

Inside the box

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For QNewZ

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Thinking 'outside the box' is all very well, but it's inside the box that ideas are turned into improved or new products and services. A recent MIT Sloan Management Review article (The Discipline of Creativity, by Sinfield, Gustafson and Hindo, 2014, v55/2) explores this idea, arriving on my desktop right in the middle of an email discussion with my colleagues at Capable NZ about managing student projects – about the boundaries of the 'box'.

Our discussion is about negotiating learner-defined work-based projects that are achievable, assessable, and meet the needs of the learner, the employer, and the academy. The MIT Sloan article is about turning ideas into action, and offers some useful crossover insights. I'll summarise.

Organisational success depends increasingly on new ideas: for products, for developing and refining processes, and for strategic and operational challenges. But ideation is only the first, perhaps even the easiest, step. Just as crucial is how ideas lead to action: how creative thinking achieves results; revenue growth, delighted customers, a stronger community, better public policy, or some other measure of impact.

Sinfield and his colleagues describe a seven-step process drawn from education, consumer research, business model design and emergent strategy. Their approach is relevant to the Capable NZ discussion about project boundaries, and if you're involved in problem-solving or project management in your workplace, they may be relevant to you as well. Here goes.

STEP 1: Define the problem

Delineate both the problem (what exactly you're proposing to solve) and the solution (what types of answers you seek). Having clearly defined boundaries can expand, rather than constrict, what's possible, and force ideators to focus. The result: clear and concise ideas, on target and with strategic impact. Less is more.

STEP 2: Map the solution space

Many possible projects are too complex to move directly to idea generation, and attempting to tackle everything at once can stop a project dead. Try creating a map or chart or other graphic that illustrates the complexity, and the barriers. Sketch the landscape.

STEP 3: Make it personal

Next, define the 'job to be done' for which you need to 'hire' solutions. Look for interventions that can be cleanly extracted from your step 2 world map, that matter to stakeholders, where solutions have yet to be found and where there's real demand.

STEP 4: Apply an outside-in perspective

Bring together individuals with diverse backgrounds who can enhance the flow of ideas. Look for new information and new ways to apply it. Look outside your team or workplace. Think process, not product.

STEP 5: Diverge before you converge

While it makes sense to consider as many ideas as possible, brainstorming sessions can be risky. One strong voice can prevail, early suggestions can dominate. Start by asking your participants to list their ideas. Introverts will get to contribute, and having lots of ideas before the discussion begins prevents the group from rallying around a solution too soon.

Mixing individual thinking and group thinking is three times as productive, measured by the number of ideas they generate, and hybrid teams' ideas are more valuable and attractive to potential users than collections of individual ideas, according to a recent study by Karan Girotra, assistant professor of technology and operations management at INSEAD.

STEP 6: Create an idea resume

Review the results of your brainstorming, sort them into categories, then crystallise as a one-page 'idea resume' that describes the project: how it meets stakeholder needs; what resources or processes are needed to make it a reality; and how it will achieve organisational and stakeholder best fit.

STEP 7: Create a plan to learn

This is where the real work begins. Steps 1 to 6 should have identified project or intervention priorities, and set the boundaries, but there will likely still be embedded assumptions. Make a list of the most important ideas and design tests for each of them: how much time and resources each would require, what you hope to learn from them and what would change as a result.

This collection of assumptions and tests is your plan to learn. It's your project or proposal, matched to real need and at a do-able scale and scope. It should now be 'bankable' – ready for approval – and if you're a work-based learner, it should satisfy the needs of your various stakeholders, and provide the best possible learning experience.

722 words