

Problem finders are better creatives than problem solvers

 By [Sid Peimer](#)

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The subject of creativity is an elusive one (especially on Fridays at lunch time), so perhaps it's time to go back to school...

Equally elusive is the pronunciation of the legendary social scientist's name who researched the topic and revolutionised our understanding of what makes a 'good creative': Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. You pronounce his surname chick-sent-mee-hali (the 'y' is silent).

Back to school

One day Mihaly drove to the School of Fine Arts in Chicago and recruited a bunch of fourth-year art students for an experiment. He invited them (one at a time) to a studio in which there was a table that had 27 objects on it. The students were asked to select any number of objects, and to arrange them as a still life which they would then draw. [1]

The artists approached the task in one of two ways: one group chose the objects that appealed to them and proceeded to draw; the other group handled more objects, rearranged them several times and took longer on the task. As Mihaly saw it, the first group was trying to solve a problem; the second group was trying to find a problem. The first group asked themselves "how can I produce a good drawing?" The second group asked themselves "what good drawing can I produce?" A subtle difference, but a not-so-subtle result.

Judgement day

Mihaly then proceeded to determine the effect. He put the drawings on show and asked a panel of experts to judge the works. When he tabulated the results, the problem finders won by a mile. However, the experiment gets even more interesting. Ten years later the same artists were tracked down. About half had left the art world altogether; the other half were working as professional artists. The composition of the latter group? Nearly all the problem finders from the original experiment.

It has nothing to do with technical skill

But he didn't stop there. He patiently waited another eight years, and discovered that the problem finders were significantly more successful than their peers. Jacob Getzels, who worked with Mihaly, concluded: "It is in fact the discovery and creation of problems rather than any superior knowledge, technical skill, or craftsmanship that often sets the creative person apart from others in the field". In subsequent research, they, and other researchers, found that the people most successful in art and science tended to be problem finders.

The Haas School of Business at the University of California, Berkley, now offers a course in "Problem Finding, Problem Solving". This is based on the premise that to be an innovative leader, you need to be able to frame the problem; to determine what the problem really is before you can even to begin thinking of solving it.

IDEO, the much revered innovation and design company, is a proponent of the five whys methodology. They use the 'five whys' is an exercise that forces people to examine and express the underlying reasons for their behaviour and perspective, allowing them to discover the real problem that needs to be solved.

May I have the envelope, please

When that brown envelope (i.e. brief) lands on your desk, it's not an instruction to produce work, but rather a treasure of tantalising clues that can lead you to the real problem. You can then produce creative work that strikes at the very heart and soul of those whom we need to influence. Because at the end of the day advertising is not art, neither is it science; advertising is persuasion.

Reference

1. *Daniel H. Pink. To Sell Is Human: The Surprising Truth About Moving Others Riverhead, 2012.*

ABOUT SID PEIMER

A seasoned and insightful executive with multisector experience in roles as diverse as senior management, strategic planning and copywriting. I am a qualified pharmacist with an MBA from UCT. I am also an accomplished keynote speaker and presenter.

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