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Employees being taught new thoughts

Creativity
classes can
show workers
some ways to
deal with their
firms' needs

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Pretend you're a human hair. You're feeling dry, lifeless, limp. You've got a split end and you hate being washed every day.

Sandra Lawrence, director of new ventures at Gillette Co. imagined just that in 1980. Result: Silkience shampoo, which now has 2% of the shampoo market, or

about \$20 million in annual sales.

Or think about Black & Decker Mfg. Corp.'s problem: trying to market a cordless electric mixer. B&D came up with a baton with attachments on the end.

It was awkward to use.

"The idea might have been dropped right there. But they played around with it," says John Holcomb, Black & Decker's director of marketing.

"Then someone suggested that we turn the baton on its side," Holcomb said. "And, holy smokes, we had it." It's the top-selling cordless portable mixer now.

Silkience and the HandyMixer sprang from how-to-think-creatively courses that have been thundering through the USA's business suites.

Today, more than half of the 500 largest USA corporations — including Procter & Gamble Co., IBM Corp. and Slinger Co. — have adopted some sort of formal creativity training, according to a study by the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, N.C.

Dozens of companies are willing to tell you how to get creative for a price — from a few thousand dollars to as much as \$500,000. New product development sessions cost from \$40,000 to \$70,000.

"I don't think I'm a really creative person," says Gillette's Lawrence. "But Synectics (Inc.) trained me not to laugh or jump on people's ideas. Eight people's heads can come up with a greater idea than one person's head."

That's at the center of creativity training. No idea is too absurd. But how the ideas spring up varies from course to course.

Boston's Synectics uses something called mental "excursions." SES Associates uses "natural analogs." Both try to find something outside the business world as a comparative touchstone.

Synectics had employees of a kitchen remodeling company imagine how trees sell themselves. Result: design-your-own-dream-kitchen workbooks for prospective clients and increased sales that saved the company. SES Associates had an appliance company consider how a goat handles its excrement. Result: a trash compactor.

"Everybody's got about a 1,000-horsepower mind. They just keep it idling around 10 horsepower," says Synectics President George Prince.

Methods are unconventional. First, get rid of the business jackets and ties. Make everyone equal and start to daydream, play with crayons, make up stories, do word games, write out-

landish wishes about sales, compare your product to other products or animals or objects and, finally, come up with a new product. It's not always an easy proposition — especially when CEOs, presidents and top managers have to drop their authority and listen to ideas of a chemist, salesperson or secretary.

At a Synectics' session, for example, a trainer wanted the top managers at Spinnaker, one of the USA's largest home computer software companies, to take off their ties — a symbolic dropping of authority.

"We refused to take off our ties the first day," recalls Bill Bowman, Spinnaker's chief executive officer. "If I was going to go out of there screaming, I was going to look like a CEO, not like a Harvard hippie."

But eventually ties came off, Spinnaker hierarchy dissolved during creativity sessions and a marketing and organizational problem was solved. "They work on these little symbols (such as the ties)," says Bowman. "It was amazing to see the ideas that resulted from this egalitarian spirit."

Prince says that most people limit themselves by relying only on "relevant" thinking, such as going to a library and checking out the books that only relate to the problem. But at a Synectics' session, participants might go on mental "excursions" — say to a huge library, picking books from every discipline to solve a problem. "If you can't point to a several million hundred dollar market five years out, then its very difficult to justify the investment in time," says John Ketteringham, co-author of *Breakthroughs*, a book that looks at innovative commercial concepts such as the Post-it note pad and Nike shoes.

Creative thinking has become the latest weapon in the corporate and business arsenal for keeping ahead of the competition. Its current popularity is linked to one thing: fear of failure in the marketplace.

"Terror is a tremendous motivator," says SES' Gordon. "We are in trouble in respect to other countries. Businesses are turning to creativity as a way of arriving at new ideas."

"The Japanese and the Third World have alerted the Western nations. They've got to find something new to do," says Ketteringham. "If every telephone is being manufactured in Japan, what are we going to manufacture in the USA?"

"There isn't generally complete openness to something that's new and different," says Peter Lawrence, chairman of Boston's Corporate Design Foundation. "But I think businesses are thinking about it more now because they are increasingly pressed: Competition has gotten extremely fierce."

This isn't the first time that business has looked to social science for help with its problems.

In the early 1950s, educator and advertising executive Alex Osborn, drawing on psychological theories, came up with the two-mode "brainstorming" idea. Instead of one mode of thought, Osborn believed there were two: the idea generator and the filter that sifts ideas for their practicality. Mostly because of fear of ridicule by others, Osborn figured the filter blocked the release of new ideas.

Osborn wrote his theories in a book called *Applied Imagination*. It hit the best-seller list and led to brainstorming — sitting around bouncing ideas off one other — as a way of generating new ideas. There was a problem, though. Brainstorming worked with words, not products. It was great for new advertising slogans; it collapsed when it came to new technologies. That took a more formal approach.

Although creativity training is the latest idea to catch the eye of business, it isn't a panacea for the marketplace. While consultants try to initiate ordinary folk into ways of creativity, the leap to new ideas is still a fragile process. Once the training sessions end, many people find it hard to stay "creative."

"I think it's very difficult to cause people to become and stay creative," says Bob McKim, author of *Experiences in Visual Thinking*. "For that you need to change the social environment to where it's possible to take risks and fail — and not be punished for it. If you can get that fear level to go down, the fear of failure, then you create a climate in which creativity can occur. But that's very difficult. That would be revolutionary."