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THINK!

Peddling creativity, intuition trainers are making giant inroads in the business world.

BY KEN LIZOTTE

PICTURE THIS: YOU'RE A SOFT-drink CEO and your major competitor has just launched an all-out ad campaign for its new diet cola. This new product not only tastes great (and is less filling) but also, remarkably, fights plaque! You now find yourself facing the greatest "Pepsi challenge" of your career, and you can almost hear some distant corporal boning up on taps.

"If you keep it on the plane of cola wars, you'll only talk about cola thinking," says Steven Bennett, a Cambridge based business analyst. The trick, he says, is to go beyond predictable tactics. "What Michael Snell and I, in collaborating on a book about business creativity, have found is that to arrive at a creative solution, you've got to step out of routine ways of looking at the world. The traditional approach might be to pour a lot more money into your own advertising or try to duplicate the other guy. But a cola that fights plaque! You've got to step back from your expert credentials and open up a different kind of window."

If you think you're not terribly adept at dreaming up original solutions to new problems, it may help you to know that there are methods for "boosting creativity." Some of these are described by Bennett in his forthcoming book, *Executive Chess*. "Everyone's creativity is there already," Bennett says. "All you need is to be reminded how you do it. Some people just express it better than others. In our book we create scenarios that are just a little offbeat to make people think. Innovation is a hot topic today because you've got to keep moving in the global marketplace; you can no longer just sit back and cruise."

So how did Bennett's hypothetical cola mogul escape the devastation of a cola war? First, he formed a research team to isolate the plaque-attacking ingredient in the competitor's drink. Next, his scientists bombed lab rats with the stuff until news of the macabre results—rat death, perhaps, or rats whose teeth dissolved—could

be leaked to the press. The new drink would be perceived as well intentioned but dangerous. The cola company could then jack up its own advertising, stressing safety.

In other words, the cola executive stepped back and saw that trying to bring another plaque-fighting diet cola into the market would just crowd the field. Once that became clear, a solution was obvious: sabotage the other guy.

"Intuition trainers" take Bennett's scenarios one step further, teaching techniques for getting those imaginative juices going.

IMAGINATION AND CREATIVITY PAY off in profits, as business and industry have long recognized. In the forties, IBM insisted that its employees "Think!" Brainstorming to uncover bright new ideas emerged in the fifties. But creativity consultants thought that brainstorming produced limited

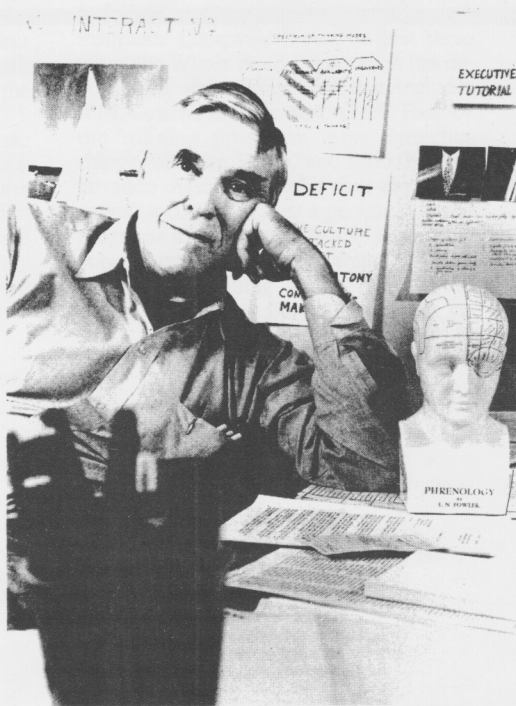
results. So, beginning in the sixties, when they started calling themselves intuition trainers, they began trying to make the process of tapping creative wellsprings more scientific. Among the first in the field was George Prince, whose firm called Synectics has trained about 15,000 executives since opening in 1960, in Harvard Square. His clients have included IBM, Wang, Digital, GE, Gillette, Lotus, and Pitney Bowes.

Once called the "mental playground of the East" by an enamored trade writer, Prince's office is papered with his own drawings, diagrams, and cartoons—all designed and displayed to stimulate his creativity. "Little red-and-white 'molecule' toys and jumbo drinking cups crammed with pens of many colors clutter Prince's broad desk. It's an atmosphere that suggests a man forever poised for experimentation. In a previous office Prince even pitched a tent. His clients would go in, lie down, clap on headphones to listen to meditative music, and wait for great ideas to strike.

Behind Prince's desk is a white brick fireplace; hanging from the mantel is a floppy transparent balloon with the word *starburst* scrawled across it. When Prince blows up the balloon, he thinks of boundlessness and the sudden, inspirational "starbursting" capacity of the human mind. On one wall he has scrawled the words and notions near and dear to his Synectics heart: "Hibachi Posture," "Win by Giving Up," and "The Spectrum of Thinking Modes."

"Our ideas come from communications," Prince explains, "and communication is heavily influenced by the state of our self-esteem. We all engage in self-punishment, so our experimental self is usually censored. Permanent change, however, isn't made that way."

George Prince, 68, is a big, agile man with fine gray hair. Today he is wearing a blue pullover and silver Reeboks. His eyes dance as he speaks. He grins, lets the grin go, falls into a contemplative pose, jumps out of his chair to show you some-



George Prince: "Communication is influenced by the state of our self-esteem."

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thing, gets back in his seat, doodles, looks absently at a color photo, goes back to grinning. His energy bebops around the room.

At first Prince and his staff did the creative work themselves, inventing new products for their clients and preparing innovative solutions to seemingly impossible management problems. Today they train their clients how to do it themselves. The switch came as Prince saw how his clients were limiting themselves, how negative they were with one another.

He recalls a "wish session" in a luxury hotel suite with eight Boston corporate vice presidents. A wish session, used to kindle creativity, involves stating a realistic goal and then coming up with all sorts of fanciful and outrageous ways of attaining it. The VPs had been going great guns, fantasizing and wishing away, getting crazy, giddy, and uncharacteristically experimental. Original, productive ideas were in the air.

Suddenly a bellhop walked into the room to pick up some dirty trays. Everyone shut up. The bellhop carried on, leaving the room moments later; but while he was there, Prince could not get a single VP to utter a word. They were afraid, he recalls, of looking foolish.

By making videotapes of executives in meetings, the Synectics folks also noticed subtle psychological games that consistently inhibited creativity. They found that early on in a typical problem-solving meeting, one or more participants would shoot down another's ideas. The victim would then lie in wait for an opportunity to shoot back. The result: no new ideas. Common goals and teamwork evaporated, with meetings typically ending in frustration.

This prompted Prince to adopt a maverick method based on the idea that everyone is inherently creative and that emotional and nonrational thought can be crucial in forming new ideas. The trick is to harness and train that type of thought. So Prince and his staff evolved the concept of "developmental thinking," which includes a technique called "excursions": mental trips into the seemingly irrelevant.

A recent Prince client was NYNEX, which wanted to create a pay telephone that could not be vandalized. The Synectics team got the NYNEX executives to focus their thinking on the Old West, a setting far removed from the problem. Then they were asked to free-associate. Their thoughts flowed from indestructible western mesas to phones built right into the indestructible sides of buildings. The result: the NYNEX brass thought that the idea of building pay phones right into brick or concrete walls was dandy and gave the project team the go-ahead.

Although such an excursion to the Old West might seem beside the point, "stepping back from your expert credentials," as

Steven Bennett puts it, has helped many Synectics clients conceive of and implement revolutionary product ideas—for example, the dial-your-own-octane gas pump of Sunoco, the Space Saver appliances of GE, and the HandyMixer Cordless Beater of Black & Decker.

CHARLES ATKINSON, PRESIDENT OF THE Whole Brain Corporation in North Cambridge, takes a scientific perspective on intuition training, insisting that what you *like* also determines your creative skills. For \$40 he provides a questionnaire designed to find out not just *how* you think but how you *like* to think.

"There's a close relationship between

"Out of 20 people I teach creativity to, 3 or 4 will definitely think I'm a lunatic."

preference and competence," he says. "When I first took this questionnaire [developed by Atkinson's partner, brain researcher Ned Herrmann], I saw my preference chart and said, 'That's me!' It was an affirmation of who I am, and it showed me that to be successful I needed teammates who reflect other kinds of thinking to complement me." The questionnaire set Atkinson on the path to founding the Whole Brain Corporation. His answers to Herrmann's questionnaire revealed that although he could handle technical subjects, he tended to avoid them. To run a company, he would need teammates who were more technically and administratively inclined.

The Whole Brain Corporation is as much a science lab as a creativity teacher. It uses metaphor, fantasy, and visualization in its intuition training, which is based on the now widely accepted theory that one of the two hemispheres of the brain governs logic, the other intuition. His research led Herrmann to divide the brain further, splitting each hemisphere into upper and lower halves, or quadrants. The logical left brain, he says, consists of an upper quadrant, the cerebral, which performs technical functions; and a lower quadrant, the limbic, which directs planning and organization. The intuitive right brain has a cerebral upper quadrant that is imaginative and conceptual and a limbic lower quadrant that is emotional and interpersonal. Whole Brain staffers say that once you understand which quadrant dominates your behavior, you can develop your weak quadrants by exercising them—for example, doing puzzles or complicated spreadsheets to strengthen your upper left quadrant. At the same time, you can confidently build your dominant quadrant to its full potential. The Whole Brain

questionnaire thus becomes a road map to a more successful and contented life.

"As Yogi Berra once said, 'You can observe a lot just by watching,'" Atkinson says with a laugh, waving lanky arms and pointing to his own colorful preference chart. After taking the questionnaire, he says, you will know what to watch out for and how to make it work for you.

WHILE THE ORIENTATION OF SYNECTICS is eminently practical and Whole Brain's borders on the scientific, Innovation Associates, in Framingham, extends intuition training to the spiritual.

"Meaning" is what's glaringly missing in the business world today, says Charles Kiefer, the president of Innovation Associates; too few workers think their jobs have any significance. And if you don't believe your work is meaningful, you probably won't commit yourself to the goals of your CEO.

The old concept of motivating workers to perform tasks that they would shun on their own is "off-target," says Kiefer. He adds: "Enrollment, getting people to sign up with you, to join in your vision—or align with you—offers more possibilities. Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream' speech represents a kind of vision CEOs more and more need to create. The images in King's speech reached out and grabbed people's hearts. It was something they wanted."

Kiefer quotes former Celtics great Bill Russell on the thrill—and productivity—of alignment: "Every so often a Celtic game would heat up so it became more than a physical or even a mental game, and would be magical. . . . When it happened, I could feel my play rise to a new level. . . . It would surround not only me and the other Celtics, but also the players on the other team, and the referees. . . . The game would be in a white heat of competition, and yet somehow I couldn't feel competitive—which is a miracle in itself. . . . On those five or ten occasions when the game ended on that special level, I literally did not care who had won."

Kiefer and Russell are not implying that winning is unimportant. Rather, they are saying that an organization's greatest creativity, hence its greatest productivity, will occur when alignment occurs.

THOUGH ONLY THE RUSTIEST TEXTBOOKS say creativity cannot be taught, there are those who harbor reservations about intuition training. Alex Randall, for example, himself a creativity consultant for many years, believes there are some issues the training companies have not fully addressed.

"Some folks, even when you lay it all out on the table, still don't get it and never will," Randall says. "The rational types will

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want to know, where are the rules, the formula? Out of 20 people I teach creativity to, 3 or 4 will definitely think I'm a lunatic, 1 will get it right away, and the rest, the middle-ground folks, will be the ones I'll really be working with." In short, some people simply will not open themselves up to the process and thus cannot be taught.

The ability to filter out, Randall says, is often overlooked by intuition trainers. "All the creativity training in the world isn't worth squat if you don't work hard," he says. "You can spin creativity all day, but you've got to be able to know what's worth talking about, what ideas to filter out, the ones that will work."

Randall himself felt the need to create something that would work, and so four years ago he founded the Boston Computer Exchange, which puts high-tech buyers and sellers together for a 10 percent brokerage fee. It was a fresh idea—one that's already earning Randall \$3 million a year. "I'd spent 12 years on the road teaching creativity,"

he explains, "so now it was time to go show it."

Despite reservations some may have about it, intuition training is an exploding industry. Synectics is turning away customers. Innovation Associates' enthusiastic clients include such corporate luminaries as Sheldon Buckler (executive vice president, Polaroid), Thomas Pyle (president, Harvard Community Health Plan), Richard Goeglein (president and CEO, Holiday Inns), and William O'Brien (president, Hanover Insurance Companies). And in just three years, the Whole Brain Corporation has developed a stellar client list that includes IBM, General Electric, and AT&T. Fees for the training programs vary: Synectics charges between \$5,000 and \$500,000; Innovation Associates holds four-day seminars at a cost of \$1,650 a person; and the programs offered by the Whole Brain Corporation cost between \$1,000 and \$12,000.

Creativity training is now part of the M.B.A. program at Boston University. In-

terface, the seventies-style personal-growth school in Watertown, says a program called Hi-Performance Learning, taught by brain studies author Michael Gelb, is one of its most popular offerings. And Lifespring, an organization that opened in Cambridge last April, plans to offer the Business Acceleration Workshop later this year.

Says Charles Kiefer: "An organization is 500, 10,000, 500,000 people—a labyrinth of reward systems, incentive systems, punishment systems, info systems, control systems, habits and norms and values and beliefs. And all of these things interacting every which way. You can learn as much as you can and develop rational foundations, and you're still going to have to extemporize and make a lot of it up as you go along.

"We intuition trainers are not covering all the bases yet—we're not even sure *what* bases to cover yet—but we are fostering the use of intuition in creating visions that must be kept alive. And we're bringing to reality something that wasn't there before." □