



# ANTICONVENTIONAL THINKING

Jeffrey Baumgartner

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## ANTICONVENTIONAL THINKING

*Anticonventional thinking is purposefully rejecting conventional ideas in favour of unconventional ideas in problem solving. It emulates the way artists, writers, scientists and other highly creative people think.*

**H**ave you ever participated in a brainstorming session only to be left yawning at the results? Have you ever engaged in an ideas campaign and found yourself thoroughly underwhelmed by the level of creativity in the ideas generated? Have you ever managed a crowdsourcing event – and still find yourself waking in the middle of the night screaming about having to review thousands of painfully mediocre ideas? If so, you are not alone. The sad truth is that idea generation events are designed to generate lots of ideas rather than creative ideas. Worse, their success tends to be measured by the number of ideas rather than the creativity of the results.

But don't panic! There is a better approach to creativity and it is called anticonventional thinking (ACT). Rather than attempting to generate ideas by the sack full in hopes that one or two of them may be brilliant, ACT aims to generate a few brilliant ideas. It's based on how people's brains respond to problems and emulates the way many artists, writers, scientists and other creative geniuses think.

As the name implies, ACT is about taking a purposely unconventional approach to problem solving and idea generation. But it's not just about the ideas. ACT is also about being anticonventional in framing the problem or issue for which you are looking for ideas, the insights you seek and how you respond to them.

Think about it. In a typical company, brainstorming tends to be around issues, or challenges, such as "In what ways might we improve product X?" or "How might we make better use of social media in our marketing communications?" Challenges such as these beg for mediocre and predictable ideas.

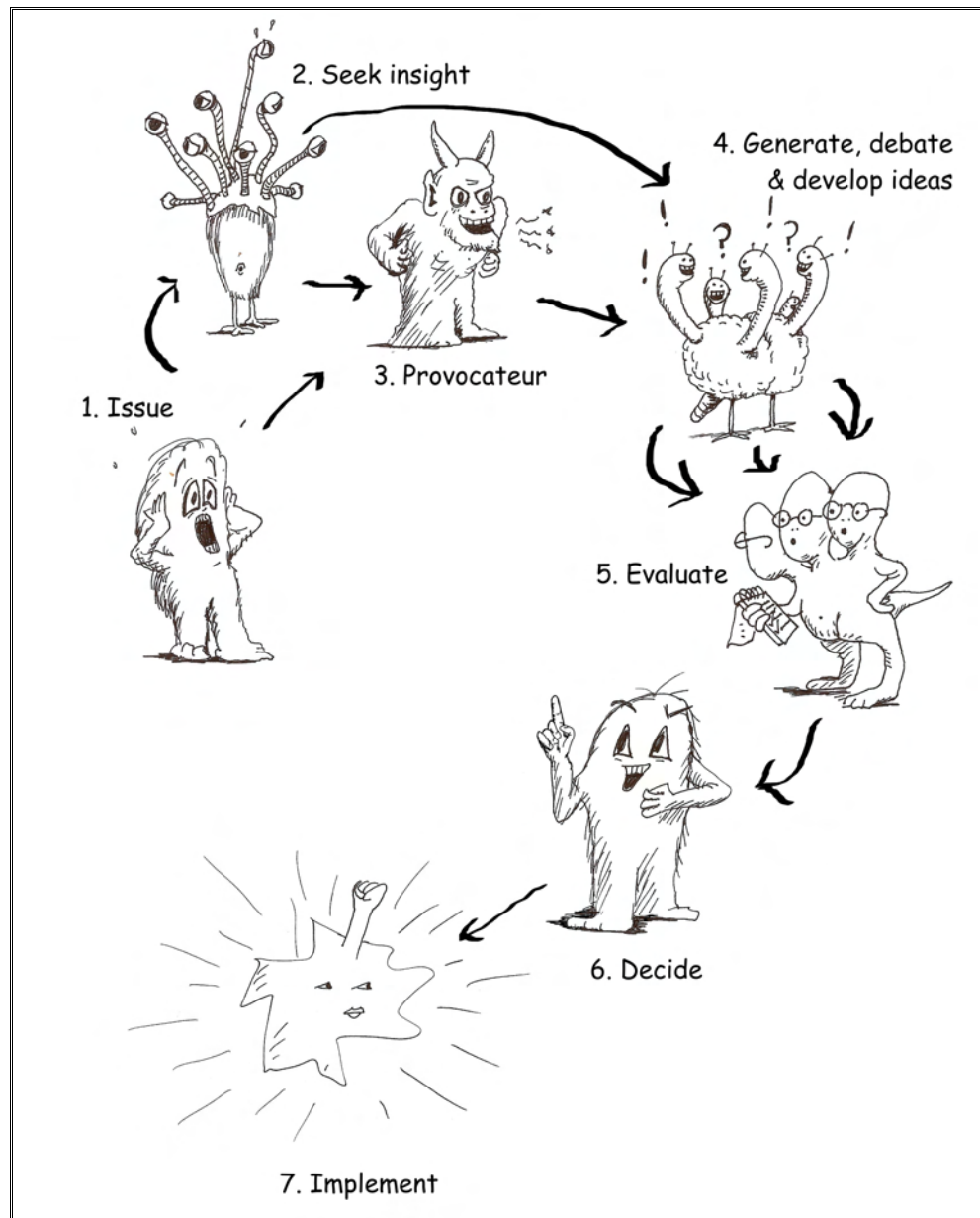
But this is not how highly creative people solve problems. People, like Pablo Picasso for instance, did not ask "In what ways might I improve my portraits?" or "How might I make better use of acrylic paints?" Rather he posed big, game-changing challenges like "How might an artist present multiple three dimensional view points on a two dimensional canvas?" The result to this challenge was cubism, one of the major innovative art movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Albert Einstein did not ask himself "How might I improve the world's understanding of mechanics?" Rather, he asked, "How might I reconcile Maxwell's electromagnetism equations with Newton's laws of mechanics?" This issue concerned many physicists in the early 1900s, but no one dared address it head-on as the two disciplines seemed irreconcilable. Einstein's very unconventional (at the time) challenge, combined with some then mind-blowingly unconventional ideas about how matter behaves in extreme situations (such as approaching the speed of light or in a gravity well), resulted in his Theories of Relativity – one of the cornerstones of modern physics.

While most of us can never be as creative as Picasso or Einstein, we can learn to emulate their approach to creative thinking and follow it as individuals or groups. That's what ACT is all about. So, let's see how it works.

# THE ANTICONVENTIONAL THINKING CYCLE

*The Anticonventional thinking cycle starts with an issue (eg. a problem or a goal) and works its way through to a decision and action.*



The ACT cycle is a loosely structured process that takes you from an issue, such as a problem or goal you wish to achieve, through ideation and on to implementation. It is specifically designed to maximise creativity. Let us run through each step of the cycle.



## ISSUE

Ideas do not just rain down from the heavens and into the minds of creative thinkers. Rather they are generated to solve problems – for example: “we are losing market share to the competition who have a fuller featured product.” – or to achieve goals – “I want to establish a business around my coaching

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skills”. In most business scenarios, idea generation needs to solve a problem as well as meet goals. For example, imagine you run a fast food business which prides itself on selling the healthiest food in the industry. If you seek ideas to increase income, those ideas also need to align with strategy. Hence ideas about selling furniture or deep-fried butter are simply not going to work.

In the ACT cycle, we use the term “issue” rather than “problem” or “goal”. Issue is a much broader word that would suggest more complexity than a problem or an unmet goal. And indeed, in most cases, there are several factors involved in the overall issue for which ideas are sought.



## SEEK INSIGHT

Insight helps you better understand the issue at hand and inspires ideas which you will soon be generating. Insight starts with research. Google can be your friend here, as it allows you to look up all kinds of information associated with your issue. But it can also be your enemy in that you are likely to find ideas that seemingly resolve your issue. Do not jump at those ideas and implement them! You need to bear in mind that implementing someone else’s solution is neither unconventional nor creative. Moreover, if you apply the first idea you find on Google, you can be sure that nearly everyone else who has Googled the same problem will also apply this idea – further reducing its likely effectiveness. Nevertheless, it is worth taking note of what others have done when confronted with issues similar to yours, if only to be sure your solution is unique.

Research and insight need not be limited to the web. Libraries are great repositories of information and inspiration. Do not go only to the section relevant to the issue at hand. Browse around the library as well. Look at new books, wander the shelves. This is a great way to discover tangential insight, that is insight which is not obviously related to your issue, but which inspires thinking related to it. For instance, if you work in a service business and your issue relates to finding new, relevant services to provide to existing clients, a book about psychology might give you insight in how people see your services. A book about a manufacturing business’s growth might give you insight about how other kinds of business solve similar problems. These books are not directly related to your problem, but provide insight that can help you look at your problem from new perspectives.

In addition to the web and libraries, talking to people in your business and other businesses is a great way to gain insight. I like occasionally to meet for lunch or a drink someone in a business unrelated to mine. It’s a great opportunity to share notes, gain new perspectives and, often, discover new opportunities. The aim of these meetings is never to solve a specific problem. Rather to broaden my network and learn.

Your customers and people who are not your customers can also provide insight. However, do not ask your customers to solve your problem. Rather, try to gain deeper insight into what value your company delivers to them and what value it does not deliver. Try also to understand why people who are not your customers have taking this unfortunate stance. What do they seek? How might you deliver it in unconventional ways?

If you are looking for non-business ideas, look to friends, relatives and

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associates for insight. Find out how others have dealt with your issues and how effective their solutions were.

From a pure inspiration perspective, visiting art galleries, listening to concerts, watching performances and other cultural activities are brilliant. Don't believe me? The next time you seek inspiration, visit an art museum and keep a notebook handy. You will be surprised!

## PROVOCATEUR

Probably the most important element of an ACT cycle is the provocateur. The provocateur phase involves taking the issue and transforming it into a question, call to action or challenge that pushes people to think anticonventionally and devise unconventional, creative solutions.



Before you can do this, however, you need to deconstruct the issue. Break it down into its core components and determine what the real problems and goals are. One of the most effective ways to do this is a technique known as the five whys<sup>1</sup>. The way it works is dead simple. Just ask yourself, or your team, “why is this a problem?” five times, breaking it down each time. For example, imagine your sales people are not getting very good results and you want to generate creative solutions to solve this problem. The first thing to do is to ask the five whys.

Q: Why are sales people performing badly?

A: Because they contact a lot of leads, but few of those leads turn into customers.

Q: Why is this?

A: Partly because the leads are poorly organised and we have little data associated with each of them. So, the sales people call each lead, but in many cases the relevant person has left the company or the company is no longer interested.

Q: You said “partly” why else are few leads turning into customers?

A: Because, with so many leads, the sales people do not follow up. If a lead does not get results on the first call, the sales person dumps it and moves onto another lead.

Q: And why else?

A: Because sales are not documenting the results, we sometimes call the same bad lead multiple times and I expect we sometimes fail to follow up with promising leads.

Q: And why is this?

A: I believe it is because we have not set up a system for managing leads, not have we taught the sales people how to do this.

As you can see, with the last why, we have come to the real problem: lack of a structured system for dealing with sales leads. With this knowledge, we can construct a provocative challenge that addresses the real problem and not the much vaguer problem of insufficient sales.

In addition to the five whys, you can ask questions such as “why have

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<sup>1</sup> The Five Whys was conceived by Sakichi Toyoda, one of Japan's greatest inventors and founder of Toyota Industries.

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I/we not solved this problem already?”, “How would I like the situation to be in six months/a year/five years?”, “Have our competitors/enemies also faced this issue and if so, what have they done?”, “What limitations must we bear in mind with respect to potential solutions?”, “What are the consequences of doing nothing?” and “By what criteria will we judge potential solutions?”

At this stage, most traditional brainstorm facilitators and creativity coaches would tell you to formulate one or more creative challenges (or problem statements) based on what you have learned. This is fine if you want incremental improvement ideas. But if you want really creative ideas, you need to push things further. You need to be a provocateur and encourage people to think in new ways.

Consider a typical brainstorm. It might start with a challenge such as: “How might we improve the customer experience in our shops?” This challenge would doubtless result in ideas such as: smiling more, faster service and so on. Good ideas. Worthy ideas. But hardly creative ideas.

In ACT, we want far more provocative challenges that will encourage provocative, unconventional, creative ideas. Compare the above challenge with these:

- How might we make shopping with us the best experience in our customers’ lives?
- How might we make visiting our shops as pleasurable as eating Belgian chocolate/kissing your lover?
- How might we bring tears of joy to our customers?
- How might we make shopping with us as addictive as heroin?
- What might our chief competitor do that would ensure we’d never see another customer again?

Provocative challenges such as these push people to think beyond their usual shopping related ideas and encourage them to explore notions of great life experiences, the joys of chocolate, addiction and so on. These associations make it easy even for averagely creative people to come up with new and unexpected ideas.

Moreover, extreme statements, such as “best experience in our customers’ lives” and “addictive as heroin” force people to push their thinking further, rejecting conventional ideas and seeking more extreme and hence more creative ideas. In truth, it is highly unlikely that you will come up with an idea that will make shopping at your business the best experience in many people’s lives or so addictive that your shops are banned by the health and safety authorities (although you never know). Nevertheless, if you do not ask such extreme questions, you are far less likely to get extremely creative ideas!

### **How to Formulate Provocative Challenges**

For highly creative people formulating provocative challenges comes naturally. This is one reason why they are so creative. They do not settle for simple challenges, they prefer provocative ones that give their brains a good work out. In fact, even if you present a highly creative person with a typical, mediocre brainstorm challenge, the chances are that she will reword it in her mind to make it more provocative in order to generate more interesting ideas. She

*Provocative challenges push people to have provocative, anti-conventional, creative ideas.*

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*Before you can make a challenge provocative, you need to break it down into its core components, ask questions and understand why the problem is in fact a problem.*

probably does not even realise that she does this. But she does.

Averagely creative people – the bulk of the world’s population – have to work at making their challenges more provocative. The best approach is to break the issue down into components and work on those. To see how this works, let’s return to our sample issue about improving the shopping experience whose key elements are, of course, “improvement”, “shopping” and “experience”. In this case, the most interesting word is probably “experience”. Ask yourself what experiences are highly pleasurable and play with on those. The obvious one, sex, would be the most interesting in many respects, but it would also invite suggestions that are highly inappropriate for the workplace and could result in accusations of sexual harassment.

Chocolate, on the other hand, is a safe but pleasurable experience for many. And it is particularly suitable if your shop does not sell chocolate. However, if you want something sexier, you might try “kissing your lover” which is probably safer than sex in the workplace!

In addition to breaking down your problem, you should also look at absolutes: best, most, only, never and so on. Rather than making your shopping experience good, make it the greatest experience in the customer’s life!

Another great approach is to turn the goal of the challenge into a negative and put it into the context of your competitors or another evil person or group. Ask what your competitors could do that would be disastrous to your business; or ask what your worst enemy could do that would wreck your goals. The added advantage to this approach is that by distancing the challenge from the solvers, you increase creativity.

Of course you can also use classical creative thinking tricks to make your challenges more provocative. Look up a random word in the dictionary and try to apply it in your challenge. Or take that word, put it into your favourite search engine along with a key word describing your problem and see what comes up. Then go to the seventh page of results and select the third item and ask yourself how you might apply that information to your challenge.

But throughout this all, remember that you want to make your challenges as provocative as possible. Don’t worry if the provocation seems excessive and likely to encourage impossible to implement ideas. Just remember that it is generally easier to make incredibly creative ideas realistically viable than it is to make dull ideas creative. In the business environment, internal committees will inevitably *decreativise* ideas. So you should aim for the highest levels of creativity irrespective of viability.

### **Why Be Provocative?**

The reason for being provocative in your anticonventional thinking challenge is to force people, who will come up with ideas, to use different parts of their minds when suggesting ideas. This enables averagely creative people to think more like highly creative people, even if their minds are not wired for high levels of creativity. We’ll get to the logic behind this shortly. In the meantime, you will just have to trust me!



## GENERATE, DEBATE & DEVELOP IDEAS

The two key rules of brainstorming are that anything goes and criticism is not allowed. In an ACT cycle, forget these rules. ACT's rules are very different. The first rule is that no conventional ideas are allowed. None. They are to be squelched. Rather, you only want unconventional ideas. This results in far fewer ideas, but they will be more creative and better developed.

The second rule is that criticism is allowed, welcome and to be encouraged. However, it must be respectful criticism. To ensure this is the case, there are three strict laws for criticising ideas in an ACT cycle:

*The two rules of idea generation in ACT:*

1. *No conventional ideas are allowed!*
  2. *Criticism is welcome, but it must be respectful.*
1. Criticism should focus primarily on conventional ideas. However, ideas which seem flawed for any reason may also be criticised.
  2. Criticism will always be formulated politely and respectfully. It will indicate precisely why an idea deserves criticism and will challenge the person who suggested the idea to solve the weakness implied in the criticism.
  3. Whenever an idea is criticised, the person who suggested the idea and anyone else in the group must be allowed, and indeed encouraged, to defend the idea.

Idea generation in ACT is an organic process, similar to a heated conversation, rather than a listing of ideas.

It is important that ideas generated in an ACT cycle are documented, such as by writing them down in text format. However you can also document with diagrams, illustrations or even models. In many cases it may make sense to do an ACT cycle non-verbally, such as through collaborative development of models, collaborative drawing or even role play. Research has shown that solving problem through collaborate non-verbal means, such as making models, generates more creative results than does brainstorming<sup>2</sup>.

Because ACT cycles often involve participants spending a lot of time developing an intriguing idea into a fuller concept, it is easy to forget to move on. Once an idea looks promising, the facilitator of the cycle should suggest that participants make note of the concept and then move on to develop other ideas. A skilled facilitator will ask provocative questions to encourage this.

Most full ACT cycles involve more than one participant (when you are doing ACT solo, you will may wish to focus on quick and dirty anticonventional thinking – see below). When ACT cycles involve multiple participants, you should strive to have a diverse group of people and keep groups small, ideally to around five to seven people, although groups as large as 12 can work. With larger groups, it is better to divide members into small teams of five to seven people for the idea generation, debate and development phase. But, once all teams are finished, invite them to present their ideas to the entire group and solicit feedback. Such an approach will result in greater diversity of ideas than would a massive group generating ideas together.

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<sup>2</sup> This is something I have written about in the past and have found highly effective in my own experience. See my article at [http://www.jpbc.com/creative/visual\\_brainstorming.php](http://www.jpbc.com/creative/visual_brainstorming.php) to learn more.

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## EVALUATE



Evaluation is a critical, yet often ignored, element of any idea generating event. If you do not evaluate ideas, you cannot determine which ideas to implement nor how to do so.

In our experience, an evaluation matrix is the best way to review ideas effectively. An evaluation matrix provides a high level of subjectivity and compares ideas to relevant criteria. For instance, in a business environment, unconventional ideas are often rejected at a glance – simply because they are unconventional. However, if those ideas are evaluated by business criteria, they can often stand up very well.

To illustrate, I like to imagine a world in which bottled water did not exist. A soft drinks manufacturer is running a massive on-line brainstorm to devise innovative new drink ideas. Among ideas for fruit flavoured drinks, cocktail like drinks and ice-cream flavoured drinks, one employee suggests:

**Idea:** Bottled tap water

**Details:** I suggest we put tap water into bottles, give it a refreshing, natural name and sell it for the same price as our other soft drinks.

At first glance, this idea would surely be rejected by management: “who in their right mind would pay for tap water which they already get virtually free?”

But if the idea is rated against business criteria such as...

1. How big is the profit potential of this idea?
2. How easily could we bring this product to market?
3. Does this idea have low development costs?
4. How well does this idea fit with our current product line?
5. If this idea does not work, how severe would the consequences be?

...it is clear that it would get a very high evaluation rating. And we know from history that as ridiculous as it seems, bottled tap water has been an extraordinarily profitable product.

An evaluation matrix is simply a set of criteria, I find five to be best, by which you judge an idea or more likely several potential solutions to an issue. You look at each criterion and indicate how well the idea meets it on a numeric scale (for example 0-5 points, with 0 indicating the idea does not meet the criterion at all and 5 indicating it meets it perfectly). The ideas with the highest scores are most likely to succeed according to your needs.

In addition to collecting ratings, ask evaluators to give additional feedback. In particular, if a criterion gets a low rating, the evaluator should be challenged to suggest how the idea might be changed in order to improve the rating. Often, evaluators see their role as a critical one and so they look far more at weaknesses rather than strengths and so fail to point out how to overcome weaknesses. As a result, a lot of ideas with potential are tossed into the corporate rubbish bin.

One last note on evaluation matrices. I do recommend that one key criteria be “How unique is this idea?” After all, if you are aiming for a high

*Ensure that evaluators understand that their role is not merely to be critical of the idea, but also to identify how to overcome weaknesses in the idea. Sometimes the only difference between a weak idea and a strong one is a little creativity.*

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level of creativity, then uniqueness should be a major evaluation criterion. Indeed, you might consider doing an initial evaluation based solely on creativity, unconventionality or uniqueness. Only ideas which pass this evaluation go on to the more detailed matrix.

### **Beyond the Matrix**

Once ideas get passed the evaluation matrix, you may need additional reviews in order to determine whether or not to invest in the implementation of the ideas. This is particularly true if implementation will involve substantial investment of time, energy or money. Within the business context, review tools might include building a business case, calculating income potential and making a Powerpoint presentation for senior management. I won't go into these methods here as there is plenty of information elsewhere.

However, there are a few evaluation techniques which are particularly useful for highly creative and hence unusual ideas. And they are suited for business and non-business ideas.

### **Prototyping**

When dealing with unusual ideas, nothing beats a prototype for getting a true feel for the idea, its potential as well as its flaws. Moreover, selling an idea to management, a client or a partner is a lot easier if you can put a prototype in their hands.

Of course if an idea involves a physical object, creating a prototype is relatively easy. It need not be a full working prototype, at least not initially. A mock-up made with whatever materials are handy can serve as an initial means of demonstrating how an idea will look when it is realised. Moreover, the very act of building a prototype, particularly if it is done as a group activity, inevitably provides more ideas that will help you improve the original concept even further.

When an idea is not a physical object, prototyping can be more challenging. But with a bit of creativity, it is not only possible, but fun! Services and activities can be prototyped through role play. For instance, if your non-profit organisation is developing ideas about how to ensure people remember to take a full dose of antibiotics, you could prototype the most promising ideas yourselves by using placebos. If you are developing ideas to sell your products as a service, do a roll play with one (non-sales) person acting as a salesperson and another person (ideally a sales person) acting as a reluctant client. Then have the person with the sales role try and sell the product as a service to the person acting as the client. The reason that the salesperson should act as the client is that she can voice the typical objections that she has often heard from clients.

Abstract ideas can be more challenging to prototype. Imagine you wish to test ideas for improving communications within your global company. An actual prototype may be difficult. But making a map that shows communication flow can be effective. Likewise, making a model of the network with Lego® building bricks has proven effective. Indeed, it is a part of the Lego Serious Play consulting practice<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.seriousplay.com> for more information about Lego Serious Play.

*Nothing beats a prototype for testing and demonstrating an idea.*

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### Imagination Club Presentation

This is based on the Brussels Imagination Club, a non-profit activity my friend Andy Whittle and I set up some years ago, and continue to run today. The principle to this approach is to make a 60-90 minute presentation of your concept to a diverse group of people. In an organisation, this should include people from different divisions. The presentation should not be a series of PowerPoint slides. Rather it should be creative, for example:

1. Demonstration of a prototype, including presentation, advertisement and sales pitch.
2. A training exercise showing people how to perform a new service.
3. A series of role plays showing how a concept will work.

The workshop starts with an explanation of the issue, the solution and the logic behind it. This is followed by the activity and then a wrap up conclusion. Afterwards, all participants are asked for feedback by answering these questions:

1. What did you like about the presentation and particularly the concept presented?
2. In what ways might you improve upon the concept and its presentation?
3. What hurdles do you see in realising this idea and how could they be overcome?
4. In what ways could you help the team responsible realise the concept?

By framing feedback in the positive context (and this should be enforced by the person facilitating the Imagination Club presentation), participants become productive in their feedback. It's very easy to criticise an idea, especially a new one. And that kills a lot of promising ideas. It is more challenging but more productive to find ways to improve upon weaknesses in order to make an idea with potential into a success.



### DECIDE

This is easy. Make a decision. You have the evaluation results, you have the ideas. Now you need to make a decision to go ahead and implement one or more of the ideas. So do it.

It never ceases to amaze me how often groups and organisations put a lot of effort into idea generation activities, but fail to implement anything. If you have no intention of realising highly creative ideas, it is far better not to bother with unconventional thinking and focus on being consistently boring instead.

But if you want to be creative, if you want to be innovative – and bear in mind that creativity is the mother of innovation – then you need to make a decision and act upon it.



*If an idea in implementation fails to meet a critical milestone, kill the idea and invest in another idea.*

## IMPLEMENTATION

Once a decision is made, the next step is to implement the idea. Very likely you already have procedures in place for implementing ideas. However, it is worth bearing in mind that highly creative ideas are almost inevitably riskier than less creative ones. As a result, I recommend drawing up an implementation plan with clear milestones that have to be met. If the implementation fails to meet any milestone, it needs to be critically reviewed.

If the idea will not work, kill it. Just kill it, communicate what went wrong and focus on the next creative idea. Killing a weak idea early on frees up resources and creativity to focus on the next idea which may be far more successful.

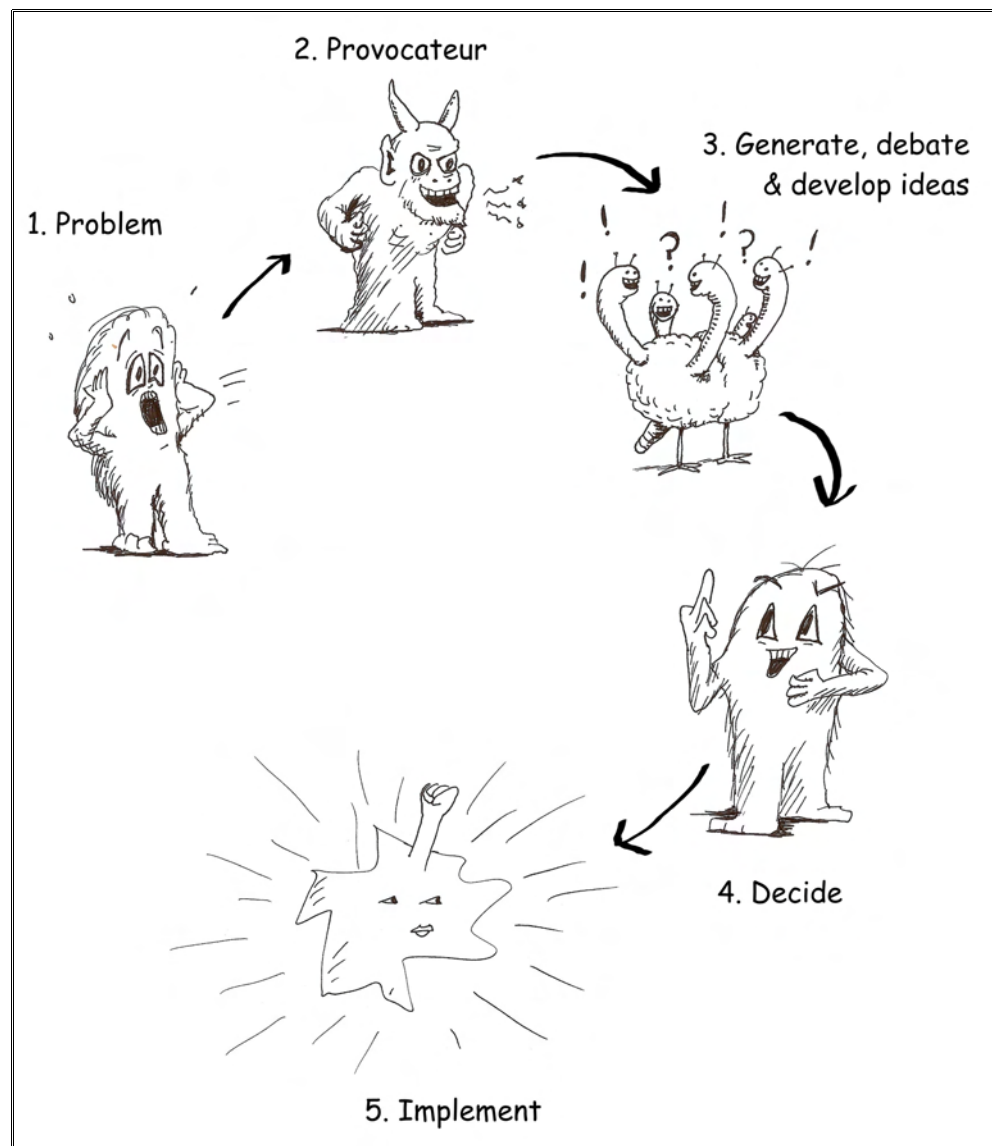
In organisations that do not have a history of innovation, the implementation of highly creative ideas can be challenging. Change tends to make people in such organisations uncomfortable and, as a result, people will try to dissuade you from implementing unconventional ideas and, in extreme cases, may even sabotage your idea. In these cases, you need to draw up an implementation plan that takes these hurdles into account. As an example, you may wish to refer to my Creative Idea Implementation Plan<sup>4</sup> which is specifically designed for such scenarios.

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<sup>4</sup> You can read more about the Creative Idea Implementation Plan and even download a template at <http://www.jpbc.com/creative/ciip.php>

## QUICK AND DIRTY ACT

*When you need to be creative quickly quick and dirty ACT is just the bee's knees.*



The full anticonventional thinking cycle is a somewhat formalised process designed to enable teams and groups to collaborate on idea generation. It is particularly useful for bigger projects, corporate creativity and involving people not familiar with anticonventional thinking.

Often, however, such a formalised process is not necessary. If you are seeking smaller ideas; ideas related to your area of expertise or relatively quick solutions to problems, then quick and dirty anticonventional thinking (Q&DACT) works just fine.

Q&DACT simply drops a couple of steps from the full ACT cycle and focuses on the creative bits. Insight and evaluation are dropped from the process. Assuming you are being creative in an area in which you have knowledge, you are already collecting insight daily. Likewise, you will have the expertise to identify your preferred solution without formal evaluation.

Like the full ACT cycle, Q&DACT starts with an issue which is

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transformed into a provocative challenge. However, unlike in the full cycle, the challenge can be dynamic, changing as you generate ideas. Indeed, by continuously looking at the issue from different perspectives, you effectively enhance the creativity you inject into the issue.

As you generate and play with ideas, write them down. But when you get an intriguing idea, stop and spend some time with it. Think about potential weaknesses and how you might deal with them. Think about objections others might have and how you might respond. Think about making the idea crazier, bigger and more detailed. Make notes, draw pictures or record your ideas.

If you are working alone or in a small team and dealing with a familiar subject, formal evaluation is not necessary. However, if you are unsure of your results or will need to sell the idea to others, then it may make sense to do an evaluation matrix. Aside from helping you make a decision, an evaluation matrix provides data that can help you defend your idea to others.

Finally, make a decision and act upon it! This is an area where some creative people fall down. They are far more enthusiastic about generating ideas than they are about making them happen. But if you want your ideas to happen, you need to act upon them.

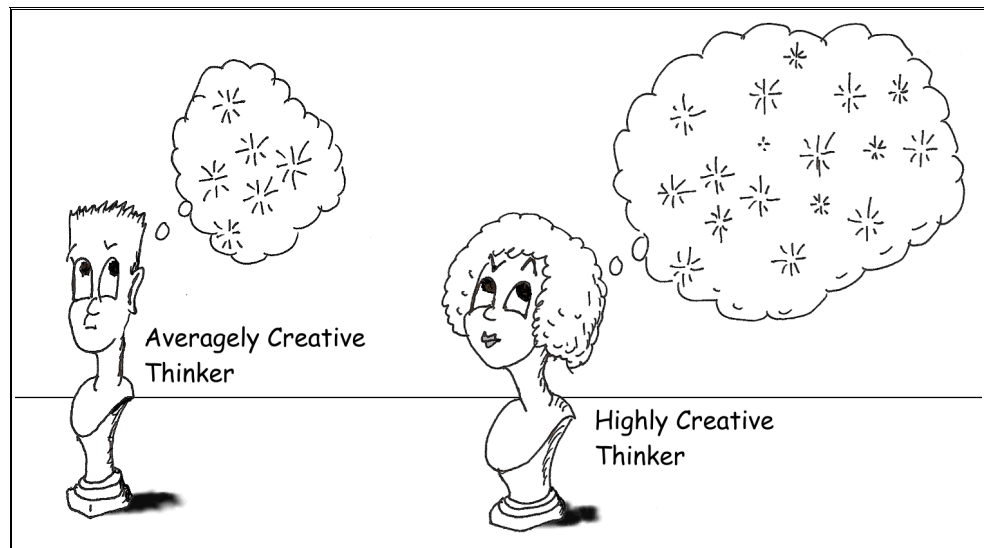
As noted in the previous section, if you anticipate hurdles in implementing your idea, take a look at the Creative Idea Implementation Plan.

## HOW AND WHY ACT WORKS

To understand how and why ACT works, we need to understand a little bit about how the mind works when solving problems. So, let's imagine we have a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scanner and a number of people, some of whom are exceptionally creative and some of whom are averagely creative. We put them, one at a time, into the MRI scanner and give them a problem that requires creative thinking.

### The Idea Zone and the Brain's Censor

*The averagely creative person only uses a small part of his brain to generate ideas to solve a problem. This results in less variation of ideas. The highly creative thinkers uses much more of her brain. As a result, there is more variety in her ideas.*



If we put an averagely creative person in the scanner, pose the problem and watch on the scanner's screen, we will see a localised area of his brain light up. This glowing bit indicates active neurons. In other words, here is where the brain is searching its knowledge base for data that could be incorporated into ideas. Let's call this area the **Idea Zone**.

It is not just the Idea Zone that shows activity though. Also lighting up is a region known among scientists as the dorsolateral prefrontal and lateral orbital regions. We will call it the **brain's censor**. It is the part of the brain that reviews ideas and decides whether or not to go further with them. The brain's censor is what keeps us from coming up with crazy ideas, which can be useful, but can also stifle creativity.

If we take our first subject out of the scanner, replace him with a highly creative thinker and pose the same problem, something rather different happens. Now, the idea zone is far, far bigger, with many more neurons in more parts of the brain lighting up. In other words, the creative thinker is searching a substantially larger area of the brain for data that could be incorporated into ideas. At the same time, the brain's censor is much less active, so more ideas are allowed through for consideration<sup>5</sup>. This is why highly

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed explanation of this effect and the research that revealed, read this interesting paper: Limb CJ, Braun AR (2008) "Neural Substrates of Spontaneous Musical Performance: An fMRI Study of Jazz Improvisation." PLoS ONE 3(2): e1679.

creative people have more ideas and more creative ideas than averagely creative people.

It is kind of like being in a library. When an averagely creative person is looking for ideas on new business models, he promptly checks the card catalogue, find that business management books are in the 650s and promptly heads there for insight and ideas. The highly creative person, on the other hand, will explore much more of the library, pulling a book here and a book there for inspiration. This much wider search results in more varied input which, in turn, generates more varied output.

It would seem that an easy way to make people to think more creatively would be to teach them to use more of their brains while solving problems. Sadly, the ability to do this seems largely hard-wired into the brain<sup>6</sup>. And in spite of what many creativity gurus claim, the only proven way to improve permanently one's creative ability is to move overseas<sup>7</sup>. In other words, it seems that neither I nor anyone else can help you use a bigger part of your brain in order to think more creatively. Moreover, even if it were possible, it might not be desirable. Schizophrenics and other people on the wrong side of the sanity line also use much more of their brains in order to solve problems. However, the connections they make are often less rational and their censors are not so good at filtering, thus apparently supporting, if not causing abnormal beliefs and behaviour. But that is not the theme of this paper!

*Sadly, it seems people cannot be trained to use substantially more of their brain during problem solving. But they can learn to use different parts of their brain – which accomplishes pretty much the same thing.*

### **Emulating Highly Creative People**

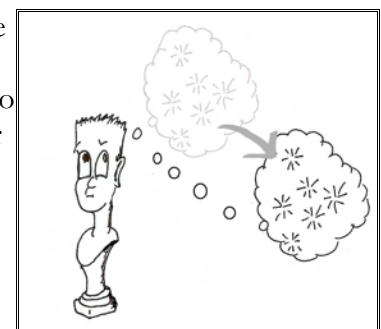
However, there are three things we can do to help averagely creative people better emulate highly creative people.

1. Move the Idea Zone to different parts of the brain when problem solving.
2. Trick the mind's censor into stopping mediocre ideas and letting through unconventional ideas.
3. Debate ideas rather than list them.

Let us look at each of these in a little more detail.

#### **Move Your Idea Zone**

If an individual cannot be trained to increase the size of her Idea Zone, so that it brings in more knowledge and ideas, she can at least be trained to move her Idea Zone around in her brain in order to accomplish the same thing. This is what ACT aims to do. By being provocative with creative challenges, you push your idea zone into other areas of the mind. In traditional brainstorming, you might ask “How could we make a better



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6 Kenneth M. Heilman, Stephen E. Nadeau and David O. Beversdorf “Creative Innovation: Possible Brain Mechanisms”, *Neurocase* 2003, Vol. 9, No. 5, pp. 369–379

7 William W. Maddux and Adam D. Galinsky; “Cultural Borders and Mental Barriers: The Relationship Between Living Abroad and Creativity”; *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 2009, Vol 96, No 5, pp 1047- 1061).

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mousetrap?” Averagely creative brainstormers will look for ideas associated with mousetraps by tapping into their knowledge of mousetraps. Unless the group includes highly creative thinkers, ideas will be incremental improvements on traditional mousetrap concepts – changing a detail here or a detail there.

However, if the creative challenge pushes the Idea Zone to another part of the mind, more unconventional ideas are likely to result. For instance, if you ask “What radical new device might we create for safely imprisoning mice?” the mind will think about prisons, preserving the safety of mice and devices. This will move the Idea Zone to new areas and result in less conventional, more creative ideas.

In addition to moving the Idea Zone around your brain while solving problems, the other thing you need to do is to trick your brain’s censor into rejecting conventional ideas in favour of unconventional ideas. There are two ways we do this with ACT. Firstly, provocative creative challenges purposely use language that suggest conventional ideas are not wanted. Instead of asking, “In what ways might we improve our fly swatters?”, you ask “How might we create the ultimate fly annihilation product?”. The former challenge encourages the mind to think about incremental improvements and reject unconventional ideas that might seem too extreme, while the latter challenge encourages bigger, crazier, more unconventional ideas while rejecting incremental improvements to the fly swatter.

Secondly, the rules of ACT idea generation, development and debate explicitly prohibit conventional thinking. By telling yourself and anyone else involved in idea generation that conventional ideas are not allowed, you are giving your brain’s censor a strict rule that is the exact opposite of what it usually does. You are telling it to censor conventional ideas and let unconventional ideas through. Most brainstorming, on the other hand, has no such rules, so the brain’s censor works as normal, letting conventional ideas through while questioning the unconventional ideas that might result in ridicule, embarrassment or, in extreme cases, reprimand.

### **Debate Ideas Rather than List Them**

Traditional brainstorming teaches that participants should be encouraged to generate lots of ideas, that all ideas must be accepted and most importantly that there is to be no squelching or criticism of ideas. This seems great, but it is based on some flawed theory. Moreover, if you have ever watched a team of very creative people working on a problem, you will notice that they do not follow these rules at all! Rather they spend some time thinking first. Then, when one person suggests an idea, everyone either explores the idea and builds it up, or criticises it. If the idea is criticised, the person who suggested it or even another participant will often defend the idea. This can result in a debate which either strengthens the idea, which makes it more viable, or results in the idea being rejected so that new ideas can be explored.

The process is highly animated, argumentative and results in fewer ideas than in a brainstorm. However, those ideas tend to be a lot more creative than the best results of a brainstorming event. With this in mind, it seems silly not to emulate highly creative people when you want to generate creative ideas. After all, painting students are taught to emulate the great artists when learning the techniques of painting. MBA students use case studies to learn to emulate

*You need to trick your brain’s censor into rejecting mundane ideas in favour of unconventional, unusual and bizarre ones.*

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the great business leaders. So it only makes sense to encourage averagely creative thinkers to emulate highly creative people in order to be more like them!

Moreover, recent research indicates that the no criticism rule in brainstorming may actually be counter-productive. Matthew Feinberg and Charlan Nemeth theorise that: “because the instructions to criticize liberated participants to more freely generate ideas. These instructions allowed for discussion that would otherwise have been kept in check, and such discussion led to more ideas and improvements on ideas.”<sup>8</sup>

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8 Matthew Feinberg, Charlan Nemeth (2008) “The ‘Rules’ of Brainstorming: An Impediment to Creativity?”, Institute for Research on Labor and Employment Working Paper Series (University of California, Berkeley) Paper iirwps-167-08

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## CONCLUSION

*ACT is best suited for situations where you need to come up with truly creative ideas. When you just need incremental improvement ideas, brainstorming and other methods may be better.*

When I first wrote about unconventional thinking in Report 103<sup>9</sup>, a creativity consultant friend of mine called me up to complain. She had done a masters degree at the International Center for Studies in Creativity at Buffalo State College, the spiritual home for creative problem solving (CPS). CPS is the formalised process that was developed from Alex Osborn's brainstorming technique. My friend felt that I had disparaged CPS with ACT and that I failed to appreciate the value of CPS.

We had a long and spirited debate over the telephone and came to an agreement that both methods had their value. And this is true. ACT is really for generating highly creative ideas because it purposefully rejects conventional thinking for unconventional solutions where CPS welcomes all ideas. Also, ACT tends to result in a much smaller number of more developed ideas whereas CPS results in a long list of very raw ideas. Finally, ACT comes naturally to highly creative people, but not to averagely creative people who need to be taught the process and may find elements of it uncomfortable initially.

Thus, I would argue that ACT is best when you want to be very creative; when you want to generate unconventional solutions to problems; when you want to seek ideas for breakthrough innovation. CPS, on the other hand, is ideal when you are looking for incremental improvements – such as new product features, new services or new summer activities for the children.

Of course there are other creative thinking approaches such as TRIZ, mind-mapping and many more. As with all such approaches, each has its strengths and weaknesses. Nevertheless, when you really want to knock someone's (or a group's or the public's) socks off with your creative solutions, you cannot beat ACT.

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<sup>9</sup> Report 103 is a twice monthly e-journal I edit and write for. You can learn more and read the archives at <http://www.jpb.com/report103/>

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## ACT SERVICES

If you would like to know more about ACT, would like to learn how to manage ACT cycles or would like a facilitator to run ACT events in your organisation, give me a shout. I would love to help you out!



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