

FLIGHTS

Is it a skill, or is it a talent? No matter; creativity, in one form or another, is again big news in management circles.

of

FANCY

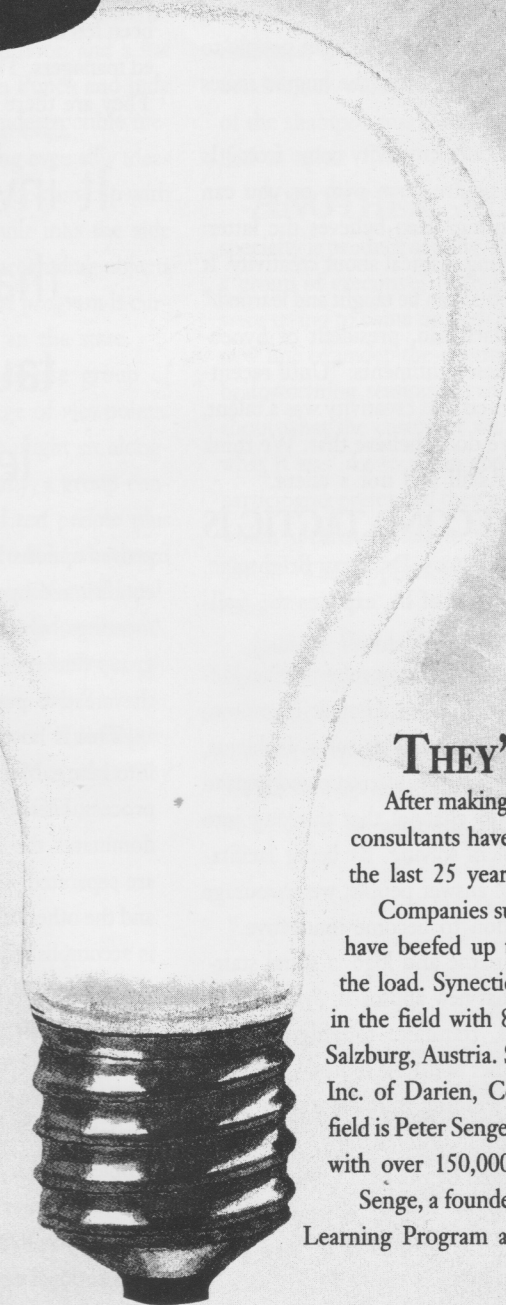


Illustration: Rob Saunders

THEY'RE IN AGAIN.

After making a big splash in the 1960s with brainstorming techniques, creativity consultants have been quietly treading the backwaters of corporate America for the last 25 years. But these days, creativity is once again a buzzword.

Companies such as Innovation Associates (IA) of Framingham, Massachusetts have beefed up their staffing from two to 50 in the last three years to handle the load. Syntectics, based in Cambridge, Massachusetts and probably the leader in the field with 80 employees, has recently opened up offices in Singapore and Salzburg, Austria. Small one- or two-person firms, such as Consultative Resources, Inc. of Darien, Connecticut, are thriving. But perhaps the biggest boon to the field is Peter Senge's book, *The Fifth Discipline*, which has become a sleeper bestseller, with over 150,000 hardback books sold.

Senge, a founder of IA and director of the Systems Thinking and Organizational Learning Program at MIT's Sloan School, has created a model of a learning or-

..... BY HOWARD SCOTT

ganization. His thesis is that only in a learning organization will companies be able to respond to today's challenges. Thus, *The Fifth Discipline* brings together the disparate aspects of creativity and centralizes the innovation process as the main objective of a corporation.

According to Senge, one of the first things organizations must do is overcome learning disabilities. Common ones include focusing on one's narrow domain, missing the learning potential of experience, fixating on events, and developing skilled incompetence through trying to protect the management team.

Senge believes an organization thrives or fails by learning what he defines as the "en-

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hancing capacity to create." He bases the new learning organization on five disciplines:

- Translating individual vision into shared vision.
- Developing personal mastery, where individuals clarify and deepen their own visions.
- Thinking by use of mental models, where people learn how they think and how to improve that process.
- Attacking problems using team learning, which improves the group dynamics of dialog and discussion.
- Systems thinking, the integrating fifth discipline, which teaches how to view things as a whole and to dig deeper to discover hidden levels.

"*The Fifth Discipline* states that nothing short of a change in corporate culture is called for," says Charles Conn, IA consultant. "That is our goal."

But how can this changeover be accomplished?

THE FIRST TACTIC IS the new emphasis on creativity. "Creativity is being demanded of managers, not just in the context of what they do but in the process of how they get it done," says John Kao, Ph.D., an associate professor at Harvard Business School, who teaches a course called Entrepreneurship, Creativity, and Organization.

"It's not just a matter of coming up with a new cereal or packaging. It's a matter of being creative in the way you get people to work together and handle the human issues in an organization."

But where does creativity come from? Is it something you're born with or you can work at acquiring? Kao believes the latter: "There's nothing magical about creativity. It involves skills that can be taught and learned."

Richard Harriman, president of Synectics, echoes these sentiments: "Until recently, it was believed that creativity was a talent, not a skill. We don't believe that. We think creativity is a skill and not a talent."

THE SECOND TACTIC IS the use of facilitators. Dr. Jerry Brightman, marketing director of IA, explains the facilitator approach.

"Unlike traditional consultants like McKinsey or Bain or Booz, Allen & Hamilton, who come in as experts to solve problems, we come in as catalysts to arouse and expand thinking and to channel that thinking into creative problem solving. By being facilitators instead of answer people, we encourage the organization to become innovative."

Synectics' name and logo, a spiral staircase, convey that new approach. *Synectics*, of Greek origins, translates roughly to "the bringing together of diverse routes." The logo symbolizes a winding unconventional path to a new level. Interestingly, *synectics*, which was coined by the firm's founder and chairman, George Prince, is now in two dictionaries and is defined as a "new consulting approach."

Innovative ideas call for innovative techniques. At in-house workshops, on-site consultations, and on-the-road programs, participants play with wooden beads (called "adult toys"), scribble using thick crayons, write stories with surprise endings, and paint pictures. One facilitator had participants go out with a camera and take photographs. "It's our way to remove the self-censors," explains IA's Conn.

"For years, these people have been attending meetings," Synectics partner Pamela Webb Moore explains. "Typically, they've been led through meetings by agenda-minded managers. Their input isn't really desired. They are there just to rubber-stamp preap-

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proved options. Imagine someone who's been conditioned by this coming into one of our meetings, where we say, 'You will help the group find a solution.' They need to unlock the creative potential within."

This is how the word "facilitator" came into being. Meetings have both content and process. Usually a person who controls both dominates the meeting. When the aspects are separated - a facilitator runs the process and the others determine the content - much is accomplished. This, in itself, changes the complexion of discussions, input, and creative thought.

The facilitator then leads the attendees by having them state a problem, establish desirable ends, seek out the aspects of the problem that aren't easily observed, and evaluate the issues from far-out perspectives, hopefully resulting in solutions. Often, unconventional methods push participants onto

unfamiliar turf. The goal is to get individuals to connect seemingly irrelevant pieces of information to the problem at hand. Synectics calls them "excursions."

One workshop with New York Telephone managers, research staffers, and marketing people addressed the issue of vandalism of pay telephones and booths. The facilitator asked the participants to envision imaginatively: "What would you like to see, or what do you think about when you consider this problem?"

Responses included a squirting mechanism, a coin-operated open door, and a flat surface. Images varied from Punch and Judy puppets to the seemingly indestructible mesas of the West. By following even silly ideas to their conclusions, the group came up with the idea of a telephone built into the side of a building with a lack of protruding objects as a protective measure. The program is currently being implemented in the state.

Workshops include a diverse group of people to elicit a wide range of viewpoints. A marketing vice president might sit alongside a staff chemist. Typically, a group consists of between seven and ten people plus one facilitator. Meetings are held in relaxed living-room spaces at the consultants' headquarters or in on-site company lounges. IA, following its own internal logic, has an empty room with only pillows on the floor for staffers to sit on and ruminate. "It's important to walk the talk" - practice what they preach - says IA consultant Conn.

Product exploratories are a common session topic. In one Synectics session, Gillette product manager Sandra Lawrence, by imagining she was a human hair, elicited a lively discussion from the group about hair needs. Comments included "I dread the blow dryer," "I hate being washed every day," "I feel dry, lifeless, limp," and "The worst part is my split ends."

"Everyone had different sentiments," says Lawrence, "which made us think how people have different issues about hair. It was a real discovery." The experience helped position Silkience, Gillette's successful shampoo and conditioner, which currently has two percent of the shampoo market with about \$20 million in sales.

ANOTHER SYNECTICS specialty is product naming. At one program, a group of executives from Black & Decker were trying to come up with a name for their new line of under-the-counter appliances. A brainstorming session began with questions about what the customer wanted and led to what it was like to be an appliance (yes, the participants pretended they were appliances), which ultimately led to the name "Space Saver." The appliance line still uses the name.

Pamela Webb Moore adds, "Product names are particularly appropriate for our facilitator methods. We bring in diverse elements, really get the cobwebs out, and help people turn up their creativity. Other names we've come up with are Slice, a soft drink

for Pepsi-Cola Co., Gold Rush for frozen french fries for Horizon International Foods, and Sound Selector, a new hearing aid by Ensoniq, Inc."

But if specific problem solving is the focus, drastic change is the goal.

IA consultant Charles Conn says, "If change starts at workshops, it must expand beyond that. We are providing managers with tools that they must build upon to become a learning organization."

One strategy both IA and Synectics use has facilitators training corporate staffers, who set up ongoing, in-house training programs. This cuts down the cost and increases the chance that creativity will continue when the consultants leave. "If a company doesn't keep at it," says Synectics' Webb Moore, "it'll probably return to old ways."

But is it working? The way corporations, organizations, and nonprofit companies are signing up, spending anywhere from \$2,100 for one-day workshops to fees upwards of \$60,000 for long-term development, creativity consultants must be doing something right.

As IA's Jerry Brightman says, "These days, without creativity, companies are dead. We're here to see that that doesn't happen."

Howard Scott is a business writer whose credits include the New York Times, Working Woman, and Boston magazine. ▲