

# Doubt: The Creative Company's Secret Ingredient

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By Alan Iny

Many companies are facing a dilemma. Creativity has never been more essential to competitiveness than it is today, as digital technology and other advancements make the lifespan of any successful idea shorter and shorter. At the same time, companies continue to struggle with creativity, especially when it comes to making it practical and systematic.

Case in point: Every day, in conference rooms around the world, legions of executives gather with flip charts and plates of cookies and try to be creative. They're told to "let loose," "no idea is a bad idea," we need a "blue-sky, unconstrained session," "think outside the box." The walls get papered with flip charts, but the next day stakeholders realize that nothing really changed. These sessions may yield some fodder for a Dilbert cartoon, but rarely any of the breakthrough ideas that the organization really needs.

The reason these sessions fail isn't that people aren't creative, or that managers don't recognize a good idea when they see one. It's that companies forget -- or haven't internalized -- two essential facts about practical creativity. The first one is that you don't need lots of new, random ideas to get to a truly transformative one. The second, and more important, one is that "doubt" is the key that unlocks creativity.

To explain, creativity begins with doubting the mental models that govern the day-to-day – namely, the deeply held beliefs your group, your company or your organization lives by. You don't need to throw out these beliefs for good, but the organization must embrace and encourage moments of doubt as part of its creative process.

More specifically, companies need to create a culture that allows executives, managers and the rank and file to have the leeway to doubt the way they do things. For example:

- \* Doubt what is commonly believed to be your company's key point of distinction.
- \* Doubt what is commonly accepted as the reason that customers come back -- or abandon your products for other companies'.
- \* Doubt that the organizations you think of as your competitors are really your competitors.
- \* Doubt your industry's core premises, e.g., that computing will continually get faster and more powerful.
- \* Doubt that the events and situations your company has always feared are really dangerous.

George Orwell once wrote, "To see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle." So, the point of this kind of doubt is to open your eyes to the ways your "mental models" are holding your company captive. It is about removing blinders, identifying and stress-testing maxims like "this is the way we do things around here," and challenging the assumptions that get us through each day. It is about breaking constraints. Doubt means remembering that all of your models, or mental boxes, are only working hypotheses and that they are subject to change. It means being willing to look for useful new boxes to help with the problem your organization needs to solve.

Take the French company Bic, for example. For decades, it had thought of itself as a disposable pen company. In the 1970s, however, someone there had the temerity to doubt that premise. That led to the production of such items as plastic razors and lighters. These were not new inventions, but they were breakthroughs for Bic, whose new "box" became "we are a disposable plastic consumer products company."

How do you create an environment that encourages healthy doubt (and, therefore, creativity)? First, get in the habit of looking at certain things with fresh eyes. Try not to see employee performance reviews, the latest competitive intelligence report, the five-year trends in your industry through the same old lenses. To get a start on this, adopt the mindset of someone else -- for instance, the perspective of someone just a year out of college, your grandmother or, perhaps, Mark Zuckerberg.

Another approach: Foster an environment where failure is celebrated. Not the kind of failure that comes with not preparing for a presentation -- celebrate the failure that flows naturally from thoughtful and deliberate experimentation -- where you're trying a bunch of ideas. I once walked in on a company that was having a champagne toast to a failed project. The freedom to fail means the freedom to try new mental models (and doubt old ones), which means the freedom to have breakthrough success.

It also may be productive to think about wild-card events or "black swans." In other words, imagine the most unreal, unexpected or seemingly impossible events. This challenges people's ideas about what they may face in the future and keeps them from being complacent. For instance, in 2006 it might have been productive -- and led to creative, breakthrough ideas -- to imagine a world in which two of the most established investment banks (think Bear Stearns and Lehman Brothers) would fold, seemingly overnight. In the 1850s, it probably would have been productive for top jewelry companies to imagine a world in which a low-end stationer (Tiffany & Co.) would come to rule their industry.

Some companies find "beliefs audits" to be useful. It's an activity that aims to discover thoughts and opinions about a certain situation that may influence people's thinking without their realizing it. By bringing those beliefs to the fore, you have the opportunity to "doubt" them.

Finally, it's worth noting that while hierarchy and "layers" are necessary and inevitable at most organizations, managers should make sure they aren't stifling. Employees should feel empowered to speak up, push back, be the devil's advocate - - and doubt.

As for top leadership -- HR included -- our suggestion is to never hesitate when a decision is required, but always doubt.