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Chairman George M. Prince: Reeboks, colored pens, doodles and a chart showing gradations from the logical mind to the world of "connected irrelevance."

GLOBE STAFF PHOTO BY DAVID L. RYAN

Synectics Inc. in Cambridge
trains workers to learn
how to develop new ideas

UNLOCKING THE CREATIVE MIND

By Bruce Mohl
Globe Staff

At a course designed to help a group of bankers think more creatively, George M. Prince asked each one to write down the names they called themselves whenever they made a mistake at work.

"What they wrote down was stunning," Prince said, reciting a litany of four-letter words. "The words were so insulting that they would never say them to someone else."

Prince says the name-calling was a form of self-censorship. By lashing out at themselves, the bankers were reinforcing a fear of making mistakes. The names were an internalized slap in the face, a warning not to goof up, not to step out of line. Exactly the type of behavior that stifles creativity.

The 67-year-old Prince has spent more than 25 years trying to unlock the secrets of creative thinking, in the process becoming something of a guru in this fast-growing field. Most people, he believes, have a vast reservoir

SYNECTICS, Page 46

Synectics Inc. teaches workers to unlock their creative minds

■ SYNECTICS

Continued from Page 39

of creative talent that rarely surfaces because they are afraid of making a mistake or appearing foolish. Prince's Cambridge consulting firm, Synectics Inc., operates something like a travel agent, booking trips for clients into the sometimes wacky world of creativity.

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

A growing number of corporations, school systems and government agencies have become believers. Frustrated by the lack of innovation bubbling up from within, such organizations as International Business Machines, Bank of Boston, Wang Laboratories, Chase Manhattan, Digital Equipment, the Needham school system and Gillette have sent their employees off to Synectics to be converted, at prices ranging from a few thousand dollars to as much as \$500,000. New product development sessions typically range from \$40,000 to \$70,000.

Groups of employees are sent to Cambridge seeking solutions to specific problems or, in the case of Chase Manhattan, more than a thousand have been trained in an effort to change the New York bank's corporate culture and cope better with the wrenching changes of deregulation.

The methods are unconventional. Employees play with Crayons, daydream, tell stories about dragons and play word games. More often than not it works. Synectics has played a role in the development of General Electric self-diagnostic appliances, Etonic tennis shows, Sunoco dial-your-own-octane pumps and Black & Decker Handy Mixers.

Sandra Lawrence, director of new ventures at Gillette, said she spent one session pretending she was a human hair. The experience helped lead to the development of Silkience, Gillette's successful shampoo and conditioner.

"I don't think I'm a creative person per se," Lawrence said. "But by thinking in the way Synectics has trained me to, people are always coming up to me and saying: 'You are a really, really creative person.'"

Dean LeBaron, the contrarian investor who runs Batterymarch

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

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

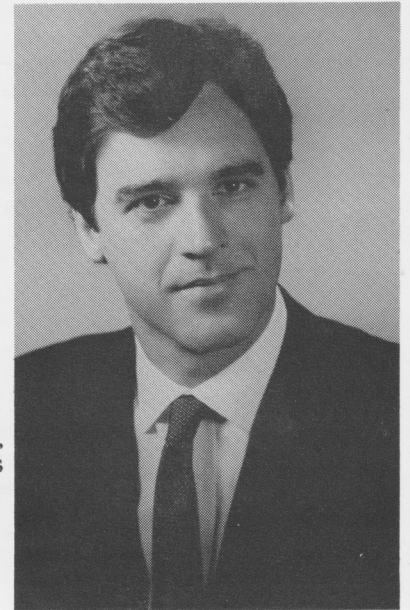
Corporate fad?

Not everyone is quite so enthusiastic. Some huff that creativity training is only the latest corporate fad. Others, such as Dr. Albert Rothenberg, who has been studying creativity for more than 20 years and is currently director of research at Austen Riggs Center in Stockbridge, says what Synectics and other consultants are selling is not true creativity.

What Synectics offers, he says, is a new way of looking at a problem. It yields solutions initially, but it can't be sustained. "They're

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— Richard A. Harriman,
president of Synectics



teaching aspects of creativity," he said. "I think there's some benefit to that. But it's not long range. Nobody has been able to teach real, effective creativity."

Researchers say creativity is a delicate and complicated process relying on the effective use of both the conscious and subconscious mind. It requires a combination of imagination, intuition, logic and, to some degree, the ability to see connections between seemingly unrelated images and events.

Archimedes, for example, discovered the so-called Archimedes principle of buoyancy while lying in a bathtub. The inventor of what eventually became known as Velcro, George de Mestral, got the idea by studying why he and his dog were always covered with burrs after a walk in the woods. And Wilmer E. May came up with the idea for the McDonald's McD.L.T. by playing with a set of hotel ashtrays.

Spiral staircase logo

Synectics specializes in promoting such connections; its training style is often called a metaphor approach. The firm's name comes from Greek roots and roughly translates as "the bringing together of diverse elements." The company logo is the spiral staircase, a winding, unconventional path to a new level.

(Not surprisingly, the Synectics office on Dunster street has a real spiral staircase. The simple yet striking design of the office is the product of architect Graham Gund, who, before beginning the design, went through the Synectics training process himself.)

The Synectics staff is also composed of diverse elements. Most are in their thirties or forties, coming from backgrounds ranging from international finance to personnel. Personal expression is promoted (earrings on men are acceptable here) and, judging from one staff session, ideas are spun off freely. One staff member suggested, for example, that the population shift to warmer Sun Belt climates will eventually transform feet into an attractive part of the body.

Prince, a geology major from Williams College, is the chairman of the board and the director of research. He wears sweaters and Reeboks (a Synectics client) and loves to doodle with the colored pens that fill four large cups on his desk. His doodles are pasted all over his office, as well as colorful diagrams and flow charts of the way people think. One chart shows gradations from the logical mind to the world of "connected irrelevance."

In 1958 Prince joined an invention design team headed by W.J.J. Gordon at Arthur D. Little Inc. The two men became fascinated by the creative process and began taping their sessions. Two years later their unconventional work habits led to a split with Arthur D. Little and the formation of Synectics, where, like football coaches, they analyzed their clients' creativity sessions to find out what worked and what didn't.

Hostile environment

What they discovered was that most meetings are hostile environments. As much as people may say they are open to new ideas, their tone, their mannerisms 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 survive.



The same occurs on an individual level. Prince says most people have a vast library of material to draw on when attacking a problem. It ranges from the realistic and the predictable to the absurd. It comes spurting 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's self-censor (a combination of fear, anxiety and the dominance of the logical mind) prevents it from getting through. Prince says the normal individual is often not even aware his creative process is blocked.

Synectics employs a variety of techniques to unlock the creative mind. The traditional meeting format is scrapped. Instead of a boss running the meeting (probably with his or her own agenda), the boss is forced to become part of the group and the meeting is run by someone whose only job is to keep ideas flowing.

Participants are also encouraged to go beyond the conventional. They wish for solutions, no matter how bizarre. An effort is made to focus on the positive aspects of each idea, instead of just the negative. Competition, in the sense of winners and losers, is discouraged.

All should contribute

"What we're trying to do is to get the competition on the project itself, rather than between people," said Harriman, the Synectics president. He says the goal is to build on each participant's ideas so that by the time a solution is reached everyone has contributed and everyone has a stake in it.

To look at the problem from different perspectives, Synectics pushes participants onto unfamiliar turf. They might tell make-believe stories, paint pictures, pretend or approach the problem from a different field. The goal is to get participants to connect seemingly irrelevant pieces of information to the problem at hand.

For example, executives from New York Telephone were seeking a public telephone that could not be vandalized. They were encouraged to discuss indestructibility in the context of politics and the wild West. A variety of images emerged, including the seemingly indestructible mesas that dominate the West's terrain. From that came the idea for a telephone built into the side of a building.

Harriman says corporations are pursuing creativity so actively now because they realize their organizational structure tends to stifle it. The segmented, top-down approaches so successful in the 1950s and 1960s, when pent-up demand merely needed to be satisfied, have been short-circuited by the competition and changing work force of today.

"What corporations are realizing now is that [the diversity of the corporation] all has to be pulled together," Harriman said. "Management is becoming less reliant on logic and numbers and getting more comfortable with creative, interactive thinking."