

Creativity Is Not A Talent — It is Inherent In Everyone . . . So Says George Prince

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The fact that George Prince's firm, Synectics of Cambridge, Mass., is perhaps the world's leading and oldest innovation management and creative consulting firm is big news in the Boston and New York area. Not so in his hometown of Rochester. Everyone who grew up with George, and that includes John and Bill Morse and Alexander Beebe and, of course, his family of brothers Ralph and Chuck and sister Nancy, was not the least bit surprised when they heard that George and his firm would be featured this fall on ABC's 20-20 in a segment entitled, Creativity in Business.

For the past 25 years, George Prince has been helping people tap the creative part of their brain, which then enables them to come up with original ideas. Prince's thesis is that everyone is inherently creative. If they are not, it is because culture has suppressed it. In business, if creativity in employees is either disregarded or ignored, then the employee tends to withdraw and do his work without the same enthusiasm he might have had for making his job and the company better. The company continues on the same plane, going nowhere and eventually declining in productivity until it ceases to function.

One of the basic premises of Synectics (the word coined from Greek roots meaning "the bringing together of diverse elements") is that creativity is latent in virtually everyone, but the daily problems of personal interaction and rigidity imposed by group meetings or the traditional power structure often block the expression and development of that creativity.

Synectics is a body of knowledge and a process that helps people get past the traditional and utilize their creative talents. This involves getting at new ideas with an open mind or, as the Synectics professionals call it, "developmental thinking."

It has evidently worked for many corporations as Synectics just celebrated 25 years of helping companies and individuals break out of the mold and solve their problems with creative thinking. When Prince started his company, it was referred to as "Invention By the Madness Method." No one is calling it mad anymore. In fact, its client list reads like the Fortune 500 directory. Times have changed and in order to survive, many companies realized that standing still is not the answer, and the answers are in their own ranks waiting to be heard.

In the beginning, in the late 1950's, there were former advertising executive George M. Prince and a few people in the Invention Design Group working together to produce inventions for Arthur D. Little clients.

"I soon realized it was very difficult to invent something for someone else," said Prince, "what I wanted to do was to teach them to do their own inventing, which I was convinced they could do. Everyone is creative if only he will let himself be."

Prince said he then asked himself, what is creativity? What conditions are necessary to produce creative results? Why do "brainstorming sessions" sometimes lead to successful innovations and other times to failure?

So armed with his theories that everyone is inherently creative, that emotional and non-rational elements are just as important as intellectual and rational ones when it comes to creativity and innovation, and that all of those elements can be systematically harnessed through proper training, he and three associates, in October 1960, split from ADL, formed Synectics and started working out of a loft building in Boston's Kendall Square.

By using metaphors, analogies, and a technique known as "excursions" — mental trips into the seemingly irrelevant that help to stimulate new associations and thought processes — Synectics gave clients a way to do some "way-out thinking."

It worked. One of their first companies to take a chance on Synectics was Kimberly-Clark. They used the creativity process to help develop a system for compressing Kleenex to save space. They are still Synectics clients and continuing to solve problems as Synectics taught them.

Also in the beginning, the firm was called in to help run company meetings. This added another dimension to their creative process. "We used to and still do run the video tapes of meetings over and over," said Prince. "We see all sorts of things happening and definite patterns emerging."

What they saw and continue to see in most meetings is a hostile environment. As much as people may say they are open to new ideas, their tone, their mannerism and their supposedly helpful criticism all signal an opposition to new ideas and the people that propose them. At most meetings, the focus is on why ideas won't work. Everyone is on the defensive and, as a result, little is ventured and little is gained. New ideas rarely surface.

"We built our process around what we learned from these tapes," said Prince. "For instance, what would you do if you threw out an idea and someone immediately said, 'that's too expensive?'"

"What you would do is just what everyone on the tapes did," said Prince. "The person squelched waited for the opportunity to put down the person who put him down, which he did. He was seeking revenge, and in the process set up an environment not in the least conducive to getting ideas out on the table."

This point was illustrated very well in a recent session (attended by this reporter) when a participant put forth an idea that was met with "It won't work." In the tape, rerun for the participants, the person who said "It won't work" was shot down for his idea. The shooter was not even aware that she had done it until she saw it on tape. "Did you see what I just did," she said. "I was almost vindictive."

The same thing occurs on an individual level. Prince says most people have a tremendous amount of material to draw on when attacking a problem. It comes spurted forth at the rate of nearly 12 clumps per second (that's Prince's way of measuring a thinking speed of 700 words per minute divided by 60). But most of this material never surfaces because an individual self-censor (a combination of fear, anxiety and the dominance of the logical, mind) prevents it from getting through. Prince said the normal individual is often not even aware his creative process is blocked.

But, if clients think the Synectic method applies only to them, they find they are wrong. The Synectic people live their own teachings. Once a client steps off the elevator on the third floor duplex at 17 Dunster St., Cambridge, Mass., he knows he is in no ordinary office.

The company logo, a spiral staircase, is the first thing he sees. At the top of this winding, unconventional path to a new level is the penthouse, a place for meetings. The leader, who, in many cases, is Prince, is conducting a session clad in shorts, tee shirt, and sneakers. ("He always wore sneakers," said Beebe. That's nothing new for George"). He is serious, though, wastes no words and speaks in a soft, gravelly voice. His clients never take their eyes off him.

A partner, John Philipp, wears sandals, shorts and a colorful shirt. Harvard, class of 1962, he came to Synectics after serving time in the venture capital field.

Jeff Mauzy, the most conventionally dressed, wears sneakers, khaki trousers, an open shirt. His clients — almost anything from Marine fatigues to corduroy trousers. Mauzy has an undergraduate degree in psychology and philosophy, seven years of art training and a master's degree in business. "I always wanted to work with the mind," he said. "I'm in cat heaven here."

Mauzy came on board about 10 years

ago and has spent almost six of them training to be a Synectic pro. Watching him guide his sessions is like watching a doting father see his first born take a first step.

The corridors at Dunster Street office are unconventional. They are rounded on one wall. No straight up and down pathways. One can see what's ahead. The two floors abound with kitchens and bathrooms, and every workroom has a good supply of soft drinks, coffee and sweet rolls. Clients are comfortable. And the ideas that come spewing forth are written down on the many, many giant pads of paper that line the workrooms.

After all the ideas are posted — not one is evaluated — the facilitator leader says, "Archimedes, you all remember the court mathematician from the first century B.C., don't you? Well, he was given the task of measuring how much gold was used in the current king's crown. How to do this boggled his mind so much that he put the problem aside and decided that taking a bath would be the thing to do. When he jumped into the tub and saw the water overflow, he came upon the theory of displacement and decided that the way to measure the amount of gold in the crown would be to use the displacement method — viola — specific gravity. Forgetting about the problem and then calling on something irrelevant, even forcing the irrelevant, is part of the heart of Synectics process. The same goes for Gutenberg and the moveable type. The story, according to Synectics' pros, is that Gutenberg was watching children at play at dusk when the lanterns were lit. When it got dark the children disappeared into their homes, but the lights remained. Gutenberg thought he could move type in a similar way. He was right. But, at the time he was watching children at play, he wasn't even thinking about discovering moveable type.

The participants like to think along the lines of such greats and find the connections are made sometimes after such an exercise such as going to the window to look at something totally irrelevant to the problem. The client who has presented the problem can choose from whatever is presented. Nothing is thrown out, and if a particular idea is not used at this time, it can serve as a springboard to another idea at another time.

Although the time spent on each course varies, the training sessions usually take three days. Rambling on and on doesn't happen as time limits are set for each session. One employee who was very reluctant to give up time away from his desk was almost in awe of what came out of the first day of working with his colleagues and the Synectic pro. "I wouldn't have believed I would fall for it," he said. "But it works."

Another one said she would apply this process to everyday problems. "They are just getting us to use our grey matter and to take a problem from the complex to the simple. I feel that there isn't anything I can't handle now."

But, the entire process needs to be viewed or experienced in order to convert the skeptics. Synectics doesn't mind. In fact, they welcome the skeptics and, if the client is willing, the work sessions are open to interested people.

"One client," said Prince, "told us it was all right to have a reporter sit in on a work session as the client said he really didn't expect too much would come of the whole process. It wasn't long before the client said, 'I think we had better ask her (the reporter) to leave. What is coming out of this group is too good to be known just yet.'"

Prince said the one wish he hears so often, "I wish my boss could be here," is one that has prompted him to encourage entire companies to "take the course."

"Only in that way, does an entire company learn to work together and profit from what we are teaching them," he said.

Dean LeBaron, the contrarian investor who runs Batterymarch Financial Man-

agement, put everyone in the firm through Synectics training process, including the secretaries.

"As corny as it sounds, everybody has a lot to contribute, and more than you think," said LeBaron. Batterymarch now has a room set aside almost exclusively for internal Synectics sessions.

And skeptics might take a look at the companies who are helping Synectics celebrate the past 25 years and looking forward to 25 more years of the kind of creative consulting and innovation management that has produced dramatic results for their companies. For instance, General Electric and their Space Saver and Self-Diagnostic appliances; Kimberly-Clark with Softique tissues; Colgate-Palmolive with their Etonic tennis shoes; NASA with its thermometers for astronauts; Sunoco with the Dial-Your-Own Octane gas pumps, and Black and Decker with Handymixers.

Some clients prefer to remain anonymous, but not Chase Manhattan Bank in New York. They decided to meet the changes in banking head on and asked Synectics to help them.

"Our goal is to become the premier customer service bank in New York," said Michael Cassidy, senior vice president for Metropolitan Community banking at Chase. "Using the Synectics process, we've discovered that the way to achieve that goal is to give our branch managers more autonomy, because they know the communities they serve better than anyone at corporate headquarters."

In other words, Chase has changed its whole corporate culture from a "transaction-oriented" culture that competed mainly on the basis of rates, to a people-oriented culture that competes on the basis of service:

1. They hired at the Chinatown Branch employees who speak at least two of the major Chinese languages, and redecorated the branch in red and gold — the Chinese colors for luck and good fortune.

2. They sponsored at the Harlem Branch numerous neighborhood cultural activities, including the World Double Dutch Rope Jumping Championship.

3. The Soho Branch displayed the artwork of neighborhood painters and premiered new additions to Chase's corporate art collection — one of the largest in the world.

4. They also established special "deposit sites" for donation of food and clothing to the homeless in Manhattan, where that has become a particular pressing issue.

5. They instituted a dedicated mortgage service on Staten Island, where there is a boom in home ownership.

6. They increased automation on banking platforms throughout the Chase system, to cut down on waiting time and the tedious process of filling out forms and applications.

Synectics training has been central to Chase's corporate culture change efforts. Close to 1,000 employees on all levels have now gone through Synectics courses in innovative teamwork and new service development. The training had educated employees about the need for customer service and has given them the creative and innovative tools to accomplish it.

Any skeptics can look to world to see where Synectics is doing its thing. Take India, Japan, Thailand, Israel, South Africa, Finland, Sudan, Belgium, England, France and Germany and the regional offices in London and San Francisco. Synectics personnel are on the road about 60 percent of the time, meeting with clients and participating in forums and seminars. They are expanding their own body of knowledge and creativity just as they help clients develop creative ideas and manage their innovation.

Remembered affectionately by his friends as a Big Man on Campus at both Exeter and Williams, George Prince is showing the world that he was right 25 years ago — everyone is creative and it pays to teach them to know it. ●