

Creative Choices: Breakthroughs in Thinking

by Jim Rough

The Tax Reform Act of 1986 was an interesting bill because it came into being in a way that was different from most legislation. Committee members had struggled to reach a compromise. Everyone knew that tax loopholes were immense, yet attempts to change them met with strong resistance from special interests. President Reagan had initiated the attempt at tax reform, but when the House committee was done with it, even he said he wouldn't sign it. The Senate Finance Committee then met and through long and arduous discussions the bill deteriorated further as special interests added additional provisions. It looked as though it would die. At this point Senator Packwood, Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, called a special, closed door breakfast meeting. At the end of this meeting the Senators emerged with a unanimous new perspective that was more revolutionary than anything anyone had imagined to be possible. The breakthrough felt risky for participants so they pledged to one another that they would stay unanimous and would live or die as a block. They weren't able to maintain their pledges against the special interests but substantial changes did result.

This example is not intended to make a point about taxes or government. It is an illustration of how normal approaches to meeting and thinking have limited value.

Breakthroughs can happen, but to obtain them requires facilitative steps that help a group change its mode of thinking. Something important happened at breakfast. The stalemate in thinking was not overcome through compromise or power struggle, but breakthrough.

Normal meetings proceed dialectically. Ideas are presented and discussed one at a time. In the face of emotional tension groups tend to polarize. The more polarized the discussion, the less creative it is. To discuss abortion with a normal meeting, for example, will almost guarantee a wrangling about two polar opposites: pro-life and pro-choice. People in normal meetings tend to stay in channels that can be safely defended. A facilitator, on the other hand, helps a group depart from safe, rational thinking, and ensures that there is support to do it safely. Creativity, requires new thinking and different ideas. Normal meetings aren't oriented to different ways of thinking or breakthroughs. They seek an ordered process that leads to compromise.

Creative breakthroughs are difficult to imagine in the white heat of a tough issue. When faced with physical limits, or federal laws, people want to assume that creativity is limited and exclaim that there are only two possibilities. What they mean

is that there are only two possibilities in the current frame of mind. Such a statement implies a limit to human capabilities because it denies the possibility of breakthrough. When it seems impossible to move ahead on a given problem, what is called for is the step that Senator Packwood took: To address the problem in a different way. The Senate Finance Committee could have continued to meet in the normal fashion. They would have developed an unsatisfactory compromise or recognizing futility, given up. Instead of trying harder, different styles of thinking need to be encouraged. The breakfast meeting opened a door into unknown territory.

In my facilitation work I have found four fundamentally different types of creative breakthrough. A different mode of thinking is required for each type. When a facilitator is familiar with these, he/she can help groups to attain breakthroughs more easily, just as Senator Packwood did when he scheduled the breakfast meeting. Each of the different thinking modes is discussed

below with an example where a group faced a situation that seemed impossible to solve. In each case an unforeseen “Creative Choice” was developed which transformed the situation and led to new and positive results.

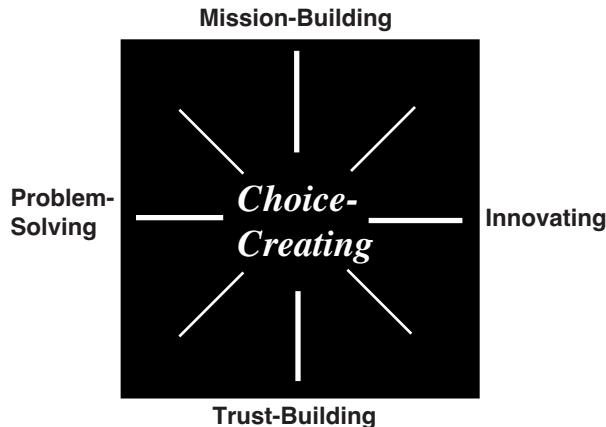
The diagram below and the examples outlined in this article illustrate these four types. The square represents normal, operational thinking. It is usually appropriate and effective. The asterisk-like figure inside the square represents the multifaceted aspect of creative approaches. The horizontal axis stretches from problem-solving to innovation, two modes that seek a paradigm shift, or a change of mind. This axis is the HEAD axis because these modes require a measure of detachment from feelings and emotions. The vertical axis is the HEART axis. Trust-building and Mission thinking explore feelings to achieve breakthroughs. These modes spark a change of heart.

ISSUE: Twenty-five members of a Board of Directors met in a retreat to agree upon one of two possible directions for the organization.

CREATIVE CHOICE: By uncovering shared motivation and values, they developed a unanimous decision.

ISSUE: Workers in a mill identified a critical need for more and better cleanup.

CREATIVE CHOICE: By critically examining how this need was caused, they eliminated the problem using a welding torch and twenty minutes.



ISSUE: Design engineers estimated the cost to automate an operation currently performed by temporary laborers.

CREATIVE CHOICE: A group of non-experts met and invented an entirely new design approach that cost only 10% of the expert approach.

ISSUE: An organization of social workers resisted their new manager. The manager wanted them to respect her authority.

CREATIVE CHOICE: The manager earned respect in a way that didn't seem possible beforehand. They respected her instead of her authority.

Four Examples

#1 TRUST-BUILDING: This is usually the first mode of creative thinking. With it one encounters a situation authentically, with an open heart. One investigates and articulates feelings as well as objective data in order to overcome emotional blocks. This style of creative thinking is appropriate for many situations including the situation Senator Packwood faced.

Example: In their efforts to help clients, caseworkers in a state agency occasionally bent minor rules. Supervision felt the need for corrective measures in the form of stronger rules and increased direction to the staff. They hired a new supervisor and directed her to shape up the department. The caseworkers responded to these moves with outrage at the new supervisor's style. They engaged in labor grievances, strict orientation to rules, uncooperative attitudes, etc. Eventually both sides pointed with exasperation at the extent to which the other betrayed trust and acted without scruples. In the minds of all nothing more could be done. It was up to the other party to change., and neither was going to do that.

Creative Choice: The group met in a series of meetings with a facilitator. In the process members articulated their differing views and were guided to hear one another completely. As people were able to accommodate the feelings of others the emotional tone of the group changed from outrage, to quiet honesty, to enthusiasm. As trust developed, people saw themselves and their colleagues in a new light. Before the meetings the group thought that the supervisor was the problem. After the meetings, it was agreed that she had become a vital asset to the department. Beforehand, the supervisor's goal for the intervention was to have the group respect her authority. After the meetings they were respecting her, instead of her authority. In the final session the group energetically and innovatively tackled the task of "how to become the best department in the state!"

Observation: Repressed feelings restrict one's power and sense of what is possible to change. This impossible-seeming problem was courageously addressed by the group in a creative fashion. One important strategy for the facilitator is to help the group articulate fully the ready answers that people are stuck on. In the case of this

conflict each side wanted the other to accept blame and to change. Articulating these extreme viewpoints is difficult but it builds group trust and leads to possible breakthroughs.

#2: PROBLEM-SOLVING: This mode is closest to operational thinking. It usually follows Trust-building and shifts the focus to the objective situation with heightened awareness, seeing with new eyes and hearing with new ears. A master auto mechanic diagnosing a car that isn't running properly is a picture of this mind in action. S/he approaches the situation with expertise and tools that help thinking and serve to spark insights. Each measurement made suggests new ideas and possibilities as s/he strives toward the diagnosis. If, however, the goal remains elusive and patience is lost, the creative mind slips away as well.

Example: A group of employees in a sawmill met to work on the problem of "cleanup at the log barkers." Bark debris from logs caused numerous problems and they had made it known to management that there was a pressing need for more cleanup people. They talked to the cleanup people about the special needs of the area. They felt they had done all they could.

Creative Choice: Meeting in a creative format the group examined the list of cleanup issues and specified one as most critical. It was "cleanup around the bucking saw." When that area wasn't cleaned properly, sawdust and bark worked into the equipment in such a way that a mechanism to lift logs didn't fall all the way back down. This meant that a log had to be jockeyed back and forth until it could be positioned to ride past the stuck lift. Besides wasting time, jockeying the log damaged the equipment.

After identifying this problem as most severe, members of the group climbed below the log lift to examine exactly how sawdust and bark hung up. Although they had been there many times before, this time they looked at the equipment in a different, problem-solving way. They were able to determine that the ledge on which the bark accumulated could be structurally eliminated. With a welding torch and about 20 minutes they eliminated not only the ledge but their most pressing problem, one that had been impossible.

Observation: This problem had

plagued the men for years and yet the solution was quite simple once they looked into it with a creative attitude. Key was seeking to resolve the situation with a feeling of curiosity and confidence. In this case these feelings and attitudes were triggered in the men by listing data and observations about the situation. Questions arose and they took time away from normal work and operational thinking to find out more.

#3: MISSION thinking: Mission thinking is defining what you really want instead of what you think you want. You seek to uncover and articulate values and deeper desires in order to discover the real goal. When determined, it is a breakthrough. Old blocks can seem irrelevant and are even forgotten in the active pursuit of the newly discovered, more important direction. As in Trust-building, this is a heart approach and feelings play a crucial role. The issue becomes redefined in a way that empowers higher levels of commitment.

Example: The Chamber of Commerce for a small town beyond the edge of suburbia met for a retreat. The retreat format provided an opportunity to assume a creative approach to a hot topic. Many of the members were shopkeepers on the edge of economic survival. Some had raised their children in the area and wished to ensure that there were job opportunities so their children could find ways to stay. Others chose to move to the area precisely to avoid the urban and suburban development that accompanies more jobs. The meeting was to determine a direction for the Chamber in an atmosphere of division. There were those who wanted the organization to promote rapid economic development in order to create jobs and wealth. The other sentiment was for the Chamber to be a force which preserves the quality of life in an economically viable way.

Creative Choice: The group spent time examining questions like: Exactly what kind of industry would you like to see? What would be the best location for the businesses you would like to see here? Where would you like to see the additional people located? What are the special qualities that drew you to this area? What would be the benefits of growth? the detriments? The whole group worked to determine

answers to these questions. By filling out different scenarios as a group and examining the pluses and minuses all could see the implications. As the group talked about the values which underlie the choice to live in the area a new feeling tone was generated. This feeling tone brought the group together in a new way: Everyone in the room strongly valued the special features of the area and agreed that they must not be threatened by a pursuit of commercial growth. The group developed a list of the special features and readily made new choices about old programs. The level of consensus and mutual agreement achieved was a breakthrough that had seemed impossible.

Observation: People often lose touch with the values which underlie their goals. A creative moment happens when the feelings associated with these values are renewed and articulated. A meeting of hearts was an outcome of this joint expression that superseded all wrangling. In the tone of new discovery, unanimous decisions were reached.

#4 INNOVATION-thinking: Like Problem-solving, Innovation-thinking seeks a new perspective. But the methods for seeking this perspective are not logical. This mode seeks to connect unrelated ideas into a new logic. A corporate research department or an ad agency may engage in Innovation-thinking regularly to spur recognition of unforeseen opportunities. Brainstorming, forced analogies, or guided imaging are examples of methods which help to force people out of ordinary channels to make new connections.

Example: The manager of a reforestation project proposed an area of investigation. After planting seedlings each year the plastic tubes in which the trees had been contained were brought back from the woods. Hundreds of thousands of these tubes needed to be sorted into racks to feed a machine that deposited soil, fertilizer and seed for next year. Getting the tubes into the racks was done manually. Design engineers had estimated that hundreds of thousands of dollars would be required to mechanize this. He asked a group of people "can you think of a new way to do this more cheaply."

Creative Choice: The group started by considering how the tubes might sort themselves. They discussed how elements

from nature sort themselves. They thought about how bees fill hexagon racks in their hives with eggs, how birds migrate to specific locations, and how salmon return to their spawning ground after years at sea. Thinking about salmon in more detail they imagined themselves as salmon returning through river currents by smell and instinct. Forcing this image together with the tube problem, the group thought of ways to use water to sort the tubes. If the tubes floated straight up and down when put into water, they could be guided by currents to squeeze together at the end of a tub. A rack situated under the tubes, when lifted, could then catch one tube per hole. This idea would cost only a few dollars and could be set up for testing in a few hours. The group invented a line of thought and made a cost improvement that the engineers would have thought to be impossible.

Observation: Innovation-thinking actively avoids logical approaches in order to provoke new lines of thought. For this kind of thinking there is value in irrelevant material and in non-expert participants. But normal meetings squelch this kind of thinking. In most meetings only relevant ideas are tolerated, and only people who are adequately familiar with the issue are invited to attend. This type of creative thinking is rarely supported within an organizational system.

Summary:

In each of the examples operational thinking had reached a dead end. It appeared to those involved that the problem was not solvable. But in each situation, through a different thinking style, old patterns of thought and feeling were left behind. Ready answers and logic became less ordered and the door to new possibilities was opened. Unforeseeable breakthroughs resulted.

In the Problem-Solving example, the group physically looked into a situation in a way they hadn't before. A breakthrough idea, cutting out the ledge, appeared to them. In the Innovation example the group used an unrelated idea of salmon running upstream, to separate from normal thinking modes. They achieved a perceptual shift which gave them a simple, cheap, new alternative. Both of these thinking modes

are powerful. They are detached from feelings, so they work well on physical problems. Issues with emotional content require a heart dimension as well.

In the Trust-Building example a breakthrough was achieved because feelings were examined directly. A new quality of relationship between supervisor and group was begun, based on trust and shared responsibility. Using Mission-thinking, each person on the board looked beyond their fears to discover fundamental desires. This step allowed them to reach unanimity. These heart modes, Trust-building and Mission-thinking, are powerful for most difficult issues. They turn problems into empowering challenges.

These four brief examples, plus the tax reform bill, illustrate ways that seemingly impossible-to-solve problems can be transformed. Creativity is not a usual approach when people identify difficult issues, however. More natural is to avoid creative thinking and in a pseudo-logical way, defend the thinking rut we are in. But the creative possibility is present in any situation and can be strengthened by a facilitator who recognizes and encourages the mental shift needed. Senator Packwood's example is such a step, taken in the public arena. The facilitator recognizes and structures opportunities for creative thinking to do its magic.