of the Napkin: Solving Problems and Selling Ideas with Pictures," urges you to draw pictures on the back and as such is very right-brained.

I have had the opportunity to read Dan's book and found it useful and have used it to get the creative juices flowing toward the solution of a couple of problems. Besides that, the book was a pleasant read.

The other book is called "Guesstimation: Solving the World's Problems on the back of a Cocktail Napkin" by Lawrence Weinstein and John A. Adam. I have not read it but it is written by a physicist and a mathematician so by default it would be left-brained. For many years this was my approach of choice.

Both books have received favorable mention in national business magazines. So I can suggest you try either. They may be the stimulus you are looking for. Or just give the brainstorming approach a try with your staff.

During the solution much of the problem has to be reduced to numerical analysis. Is the solution going to be profitable? Does it have a reasonable probability of success? How much will it cost in money or time or both? The right-brained/left-brained question is merely a starting platform. As a matter of record, the formation of the real question is often the key to the solution. So any approach that helps you get to that kernel question is the one to choose.

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