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Upping the Ante on Creativity: Harnessing the Power of Astonishment to Create Value for Your Clients

By Luc de Brabandere

As management consultants, most of us no doubt secretly enjoy being portrayed as the “smart people” who get called in to fix client problems. Everyone likes to be flattered, and consultants are certainly no different. But let's be honest—our clients are smart too. The real reason management consultants get a seat at the table is that we bring a fresh perspective on how to solve thorny problems—or to find where they may be lurking—and the experience to turn that new perspective into a better reality.

As I argue in my latest book, [The Forgotten Half of Change: Achieving Greater Creativity Through Changes in Perception](#), this ability to see things in a completely new way is the essence of creativity. And the more creative we are, the more value we can potentially deliver to our clients.

But the question is this: *Can we make ourselves more creative?*

Creative vs. Innovative Thinking

The short answer is ‘yes’—absolutely. But before saying how, let me first make an important distinction between two kinds of thinking that are completely different, but that we often run together—creativity and innovation.

Both relate to ideas. The difference between them comes down to how the ideas are born. Innovations arise from looking at how things are—existing business operations and processes, for example—and considering how they might be “tweaked” to make them better. This is our left brains, our old reliable analytical engines, at work. Left-brain, innovative thinking is fundamental, and something we should be, and usually are, doing all the time.

Creative thinking, on the other hand, comes from stepping out of our day-to-day reality and seeing things from a drastically new perspective. This radical change in viewpoints allows us not to just tweak the system, but often to replace it wholesale with something that's dramatically superior, and which is often described later as coming from “out of the blue.” Call it a “paradigm shift” or a “Gestalt change”—whatever you like—what it boils down to is right-brain, non-analytical activity.

Astonish Yourself into Creativity

But how do we do invoke the power of our right brains? How do we generate more creative ideas for our clients?

I suggest that the best way to have creative ideas is to have lots of ideas. And to do that, we need to reawaken something we all have within ourselves: our ability to be astonished by what goes on around us. And, perhaps even more so, by what doesn't.

The old saw is true: The world is full of surprises. Only most of us don't see them. Religious and secular sources alike remind us of this. The Talmud, for example, tells us that *we don't see the world as it is; rather, we see it as we are*. The English philosopher Francis Bacon makes roughly the same point when he notes that *people prefer to believe what they prefer to be true*. How many executives today, particularly in companies that are doing well, bother to ask themselves whether their entire business might be vulnerable? Probable answer: Not many.

For example Microsoft—as executives there will tell you—initially completely overlooked the importance of the Internet. Ken Olsen, the former CEO of Digital Equipment Corporation, was confident (in 1977) that there was no reason people would ever need to have a computer at home. In both cases, the underlying problem was a lack of astonishment—an inability to be surprised by an idea and captivated by its potential.

Fortunately, we can cultivate our ability to be astonished by taking a second look at something familiar, by exposing ourselves to different viewpoints, by questioning our questions.

The Varieties of Astonishment

There are (at least) four kinds of astonishment, and to activate our latent potential to be astonished, it helps to know what they are.

First, there is astonishment over something that *is*. Over a traffic light that is *still* red; or a bad cup of coffee; or a statement by a friend or colleague you thought you knew well. Next, there is astonishment over something that has always—or long—been, but that you have never noticed until now. We're all familiar with this—at suddenly “discovering” there is a photo shop or a pharmacy along your usual route to work, even though it has clearly been there for years.

The third kind of astonishment happens when something, or someone, that has always been there no longer is. It happens when you are shocked to learn that the friend you thought you knew is no longer the same person. Something about that friend has changed, but you didn't notice it until now. And only then do you realize that the change isn't new at all.

The fourth kind of astonishment is perhaps the most important of all for today's executive to cultivate: astonishment at what is not. The dot-com era, despite its (now) obvious excesses, fundamentally changed the way we do business and communicate because some individuals were able to be astonished by the *lack* of commercial use of a burgeoning Internet. Similarly, several low cost airlines are currently booming because some people were surprised that there *wasn't* a more efficient alternative—an insight that enabled them to go out and create one.

Paving the Way for Creativity...and Happier Clients

At the end of the day, clients pay us to bring fresh, creative perspectives to bear on their problems. And it's what we tell them we can do. Awakening our power of astonishment is the best way to deliver on that promise.

Astonish yourself into new perceptions, and you seed the ground for creative ideas. Be astonished—at what is, what always has been, what has changed, and at what could be. Learn to question what's behind your newfound surprise, and you will be a long way toward generating the ideas that you and your clients need.

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