

# Improve How You Learn

## Creative Thinking

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### Overview

In this Module you will be taken through the 10 steps to effective learning as they apply to your desire to improve the way you learn Creative Thinking. Steps 1 to 3 are designed to increase your motivation. The remaining steps are designed to help you succeed.

#### 1. Be clear about what it is you want to learn

This Step helps you clarify and define exactly what it is you are trying to learn and to what level of competence.

#### 2. Be clear about why you want to learn

This Step helps you fully understand your reasons and the likely benefits to you of improving how you learn to Think Creatively

#### 3. Envision the end-point

This Step helps you imagine and visualise as concretely as possible having succeeded in achieving your learning goals.

#### 4. Create learning targets

**This section helps you formulate your learning goals in a practical way.**

#### 5. Understand how you best learn and the types of learning needed

This Step introduces you to the different approaches to learning that you can adopt (learning styles) and the different kinds of learning involved in learning to improve your learning.

#### 6. Explore learning tactics, tools, and techniques

This Step introduces you to 10 Powerful Tools, Tactics and Techniques you can use to improve the way you learn. The exercises will help to (1) *think* and deepen your understanding of the area you want to improve and actually suggests specific tasks you can (2) *do* at your computer and away

from it (in your work and life environment), to dramatically improve your capability.

### 7. Create a Personal Learning Plan

This Step introduces you to a structured planning process to help ensure that you are clear about what you want to do and by when. The plan promotes commitment and the monitoring of progress.

### 8. Get going

This Step helps you with the practicalities of starting to carry out your plan.

### 9. Keep going

This Step helps you with the practicalities of keeping going especially in the face of disappointment, frustration, setbacks and pressure from other sources.

### 10. Celebrate success

This Step encourages you to mark not only completion of the plan but key stages along the way. The message is simple. Give yourself the treat you promised yourself!

# 1 Be clear about what it is you want to learn



#### Possible Objectives.

Tick the ones that appeal most to you

I want to be more creative	
I want to find new ways of solving familiar problems	
I want to be more innovative	
I want to think more widely	

I want to be comfortable with novel ideas	
I want to generate fresh ideas and concepts	
I want to be the one who comes up with the brilliant ideas	
I want to look at new ways of doing things	

Do any other objectives appeal to you? What are they?



Does your employer already have a definition of **Creative thinking**? (For example, in a management competency model or framework). Alternative labels might be Lateral Thinking or Innovative Thinking or similar phrases, such as Thinking Outside the Box.

**If so, insert the definition here**

Are there Positive and Negative **Behavioural Indicators** to support the definition. If so, copy then into the box below.

My employer's Indicators for <b>Creative Thinking</b>	
Positive Indicators	Negative Indicators

If you do not have access to a company definition of **Thinking Outside the Box** you can do a number of things. First look up a definition of strategic thinking in

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creative\\_thinking](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creative_thinking)

**Insert the definition here**

**Or alternatively use this definition**

Creative thinking involves seeing beyond obvious and familiar possibilities and considering unexpected and at first irrelevant-seeming possibilities, and coming up with new ideas and creative solutions to problems.

Now you need to write Positive and Negative **Behaviour Indicators** to support the definition. They are very important as they give meaning and concreteness to the definition and also personalise it to your needs. Guidance on writing personal Positive and Negative Indicators is provided in [10 Steps to Improve Your Learning](#). Some examples are provided below to get you started. Only use them if you think they apply to you.

<b>Indicators for Thinking Outside the Box</b>	
<b>Positive</b>	<b>Negative</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Uses brain storming</li><li>• Examines all possibilities</li><li>• Deliberately thinks beyond the tried and tested</li><li>• Uses stream of consciousness to come up with new ideas</li><li>• Open to new thinking and ideas from whatever source</li><li>• Has the confidence to be bold and suggest unconventional ideas/solutions</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Relies solely on tried and tested methods</li><li>• Automatically rejects unconventional ideas</li><li>• Mind already made up on every issue</li><li>• Rejects ideas without examining them</li><li>• Plays it safe, only relying on past experience.</li></ul>
<b>Can you think of other indicators?</b>	<b>Can you think of other indicators?</b>

Re-phrase your overall goals in terms of the change you would like to see in yourself.

**I would like to change**

FROM
TO

# **2 Be clear about why you want to learn to improve your Creative Thinking**



Why do you wish to improve in this area?  
Here are some common reasons. Tick the ones that apply most to you.

Increased confidence at work	
Greater self esteem	
Admiration/respect from others	
Overcoming frustration	
Holding back my job performance	
Holding back my career	
I am getting things wrong	
I feel I don't understand things	
I have been told by my boss	
I have been told by my colleagues	
I just feel I want/need to improve	

Any other reasons?
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## 3 Envision the end point



The next step is to imagine as concretely and specifically as you can that you have achieved your learning goals and picture yourself at the desired level of performance. Imagine yourself in a specific situation or **scenario**. Try and be as detailed as possible.

When? Weeks, months ahead?	
What will you be doing?	
What will you be saying?	
Where will you be doing this?	
How will you feel?	
How will others regard you?	

Can you imagine another **situation or scenario**?

When? Weeks, months ahead?	
What will you be doing?	

What will you be saying?	
Where will you be doing this?	
How will you feel?	
How will others regard you?	



If you are that way inclined draw a picture of yourself being skilled at creative thinking. Be creative, have fun with it. Try to capture the changes you want to see in yourself.

Create a **Change Shield** for yourself or better still have fun with friends or colleagues at work. For guidance see [10 Steps to Improve Your Learning](#).

## 4 Create learning targets

Now the time has come to set formal learning targets. Learning targets are derived from the overall aim and

- Create greater precision
- Give you a sense of being in control and managing the process
- Help you monitor your own progress
- Give you the satisfaction of seeing progress
- Help you know when you have arrived



First you need to define your current level of performance.

In your own words describe your current level of performance in terms of **Creative Thinking**. Focus on things you do and don't do, say or don't say:

- Absolute beginner (no real competence or understanding)
- Beginner (some experience)
- Intermediate (experienced but performance is unsatisfying)
- Advanced (on the whole competent but a few areas need improving)

- Mastery (able to encourage others but still learning)

I would describe myself as

- Absolute beginner
- Beginner
- Intermediate
- Advanced
- Mastery

I want to progress to (Initially it should be the next one up)

- Absolute beginner
- Beginner
- Intermediate
- Advanced
- Mastery



Think of some of the the things that will help indicate that you have achieved your goals

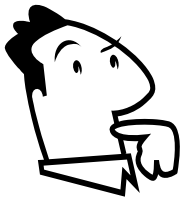
<b>Examples</b>	
Things I will know	
Things I can say or do	
How I will feel	
Qualifications achieved	
I know I will be making progress if...	

This self-assessment is subjective but it helps you be realistic and not try too much at one go.

# 5 Understand how you best learn and the types of learning needed

## Learning styles

In order to learn well you need to



- Have experiences and plenty of them
- Review and reflect on that experience
- Draw lessons and insights from the experience
- Plan to gain new experiences that result in improved performance

Most of us have strong preferences for one or more of four styles of learning. From your knowledge of yourself, do you know which your preferred learning styles are? If not, see the Learning Styles Module.

<b>Activist</b>	This is me Not really sure No idea
<b>Pragmatist</b>	This is me Not really sure No idea
<b>Theorist</b>	This is me Not really sure No idea
<b>Reflector</b>	This is me Not really sure No idea

If you are not sure about your preferred learning styles, see [10 steps to improve your learning](#) for an introduction.

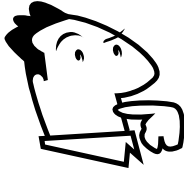
If you have a strong preference for one or more of these modes that will indicate how you are likely to begin but it is important not to get stuck in one mode at the expense of the others.

### Different kinds of learning involved

<b>Practical Skills requiring practice and feedback to get right</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Writing brainstorming exercises</li><li>• Writing paradigm stretching questions</li><li>• Thinking laterally as a discipline</li></ul>
<b>Feelings and attitudes you need to get right</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Expect the unexpected</li><li>• Enjoy diversity and difference</li><li>• Tolerance of uncertainty</li></ul>
<b>Understanding of concepts and theory</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How paradigms and mind sets block creativity</li><li>• The nature of constructive as opposed to critical thinking</li></ul>
<b>Knowledge, and facts to remember</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How the brain works</li><li>• Techniques specifically designed to encourage constructive or creative thinking</li></ul>

## 6 Explore learning tactics, tools, and techniques

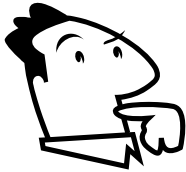
Select according to



- Your preferred learning styles
- Feasibility
- Time available
- Cost implications
- Accessibility

## Ten things you can do to improve HOW you learn to Think Creatively

### 1. Brainstorming Creative Thinking



Spend a few minutes writing down words and short phrases that come to mind in response to these questions.

When you think of the phrase **Creative Thinking** what words or phrases come to mind?

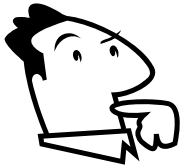
#### Here are some thoughts to compare with yours

Thinking unconventionally  
Starting with a clean sheet of paper  
Think from entirely different perspectives  
Thinking with childlike simplicity  
Lateral thinking  
Creativity  
Exploring the unknown  
Unconstrained  
No holds barred  
Uninhibited  
Innovative  
Fun  
Challenging  
Boundaryless thinking  
Step changes  
Dramatic changes in direction  
Opening up new fields  
Exciting  
Mistakes

**What do you think are the benefits to be had from thinking outside the box?**

**Compare and contrast your list with the one below. Add to or modify it as you wish.**

Effective problem solving  
Completely new solutions  
Getting there first  
Innovation  
Survival  
Being better  
Competitive advantage  
Impact  
Vividness  
Being remembered  
Fun  
Deals with complexity in an unpredictable world



If these are the benefits what stops us? Here are some of things that prevent or discourage us from **Creative Thinking**.

**What stops you?**

- Fear of ridicule
- Fear of failure
- Fear of being different
- Safer to stay with what you know
- Laziness
- Bureaucratic thinking
- Rules and regulations
- Time and effort involved
- Tradition
- Convention
- Culture
- Mindsets
- Expectations
- Comfort zones
- Habits

The resistance to thinking outside the box is extremely powerful, some of it unconscious and within ourselves as individuals, some of it collective and unconscious, and some of it imposed by authoritarian systems (some religions and political systems).

## 2. Exploring Blinkered (closed) thinking



Do you know or can you imagine possible answers to these questions?

**What was the kitchen on fire dragging a village behind it?**

**Here is the answer**

South American peasants had never seen a train before and interpreted the weird sight in terms of things they were familiar with - the steam locomotive was seen as a kitchen on fire, and the passenger carriages were seen as village huts!

**Why was Captain Cook's ship invisible to the South Seas islanders?**

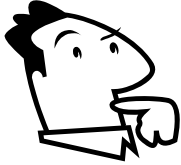
**Here is the answer**

It was reported that the South Sea islanders had never seen any man-made object bigger than their own huts. The sight of Captain Cook's vast ship in the bay was so perplexing to them that the brain did not register it at all.

**Why should anyone try to design a car with square wheels?**

**Here is the answer**

Being forced to think counter to normal experience makes the brain think of unusual and unexpected possibilities, leading to creative and imaginative thinking. The exercise above led to the invention of "intelligent suspension" for road vehicles.



Here are some famous examples of blinkered thinking

- The phonograph (early record player) is of no commercial importance (Thomas Edison, inventor, in 1880)
- Who the hell wants to hear actors talk (Harvey Warner in 1927, Founder of Warner Brothers)
- I think there is a world market for about five computers (Thomas J. Watson, founder of IBM, 1943)
- There is no call for that type of music (The head of Decca records declining to record the Beatles)
- There is no reason for any individual to have a computer in the home (Fred Olson, Head of DEC in 1977 just before IBM launched the PC on to the world market)

### 3. Learn from the Greats



Albert Einstein

The world we have made as a result of the thinking that we have done thus far creates problems we cannot solve at the same level of thinking that created them.

What do you think are the implications of this statement?

#### J.L. Baker on Paradigms

Paradigms are a shared set of assumptions, the way we see the world and a set of rules and regulations that establish boundaries and tell us what to do to be successful within those boundaries.

#### Thomas Kuhn on Paradigms

Paradigms are sets of assumptions and beliefs that are so powerful and taken for granted that new experiences are interpreted to fit the assumptions rather than change them

#### Peter Senge on Mindsets (1994)

Mindsets are the images, assumptions, and stories that we carry in our minds of ourselves, other people, institutions, and every aspect of the world. They are usually tacit, and therefore untested and unexamined. They can also be explicit and formalised.

Systems thinking is key to revealing and over coming mindsets. For more on systems thinking see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Systems\\_thinking](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Systems_thinking)

#### 4. Use paradigm-stretching questions in your work



Try these in your own personal thinking or better still in brainstorming sessions in groups. The more diverse the membership of the group the better.

1. What is impossible now but if it could be done would fundamentally change the way we do our business?
2. Think of things that are the opposite of things we take for granted? What would we do if the opposite were true?
3. What is impossible but if we could do it would give us dramatic advantage?
4. What is exceptional or even impossible for us but routine for others?
5. What changes are only just occurring but have not yet changed the way we do things?
6. What things have been taken for granted in the past, but have now changed? What might we be taking for granted now?
7. What is impossible today but could be normal one day?
8. What would we do if ----- (something we take for granted) suddenly did not exist or was no longer possible?
9. What do you think ----- (specified group) take for granted? What would happen if the it was suddenly no longer true?

**Can you see the theme or pattern in these questions? What are the essential ingredients?**

### **Possible answers**

Things we take for granted  
Things we automatically consider impossible  
The opposite of things we think are true  
What is exceptional for us but routine for others  
What would we do if?

## **5. Observing and shadowing creative people**



Identify people in your organisation who you think are already good at **Creative Thinking**. If possible select two or three. Watch what they do. Notice what they say.

At the time or shortly after write down what you think it is they do that makes them creative thinkers.

Write down exact examples.  
She said (Exact words used)...  
He did...

Apply the same process to people you see and hear on the radio or on TV.

If you cannot observe them in the normal course of your work ask for opportunities to shadow them, especially in contexts where their **Creative Thinking** is needed.

## **6. Asking and seeking explanations from creative people**



Asking and seeking explanations is one of the most powerful yet under-utilised forms of personal learning and development.

Having identified a number of colleagues ask for half an hour of their time, explain your reasons, and ask them the following questions

- What is your basic approach to **thinking creatively**?
- Give me some examples

- What do you personally do to ensure that you are **thinking creatively**?
- Do you have any practical tips that always work for you?

Compare the answers from the different people and your own brainstormed thoughts.

## 7. Modelling new behaviours

Having observed and questioned people whom you regard as being good at **Creative Thinking** set yourself small goals to emulate or copy their behaviour. It will not always work at first and be modest with your goals but gradually you will become more comfortable, especially if you also do some of the exercises below.

1. Immediately reflect on what happened.
2. What worked well? What did not work so well?
3. What will you do differently next time?

We are frequently in situations where we can usefully **think creatively**.

- Solving problems
- Agreeing action for the future
- Thinking up new names, new products, services
- Finding improvements to existing services, processes
- Building visions
- Moving individuals or groups from a fixed position or viewpoint
- Identify new markets or business opportunities
- New ways to communicate

Try to think differently. Start small but specific, get feedback if you can, reflect on what happened, resolve to try again.

## 8. Partnerships and networks to encourage Creative Thinking



Form or join networks (See [Learning from Networks](#)) of people whose experience and interests are quite different from your own. The networks can be people-based or electronic. Create a Learning Network. Expose yourself to new disciplines, way of thought, new perspectives. Add examples.

## 9. Think about how paradigms or mindsets blinker our thinking



Here are some examples of famous paradigms?

### **The earth as the centre of the universe**

The belief that the earth moved around the sun was so strong that all the massive evidence to the contrary was interpreted in such a way that the original belief could be maintained, even with bizarre and ever more complicated explanations.

### **Moveable-type printing press**

The commitment to traditional methods of printing over a period of 500 years was so strong that the immense advantages of electronic printing were slow to be recognised.

### **Cross-country skis**

Over thousands of years cross-country skis had remained essentially the same, the only means to ski faster being to make the skis longer and thinner, until a few years ago someone recognised that shorter skis were much faster if you adopted a skating movement instead of the traditional parallel movement.

### **Mechanical watches**

The Swiss watch industry, which dominated the world market, initially rejected the invention of the quartz movement watch (invented in Switzerland!) even though it was many times more accurate than the mechanical watches in which they had specialised and triumphed for hundreds of years. They thought the new invention would never catch on and it was sold to the United States and to Japan, and both countries almost overnight became world leaders in the watch industry.

### **The first office copier**

Rank Xerox originally rejected the modern photocopier because it used a technology with which the company was not familiar. Xerox later changed its mind but by then it had lost its domination of world markets.

**Can you think of some examples from your own experience?**

## 10. Search the Internet



The Internet is ideally suited to finding and reading about creative and innovative ideas, as well as techniques that have been developed specifically to encourage creative thinking.

It is also a good way to find organisations with relevant interests.

Try putting the following phrases into the search box:

Lateral thinking  
Creative thinking  
Innovation  
New ideas  
New thinking

# 7 Create a Personal Learning Contract



Your personal learning contract is a statement of commitment to yourself and is also a means to monitoring progress.

The contract can be as detailed and as structured as you see fit (this varies greatly from person to person) but it should at least contain statements of

**What you want to achieve overall (however you wish to express this).**

<b>Why (your motives)</b>	
<b>The level you are starting out at (as precisely as possible)</b>	
<b>The level you wish to achieve (as precisely as possible)</b>	
<b>The specific actions you are going to take including the tools, tactics and techniques you are going to use</b>	
<b>This week</b>	
<b>Next week</b>	
<b>By the end of month one</b>	
<b>Month two</b>	
<b>Month three</b>	
<b>Month six</b>	
<b>Beyond six months</b>	

<b>Monitoring progress</b>
<b>How you will know you are making progress?</b>

**How you will know you have succeeded?**

Keep a record and look at it from time to time. If you can involve others in your commitment you will increase your chances of success.

## 8 Get going



If you have got this far you are already going, but the critical thing is to take action that enables you to feel you are actually improving. There are several ways to do this.

Aim for early success. It reduces the risk of giving up early on.  
What action will you take this week?

- Meet up with a friend or colleague whom you have not seen in a while and describe or demonstrate what you have done in the interim.
- Refer to your progress indicators and tick them off as you make progress.
- Remind yourself of the expected benefits and potential rewards. Look back at your envisioning exercise or your Change Shield.

## 9 Keep going



Getting going is hard enough, but to keep going is often harder still.

- Refer to your progress indicators and tick them off as you make progress.
- Recognise that guilt and anxiety about progress is inevitable

- Re-adjust goals and timescales to be more realistic in the light of experience.
- List early warning signs that may block you progress and think about responses that would help

Danger signs	Responses

Meet up with a friend or colleague whom you have not seen for a while and describe or demonstrate what you have done in the interim



Identify your personal reinforcers that will help you to keep going regardless of

- Set-backs
- Disappointments
- Frustrations
- Unexpected problems

**What might they be?**

- Pressures from other sources

**What might they be?**

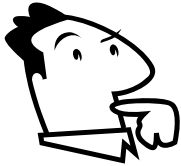
Reinforcers are REWARDS you can give yourself (treats) that you would not otherwise have had but for the progress you have made. They include a meal out, chocolates, an outing, champagne, a weekend away, etc etc or whatever takes your fancy.

Equally reinforcers can be PUNISHMENT that you inflict on yourself for lack of progress that you had committed to. This can be denial of the promised treats or something stronger like paying out to a charity. On balance rewards work better than punishments.

What support do I need and what can I put in place?

**My PERSONAL REINFORCERS are**

## **10 Celebrate success**



Finally don't forget to mark the achievement of having moved from one level of performance to another. It is always a satisfying feeling to know that you have done it, but there is also the intrinsic satisfaction of performing at a higher level than previously.

Some forms of learning are acknowledged through accreditation and certificates, but vast amounts of personal learning and growth are not recognised in this way. Much of the most important learning (tolerance and understanding, effective parenting, leadership, teamwork) is not recognised in this way.

Try to find ways of expressing the pleasure of the learning you have achieved.

**If I achieve my learning goals my overall REWARD will be**

Ultimately, the best way is simply to think and act in new ways and feel the benefit for you and for others, and then commit yourself to further learning.