

A More Social, “Human” Model for Brainstorming Means Better Business Outcomes

Improvisation is the ultimate, adaptable “social” model of co-creation. Based on right-brain techniques improvisation for idea generation is becoming more common within the enterprise. It’s an idea whose time has come as co-created ideas, products, processes, business models, and processes for example often lead to better business outcomes, including, of course, revenue, as a recent [New York Times article](#) illustrates.

By improvisation, we don’t mean comedy or theatrical performance. Improvisation means being adaptable and reacting to ideas and realities as they change. It means being able to invert assumptions about the way things should or can be done. By thinking differently, we shift the lens through which we see challenges and solutions. The ability to improvise is about making new things up as things change, and there is no such thing as stability when it comes to strategy.

There are two salient aspects to improvisational methods that make them ideally suited for co-creating. First, brainstorming techniques that leverage improvisation create a powerful *collaborative* dynamic for getting the best ideas “out there” for further development. These types of exercises are built on the premise of “Yes, and” – a concept that is the cornerstone of improvisational theater. In business, this fundamental idea means accepting another’s idea and building on top of that idea by taking it further in a collaborative, “social” way where everyone co-creates – just as scenes are created in theater. “Social” potential takes on even more potency when group collaboration is facilitated by new media technologies.

Rather than competing for individual ideas, a “yes, and” approach in business turns all individual creativity into materialized *collaborative* capital so that team-based problem solving yields more innovative results. Applied improvisation drives better human outcomes for more people because of its focus on “group.” Improvised co-creation therefore leads to better results for more stakeholders within and outside of the organization. No product, service or cultural innovation is ever brought to fruition without the collaboration of the team. Group collaboration has a multiplier effect on corporate innovation that is required for commercialization success.

The second reason improvisation-based approaches to idea generation achieve better outcomes is because they use the “creative brain.” Think about it this way: most brainstorming approaches aren’t as productive or result in as many great ideas as they could because they follow a *linear* approach. By contrast, improvisational techniques rely on non-linear, random associations that tap into lateral thinking – engaging the best of the right brain, the creative brain, as well. The resulting ideas are often concepts that the left (“logic”) brain alone would never have come up with.

The right brain likes to invert assumptions and examine “what if” scenarios. Creative techniques such as SCAMPER, for example, start by suspending assumptions about products and what people need in order to see new things. And, by rearranging and modifying *existing* products, we can create new breakthrough ideas. The optimal scenario is integrated thinking that uses both left and right brain thinking, of course. We’re not advocating *supplanting* left-brain thinking (The MBA police would revoke my diploma FAST); rather, we’re championing the elevation of right-brain skills to a seat at the co-creation table alongside traditional linear approaches.

Improvisation is also important because it teaches communication, teamwork and creative leadership. These skills are critical in innovation. A recent 2010 study by IBM, for example,

revealed that the ability to think creatively was the single most important leadership skill needed for next decade technological leadership.

Of course, applied improvisation is also fun. That's important. While it's not the end goal, fun is a catalytic conduit for creative engagement. You know it as flow-time. Do you know anyone that doesn't have fun when they are feeling creative? Fun is the oil that greases the creative right brain.

The Perfect “Brain” Storm: A Social, Human Model Meets Social Technologies

Improvisational approaches also represent a better ‘human’ model of idea generation for both employees and customers. First, ideas that are built collaboratively tap into the human need for being creative and doing work that matters. Employees who feel creative are more engaged because the work engages both sides of the brain – the creative as well as the logical. Companies are always grappling with how to improve employee engagement. By giving employees more autonomy, mastery, purpose and creativity in their work – a very human aspiration – organizations will see engagement rise. Moreover, collaborative development also reduces push-back and discord within a group when the group has co-developed the best ideas *together*.

Improvised problem-solving also means better products to meet customers’ needs. One burgeoning area for improvised development today is co-creation between users and customers – a feasible “social” approach to product strategy fueled by adoption of new media tools. Instead of product managers sitting around asking the hypothetical, “what do customers need?” based on isolated data, “social” co-creation approaches involve customers in the idea generation process itself rather than at the beta development stage. When employees and users work together to co-create products and services, for example, the human needs of users take focus. That's a great thing because it helps vet ideas with customers before they enter the commercialization funnel. This is the ultimate in “social” product and services development, and companies leading the charge are reaping the rewards. Think about GE or Procter and Gamble, for example, and how much of their current revenue stream comes from co-created products developed with the help of new media tools. In 2009 alone, approximately 35% of Procter and Gamble's sales came from co-created products.

Great models for problem-solving must improve human outcomes for all stakeholders – employees, organizations, and customers. The opportunities for using these co-creation models have been made all the richer today thanks to new media tools. That's the beauty of leveraging social capabilities for co-creation in business.

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In her 18-year strategic marketing career, Kathy has led successful marketing, research, product and communications strategy teams for high-tech, consulting, and media firms including SGI, Excite@Home, Yahoo!, Dataquest/Gartner Group, Autodesk, and MediaMetrix. She has launched many new products

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