

Generative Thinking

By Phil Olley

Someone recently came to me saying, “All of our Brainstorming and Strategic meetings generate lots of discussion, but we seldom really create any concrete action. We use some brainstorming techniques and minutes are often written, but we don’t get full value for the time taken out of the business by our highest paid people!”

A common enough complaint. It may sound strikingly familiar to you.

And if you run your own small business, the challenge is the same. Not only that, but also how can you find time to think strategically whilst at the same time focusing on productivity; doing the day-to-day work that puts bread on the table.

We need to be thinking, creatively, coming up with fresh ideas to build business, so how do we avoid the common pitfalls? How can we Think Fast in order to translate that thinking into decisive actions that get results?

The secret rests with **Generative Thinking**. And this is not just for those one-off group brainstorming sessions. No, this is to create a culture of “generative thinking”, of ideas, of opportunities, and of ways to put them into action.

The key is to have a clear Vision, and a Master Plan of how you are going to get there already laid out. That is the wallpaper against which all your strategic thinking takes place. And remember, “no plan survives first contact with an enemy” (Clausewitz), so the strategy should be an outline set of principles, a few key waypoints, and the focus firmly on Vision. In short, it’s a Strategy, not a Strait-jacket.

That done, we are left with the need for regular thinking to ensure you stay on track, and take advantage of opportunities, as well as creating fresh opportunities. Which is where Generative Thinking comes in...

The four cornerstones of Generative Thinking are...

1. Time.

Unless you set aside the time to think on a regular basis, strong thinking habits will never be maintained. It’s no good sitting down once a year to “think about ways of improving the business and the way we do things” to find that you stumble. Like any muscle, the Generative Thinking muscle will atrophy with lack of use. Exercised often, it will become strong. Setting aside time in your diary, on a regular basis, to think, without distraction, is one of the most important “meetings” you can have. You should protect that time as you would protect the time allocated to any such meeting.

“I made an international reputation by thinking twice each week”.

-George Bernard Shaw

If you don't set the time aside, something more “urgent” will always crop up and you'll get to the end of a week, month, quarter, no further forward.

2. Space

Find an environment which is away from your normal work space. No, you don't have to climb a high mountain and get above the clouds, or sit in meditative pose. But you do need to sit away you're your normal work space... away from being in managerial or bureaucratic mode. So, not at a desk -a change of room, or even a separate comfy chair will help, preferably away from any potential distractions... such as phones, and so on.

I have always advocated at least one full day per quarter as a “Hotel Day” away from the business purely for strategic thinking, as well as at least two hours per week spent on Generative Thinking. Certainly, finding a place where you can relax will help because you are more likely to access the Theta Brain Waves which fuel creativity. These brain waves are most active when we are most relaxed. Which is why so many people have great ideas when least expected. These ideas should be captured and stored up to form the agenda topics for your Generative thinking sessions.

3. Topic

Many people set aside the time and space to think, but then find themselves thinking about low-grade topics, or getting side-tracked into dealing with minor business issues. So choosing your topics for Generative Thinking in advance is critical.

Have some questions formed which will open up the session.

Such as “What if we wanted to do x...”

or “If we had a magic wand, and we waved it over the Despatch department, how would we want that to run?”

or “What if we absolutely HAD to do z, how would we approach it?”

Or it may be that you simply have a specific issue or opportunity that needs some decision time. So the topic could be: “sorting out the website”, or “creating a strategic alliance with xyz Ltd.”

Be challenging, but always opportunity and solution focussed. The rules that apply to any meeting also apply here. The object of the exercise is not “to discuss” or “to think about”, but “To decide”. The thinking is simply the vehicle that allows you to take decisions and commit to action.

4. Tools

It is imperative that we have some thinking techniques which allow you to capture the ideas as they are generated. So, Tony Buzan's Mindmapping, or Edward deBono's "Thinking Caps", or any number of tools will help. Most people think in pictures. And these don't have to be works of art... they can be very basic. The Stratagrams (Strategic Diagrams) I have devised and used many times are there to generate thought, harness opportunity, and act as a record for ongoing monitoring and follow-up.

And always think with a pen in your hand.

Nurture creativity. Being creative exercises the creative spirit. You can't sit down and say, right, now I'm going to start being creative, if you haven't exercised that muscle for years. Become creative by taking up creative hobbies or arts. That will strengthen that part of your mind so that you can apply it in business.

Similarly, if you have a strong Vision for the business, don't forget to listen to your gut-feeling. It's essential to take account of all facets of a challenge or opportunity, and whilst in business there's a tendency to look at pure hard, cold data, many people under-estimate the intuitive power of gut-feel emotion as a guide to taking decisions.

Doing a bit of what I call "mindsurfing" once a week for about 45 minutes is a great form of Generative Thinking. It revolves around www...

Wow: How can we "wow" our existing clients and customers? what improvements in service and products can we implement?

Woo: How can we "woo" new clients/ customers? – what fresh marketing approaches can we employ?

Win: How can we "win" as a team? - what can be done to improve the way we perform as a team, our environment, our systems, our structure?

The final step in Generative Thinking is to take immediate action. And I mean immediate. Right after the session, take point one of the resulting action plan and activate it. Do something immediately to get things on the move. That single action sends the signal that you have committed to the change.

Generative thinking is not about sitting back allowing the thoughts to come to you and then hoping that one day you may get round to implementing ten percent of the ideas. It's about generating action, through thinking.

It also takes practice... Start now, you'll never regret it.