

Quorum

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Creatively Transforming Corporate Thought: An Interview at Synectics, Inc.

Institutionalized brainstorming can have very creative effects.

by Barton Kunstler

This column, which will be a regular feature of Quorum, explores our experiences in applying transformational ideas and methods to actual work situations. How have people succeeded in providing organizations--their own or those to which they have consulted--with the ways and means of creatively transforming themselves? In what ways have we succeeded in applying our transformational visions to actual job situations? When a transformational approach has succeeded, what made it work? Have we transformed an organization only to see it more effectively perpetuate values and products repugnant to us? What is our response to this sort of situation? What is the danger of being co-opted, of having our ideas and methods used in highly localized applications while the organization avoids larger issues of organizational behavior?

This issue's story is about a small firm of consultants in Cambridge, Massachusetts who have had considerable success with "transformational" ideas.

In the depths of Canada's northern forests, a grizzly bear approaches an electrical transformer. Curious, the huge beast circles this intruder in his domain, pawing at it. Until recently, events unfolded predictably. The transformer, of course, just stood there, and the grizzly, becoming enraged, tore into the machinery. At the fatal moment, sparks flew, the bear was electrocuted, and the transformer went dead. In a northern town, the lights blinked out.

Today, the story ends as soon as the bear scratches at the metal box. "Scratch 'n' sniff" paint emits an odor repugnant to the grizzly and he retreats. Transformer, bear and lights are all preserved.

The company responsible for helping the Canadian Forestry Service devise this happy ending is headquartered in Harvard Square. Synectics, Inc., one of the leading creativity training and consulting firms in the world, is in the business of "helping people and organizations optimize and actualize their creative potential," according to Kenny Cohen,

Senior Associate and Director of Business Development in Canada.

While Synectics addresses a wide range of product development, marketing, and organizational culture issues, a common theme unites the firm's approach to all its work. "People have tremendous untapped potential which can be translated into a bottom line business approach," says Cohen. Indeed, Synectics has succeeded dramatically in helping large, traditionally conservative organizations achieve daring, constructive, and profitable innovation.



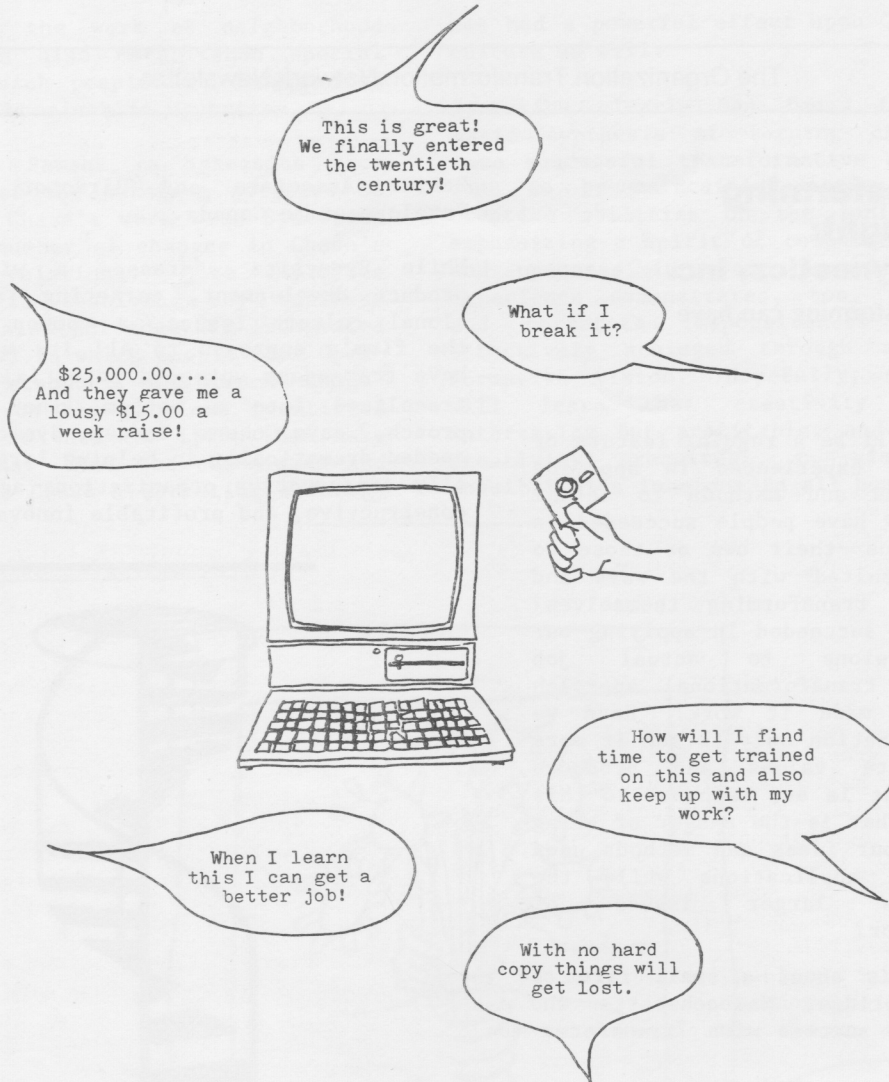
Synectics®, Inc.

The spiral staircase, an unconventional path to a higher level, is the Synectics trademark.

Synectics' offices in Harvard Square reflect the firm's emphasis on growth and illumination. Video equipment, flip charts, and magic markers are everywhere. One senses that the offices have been designed as green-houses for ideas, in which creative thoughts are given every chance to blossom and flourish. At one end of the lobby, a spiral stairway hangs suspended between the fourth and fifth floors. The spiral, ancient symbol of nature's mysteries and the creative process, leads to a lovely fifth floor aerie overlooking the rooftops of Cambridge.

Speaking with Cohen, one realizes that this relaxed but energetic spirit exists among Synectics staff as well. The backgrounds of

"Perceptions will vary..."



Senore Jean

the 30 people who work at the firm include education, social work, and fiction writing, as well as traditional business pursuits. And, as Cohen says, people here "share a set of values about doing life-work that is meaningful, makes a contribution, and is positive and constructive. They have highly developed moral/ethical value sets and try to live by them. You couldn't do this work unless you practiced what you preached..you have to believe in it."

Synectics boasts over one third of the Fortune 500 companies as present or former clients. Branch offices and licensees in Berkeley, London, Dublin, Amsterdam, and Frankfurt attest to the firm's recent expansion. With corporations looking for ways to compete in the "post-industrial age," Synectics' creative approach to problem-solving plays an important role in helping them adjust to rapidly changing economic and social conditions.

Synectics' success is rooted in its history and

its adherence to the vision of creativity developed by its co-founder and chairman, George Prince. In 1958, Prince joined Arthur D. Little as General Manager of the Invention Design Group, which was in charge of inventing new products and processes for ADL's clients. As Prince tells it in his book, The Practice of Creativity, "It became our obsession to discover why we were sometimes successful and sometimes not--to determine what procedures lead to creativity." In 1960, as a result of this work, Prince and three associates left ADL and founded Synectics.

In trying to expand the possibilities of organizational thinking, Synectics' founders had to address the key question faced by any manager or consultant concerned with organizational flexibility and innovation: What steps are required to build a substantive, lasting commitment to creative thinking within an organization? How do we avoid the trap of promoting merely cosmetic adjustment or superficial

Synectics, Inc.

training?

Prince and his associates became convinced that corporate meetings are dominated by fears of being ridiculed, making mistakes costly to careers, crossing swords with superiors, or simply doing less well than someone else. To protect ourselves, we tend to be overly critical of unconventional suggestions. The ideas that do survive are the ones least threatening to an organization's prevailing views.

In addition, we have been trained to think of ideas as being right or wrong, useful or frivolous. In a more essential sense, we see ideas as self-contained entities, or products. Thus, if an idea is not almost immediately usable, we dismiss it as we would a flawed product. As a result, as Cohen points out, "organizations miss out on exploring the range or universe of possible solutions; they lose out on opportunities."

The Synectics group found that creativity is enhanced by an environment in which suggestions are openly considered rather than shot down, and in which all group members feel secure that their ideas will be respected. Ideas are not self-contained at all. The personal history of the offerer, odd perceptions and associations, hidden principles, are all present within any given idea. Only by tossing ideas around, playing with them, if you will, do we exhaust their inherent possibilities. Furthermore, the very act of exploring ideas stimulates us to further exploration and inquiry, a process stifled by the far more static process of immediate judgment.

Thus, the first task of the Synectics facilitators who lead creativity groups is to sensitize participants to the emotional component of group dynamics. As Cohen points out, facilitators try to make people aware of the importance to problem-solving of the supportive environment so often missing from the workplace.

The other Synectics task is to help participants use the non-linear thinking out of which most truly creative ideas arise. Synectics trainees use a variety of techniques to generate ideas. For instance, Prince cites a group coping with the problem of an executive always hostile to new ideas. The members played with images of tools--levers, wedges--that could "move" him; eventually, they constructed a group image of a great mountain eroded by wind and rain. This led to the idea of "wearing away": "we shouldn't let him wear us down, let's wear him away." The session culminated with a solution that also allowed the executive to save face; the participants would use a sophisticated form of group dynamics whenever one of them planned to present the man with a new idea.

Many Synectics trainees work in their organizations as facilitators, trainers or both. Trainers use Synectics techniques to teach employees to interact more cooperatively or to stimulate their creative juices, while facilitators actually lead "synectic" problem-solving meetings. As a result, Synectics' values and methods are integrated into the corporate decision-making system.

That so many organizations are now internalizing Synectics techniques is but one testimonial to the firm's success. Since 1976, when Richard Harriman, a former Synectics practitioner from General Foods, became president, Synectics' marketing program has become more aggressive and directed. Each year, Synectics works with about 150 client companies from a wide range of fields, including consumer goods, food products, high-tech, financial services, and industrial products. Recent Synectics successes include helping Black & Decker develop the enormously successful cordless Handymixer Beater, B & D's first branded product for the kitchen. Synectics helped the Toronto Star create a rate strategy for marketing its "Career" classifieds, which resulted in an increase of the Star's market share from 15 to 50 percent in one year. And New York Telephone designed its vandal-proof pay phone when a Synectics group began working with the seemingly irrelevant image of the massive mesas and canyon walls that dominate the landscape in the Far West. Out of this image came the idea to build telephones into the walls of buildings.

In addition, Synectics is also tackling ambitious corporate culture projects. One of the most far-reaching, with Chase Manhattan, is designed to make Chase "the premier customer service bank in New York," according to Michael S. Cassidy, Senior Vice President for Metropolitan Community Banking, Chase's retail banking network. Rather than imitating competitors who stressed computerization and cutbacks in services to small depositors, Cassidy envisioned Chase emphasizing more personalized customer relations.

Synectics' early work with Chase examined how the bank's staff saw itself and the organization. It found that Chase's decision-making processes and style did not support its new aims. Synectics then introduced the new skills and ideas needed to change Chase's corporate culture from a "transaction-oriented" one, competing mainly on the basis of rates, to a people-oriented one, competing on the basis of service.

Among the results of the shift in Chase's philosophy have been hiring at the Chinatown branch employees who speak at least two major Chinese languages, and redecorating the bank in red and gold, the Chinese colors for luck and good fortune. The Harlem branch has sponsored many neighborhood cultural activities, while the

Synectics, Inc.

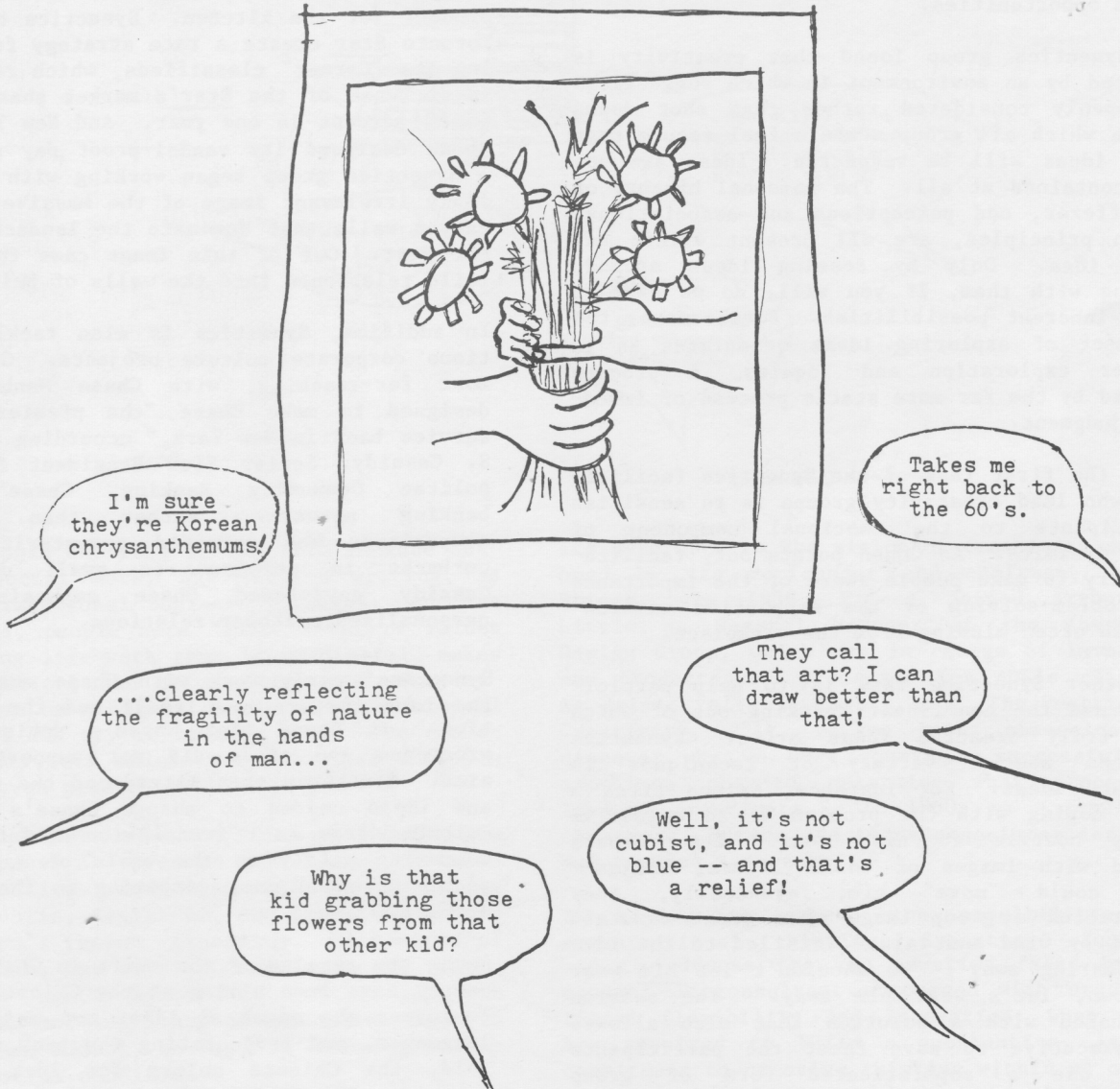
Soho bank displays the work of neighborhood artists. Chase has also established special deposit sites at which people can donate food and clothing to the homeless in Manhattan.

According to Houda Samaha, a Synectics Vice President and one of the managing partners of the Chase program, Chase's work with Synectics has resulted in a number of changes in Chase's internal employee relations. More employees are now involved in resolving key business issues. Chase has also put together Integrated Business Teams (IBTs) in which people from Operations, Marketing, Personnel, and Branch Management work together on key problems identified by top management, to whom the IBT's then make their recommendations. Thus the techniques and awareness applied to Chase's marketing strategy

has had a powerful effect upon Chase's internal culture as well.

Synectics clearly has found the key to the magic synthesis of turning creative thought into successful transformative action. It has done so by maintaining focus on the innate creative abilities of the individual, and by emphasizing a spirit of cooperation, generosity and openness in group dynamics. Synectics' experience demonstrates, too, that innovation and corporate responsiveness can be most effectively achieved through a truly transformative vision. Hopefully, more businesses will learn that creativity is not only interesting but profitable, and that fostering creativity requires a vision of the possibilities inherent in all human beings. □

"Perceptions will vary..."



Lenore Fern