Conceptual Blocks and Creativity

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Introduction

Conceptual blocks are thinking barriers that keep people stuck in a thinking pattern which is unproductive. These blocks prevent creativity and free thinking which is extremely beneficial in the creative problem solving that is needed in today’s leadership. There are four common categories of conceptual blocks:

Constancy- The habit of using a familiar, comfortable solution to problems.

Commitment- Becoming dedicated to a solution simply because it is one of the first ideas suggested, at that point one becomes fixed on the thought and can not move on to consider of other solutions.

Compression- Looking at only a small amount of information, coming to a quick conclusion and a limited solution.

Complacency- Becoming content with an easy solution rather than continuing to think of additional possibilities.

Other definitions that are used:

Creative thoughts- Innovative, imaginative, resourceful thinking

Problem solving- Finding an answer to any “discrepancy between the current situations and a desired future situation.” (Wright, para. 1)
Conceptual Blocks and Creativity

The Disney Institute, predictably promotes creativity, not simply in the expected areas of cartoons and movies but it promotes innovation and imagination for individuals and whole organizations. Yes, there is a Disney Institute where one can learn how to be creative in every phase of life. Their promotional information states, “creativity and innovation are available everywhere, the challenge is cultivating and harnessing its full potential” (Disney Institute, n.d. para. 2). As a Disney cartoonist or writer, conceptual blocks are probably a daily if not hourly challenge that must be conquered. Our minds are capable of extremely imaginative thinking but too often, even Disney employees can get into mental ruts that keep them from innovative thinking.

Conceptual blocks limit our thinking by short circuiting the creative problem solving process. When faced with a problem or unfamiliar situation our brains begin to scan through a variety of common solutions. If our brain quickly latches on to a prior answer and closes off the thinking process we have become complacent. We think we have found a viable solution, although not necessarily the best solution but one that will suffice. This keeps us from continuing to pursue other ideas in search of the best idea. Complacency leads to quick, simplistic solutions. By jumping out of the think tank too quickly we may miss the best answer because we have not given the problem the time and energy needed to formulate the most excellent response. (Williams, n.d.)

When it comes to problem solving my husband does not suffer from complacency, if anything he engages in over thinking which can cause stalled problem solving. His mind is so active he comes up with an incredible amount of suggestions for any one question. The number of ways he can think of to arrange furniture in a room is staggering. He is constantly thinking
and rethinking a small project around the house, like painting. Unfortunately his multitude of ideas keeps him from starting the project or sometimes finishing a project that he had not fully contemplated. My husband does not have a conceptual block he has a conceptual overload which disconnects him from action.

Another conceptual block which may derail one is constancy. Once we have a way of accomplishing a task and it works, why not apply it to every similar problem that comes up? Constancy is when we become comfortable and stop questioning if there is a better, faster, smoother, less complicated way of getting it done. It would be easy to think, if a solution worked last time why even give a thought to a different idea. Except by continuing to use the same solutions we are most likely limiting the possibilities and restricting our creative problem solving. (Williams, n.d.)

Compression is my problem solving hang up. I want to find quick solutions to problems, I do not like having discord or difficulties hanging over my head. I feel uneasy, my mind does not think straight, and I want those feelings over, so I will choose a quick answer just to get past the problem- even though I have noticed quick decisions are not always the best. By making a quick decision, I may not have all the information available to make the best decision. Limiting options for one’s mental wellbeing may be acceptable, but not prudent problem solving when it comes to significant decisions.

The conceptual block of commitment, sounds like it should be beneficial to leadership positions. Although commitment is a good attribute in a job, relationship or graduate school, it is not in problem solving. Being overly committed to a way of thinking about a problem, keeps us from exploring other solutions because we think we have possibly identified this problem as the
same as the last problem we faced. We quickly commit to a way of thinking that limits the creative ideas for other solutions.

Creative problem solving comes from new ideas, not always completely unheard of ideas but thoughts that are new to us or are new to the situation. Creative thoughts begin with one’s common knowledge and is then expanded on to explore the next idea, like adding on a modification. Think of all the creative additions that have been added to automobile production. One such amenity is the intermittent windshield wiper, invented by Kearns. Before 1967, when he patented his invention, the wipers functioned in either the fast or slow mode. Kearns, who earned his engineering degree from Wayne State University, recognized the problem of wiper speeds being too slow or too fast for the weather conditions. This was a perfect creative problem solving scenario. He worked with his prior knowledge and brainstormed to imagine other possibilities. Kearns was willing to risk failure in his pursuit of solving the problem and created a new version of the automatic wiper blade. (Associated Press, 2005)

My father’s homemade corn tortilla recipe is another, more personal example of creative problem solving. Years ago on the U.S. East Coast Mexican food was not readily available and my father, growing up on the West Coast grew up eating and liking it. When he moved east he could not find the corn tortillas he wanted, so he decided to make his own. My father is not a chef, he did not even do much of the cooking, but he wanted to have the kind of tacos he remembered enjoying. He used his innovation to mix proportions of water, corn meal, flour and milk to get just the right consistency that was not too sticky to fry. He wanted it to be pliable, not too stiff to fold and not crumbly. The recipe he developed over fifty years ago is still being used for my family today. My children and husband are hooked on the homemade tortillas. They do not like any store bought tortillas, if we are having tacos they must be grandpa’s recipe.
The first stage in breaking through a conceptual block is realizing your problem solving ability is blocked and then using techniques to get unstuck. Recognizing and admitting the problem solving stalemate exists allows an individual to begin the freeing process. Eliminating a conceptual block starts by reducing stress, while one is stressed it is difficult to work towards positive thoughts which may lead to creative thinking. Martin, a Forbes blog contributor reports, findings from Hanson of The WellSpring Institute for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom, “chronic stress degrades a long list of capabilities with regard to creativity and innovation. It’s hard to think outside the box.” He explains, “Stress is like fine sand being drizzled into the brain. It might keep working, but if you dump enough sand in there, it’ll freeze up at some point.” “He says, neuroscience is now showing us that the cumulative consequences of stress can be a dire thorn in the side of business innovation” (Martin, 2012, para.5).

While I was at Temple University School of Dental Hygiene I experienced the brain freezing effects of stress. It was my first year out of high school and I was living away from home for the first time. I was a good student, but the course load was extremely difficult for me. I was barely able to maintain passing grades, which caused me much stress. I was not accustomed to receiving average or below average grades. I can remember staying up late to study and my mind was so full of the nervousness of not passing, I could not think. I read textbook passages over and over and still could not make sense of the words. I lost weight and could not sleep, because my brain would not allow for rest.

Half way through my first semester, to combat the anxiety, I began to run. I ran the unsafe streets of Philadelphia against my mothers counsel. I ran the emergency escape stairs from the dorm basement, up ten floors to the roof and back down. I remember after a while
feeling the urge to run, the running exhausted my body and would give my mind some amount of rest. This change of focus gave my mind a new point of concentrate and helped me clear my thoughts of the overwhelming fear of failure which caused my stress. In the second semester we began more practical courses which were easier for me and I was able to relax enough to learn the skills needed to graduate and pass my boards. Still to this day when I drive the roads to Philadelphia I remember feeling the knot of stress settle in my stomach as my parents returned me to school after a weekend at home. Thankfully I have not had many other experiences that put me in such a stressful state.

Another innovative thinking crusher is habitual behaviors. Confucius said,” Habits take us where we were yesterday and our attitudes keep us there.” (Charleton, n.d., para.6) Routines are necessary for routine tasks, but they narrow the creative problem solving process. When a person is not a custom to thinking but acts habitually the brain is in a coasting pattern, which is not conducive to creativity. This can lead to a kind of blindness, keeping one from seeing new stimulus that might lead to new insights. Often the attitudes or thoughts involved in habits can limit out of the box thinking, which is crucial for ingenuity. To break the ritual of habitual thinking a person may choose to change the familiar surroundings and usual way of responding. A solution may become visible by switching the problem solving mode. Try a diagram, mathematical representation, or verbal exploration of the problem. While brainstorming for possible solutions, any and all ideas are acceptable and included for consideration. Some wild ideas may seem useless but those ideas are often the paths to innovative thinking.

Conceptual blocks can be overcome by changing ones thinking paradigm. If one gets stuck in a single way of thinking, broadening the scope will be liberating. Opening one’s mind to “what if” questions will stretch the borders of the imagination. Most often our thinking is bound
by what we know or understand but if there are no barriers; the mind is free to be creative. The barriers may simply be the common approach to a problem; attacking it head on. What if approaching it from the beginning is causing the blockage, then changing the approach and working backwards might initiate a solution. The particular details of a plan may cause a breakdown of the creative problem solving process. Working backwards allows the solver to fill in the details of the plan after the solution has been established. (de Leos, 2010)

Conclusion

In conclusion: an examination of Daylight Saving Time which is an excellent creative problem solving success. The problem: needing more sunlight. Benjamin Franklin, in 1784 joked candle usage could be conserved “by getting people out of bed earlier in the morning, making use of the natural morning light” (Time and Date, n.d.,para.3). Others through history continued to suggest changing the clocks to give more sunlight to the day. In 1916, Germany was the first country to implement Daylight Saving Time. “The rationale was to minimize the use of artificial lighting in order to save fuel for the war effort during WW I” (Time and Date, n.d., para.6). In 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt instituted a form of Daylight Saving Time, which has changed over the years to be what we know today.

Imagine the creative thinking involved in suggesting changing the clocks? How can time be changed? How could it be implemented across a wide country? What about transportation schedules? The questions are endless, yet it is used successfully today without question! It is one of those out of the box, wild and crazy ideas, that is a standard of living now.

The conceivers of Daylight Saving Time knew how to use creative problem solving techniques. They did not allow conceptual blocks to keep their minds bound by the fear of
failure, stress, habitual thinking or derailed by simple easy answers. By giving themselves the freedom to imagine no limits of possibilities they pushed the hands of time. The Daylight Saving Time creators had a vision of what could be and the freedom to think of extreme possibilities. This kind of creative problem solving is beneficial in every chapter of life. Today as a CEO, dog groomer or landscaper there is always room for new inventive ways of thinking.
References


