
Think Outside Your Blocks

*Breakthrough Thinking Techniques
that will help you solve problems
and ignite ideas.*

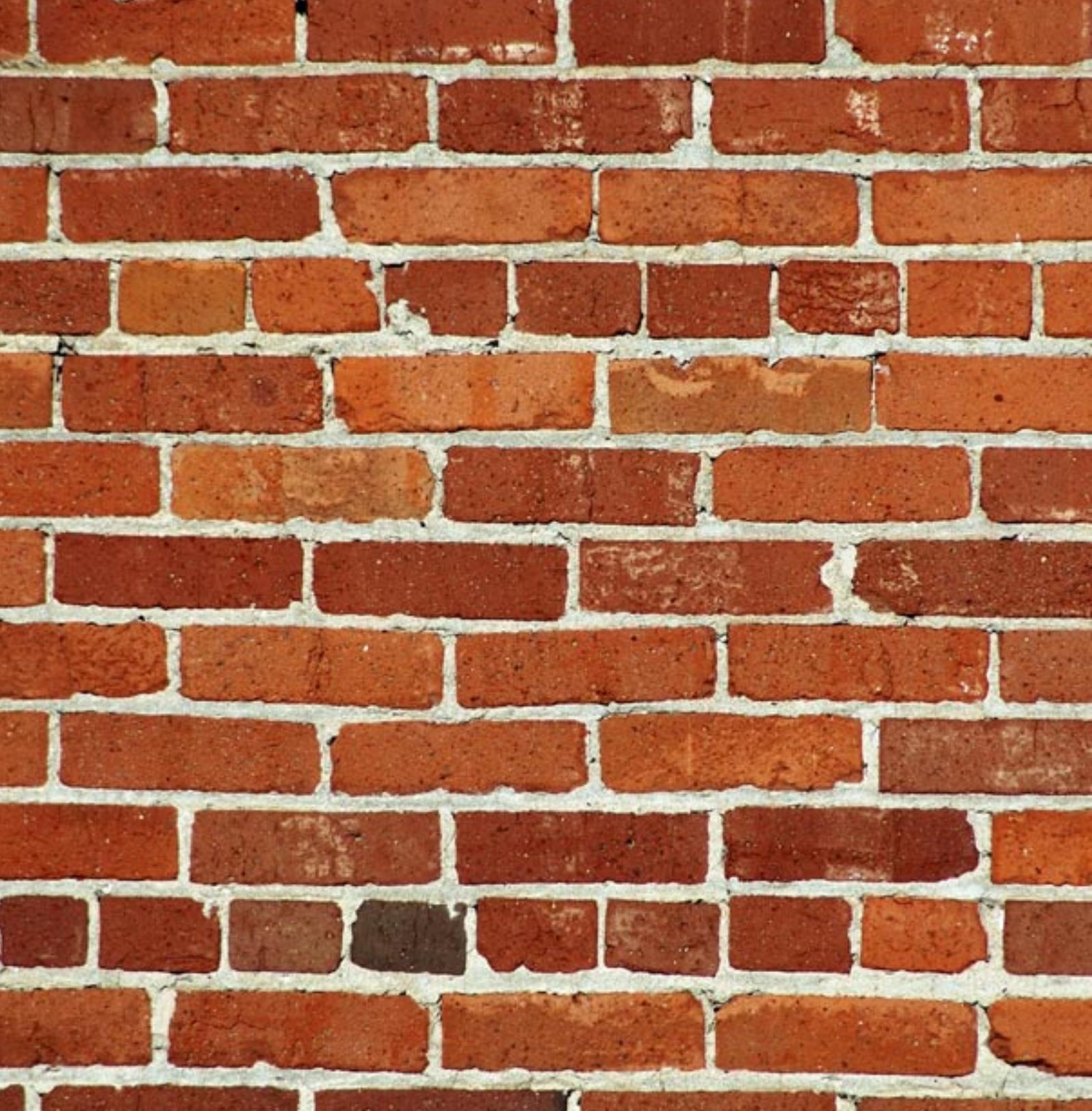
by
Kevin Carroll



Sure, sure, sure... everyone always says, “You need to think outside the box.” Well that’s just great, but the only problem is that no one ever really shows us how.

So whether you’re leading a big R&D project, managing a marketing team, or running a household, *Think Outside Your Blocks* will help you look at things in a new way.

Kevin Carroll has filled this short and snappy book with lots of real world examples, enticing brainteasers, humorous anecdotes and, most importantly, tools and techniques that you can put to use immediately.



Think Outside Your Blocks

Kevin Carroll

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or on www.kevincarroll.com.

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Thanks

When I was about seven years old I won a Halloween costume contest in my hometown of Pelham, New York. I believe that was the year my parents dressed me up as Mr. Clean (yeah, the disinfectant guy). My mother and father rarely bought us our costumes; they always liked making them instead. Since there were seven of us Carroll kids, they must have started the production process around Groundhog Day. Giant pumpkins, robots, Egyptian princesses and even Mr. Peanut spewed forth from our home in late October. So Claire and Bud, thanks for making it a fun, loving and creative home.

Collin and Claire...you are my never-ending source of amusement, inspiration and occasional angst. Mary, you are always there for me. I love you all.

And to Bob Sutherland. Thank you for your honest feedback, creative talents and willingness to talk to me on the phone when I'm stuck in traffic.

***“A great many people think
they are thinking
when they are really
rearranging their prejudices.”***

Edward R. Murrow

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Preface

A few years ago, during one of my workshops, a participant had a problem that he wanted the class to help him with. The issue had to do with the disposal of wastewater in the plant where he worked. He and his operations team had been wrestling with the issue for many months. It was a tricky matter that had the potential to cost his company millions of dollars and significant goodwill. Things looked bleak.

As the engineer explained the problem to us, we sat there befuddled so we just began asking questions. One question lead to another which lead to another and so on. After about 15 minutes of Q&A, his problem still wasn't apparent so he drew a diagram on a flipchart.

With the benefit of the visual aide, the group quickly grasped his predicament and what had led up to it. Moments later, one of the participants simply said, "Why don't you reverse the flow of that pipe over there?" The

engineer stood quietly for a moment, looked at the diagram, looked back at the class and then shouted, “We have been working on this problem for almost two years and no one ever suggested that! Do you know what this means? This could solve our problem!” It was truly a Eureka moment and one that the engineer subsequently called a “watershed” event for the project.

The next day I spoke to the man who had suggested reversing the flow of the pipe and I asked him how he had come up with such a brilliant idea. He answered, “I don’t know.” Well that wasn’t too helpful because it’s my job to understand how breakthrough thinking works and then to teach other people how to do it. So I persisted, “Something must have sparked you. Can you remember what it was?” After considering it for a few more moments he said, “Well in China, where I grew up, our government had a similar problem, but in that case it had to do with the two great rivers in China: the Yellow River and the Yangzi River. This looked like the same problem, so I just suggested that he solve it the same way we solved it in China, by diverting the flow of one river into the other.”

To me, that conversation was critical because it reaffirmed that thinking outside your blocks (or what I'll often refer to as breakthrough thinking) isn't about unexplained flashes of brilliance (although it can be). More often, breakthrough thinking is about asking questions, getting clear on the problem, and then making connections to what you already know.

Having spent 17 years in the advertising business, I've come to realize a few things. The first is that everyone is creative. The second is that lots of people don't think they're creative. And the third is that creativity (i.e. breakthrough thinking) is a skill that anyone can develop.



Introduction

I like books that are easy to absorb and that provide immediate benefit. To that end, by the time you finish this book (if not sooner) you will have a number of straightforward, doable ideas that will take your ability to think innovatively and solve real world problems to a higher level. The key to breakthrough thinking is to learn a few simple techniques and then remember to apply them.

As you begin reading, you'll see that I've peppered in a variety of brainteasers. These are for your amusement, frustration and, ultimately, for your benefit. I use brainteasers in my workshops because they are a fun way for me to show participants how we misinterpret problems and how we block solutions.

When you start working on the brainteasers, promise yourself you'll do two things. The first is to resist looking up the answers right away. Spend some time on the problems. Sit down with a friend and wrestle with them (the brainteasers, not your friend). Walk away from them

(again, the brainteasers, not your friend) and come back to them later. But don't give up. Persistence is the backbone of breakthrough thinking. The second thing is to actually apply the tools and techniques that you'll find in this book to the brainteasers. So whether it's the I.D.E.A. method for critical thinking or a specific breakthrough thinking technique like *Add Dimension*, PLEASE USE THE TOOLS. Only through practice will you be able to recall the tools when you need them. This is true whether you're running a multibillion dollar company or trying to fix a door-knob. (The answers to the brainteasers are on my website: www.kevincarroll.com.)

By the way, once you start applying the principles found in this book, if you have a breakthrough thinking success story that you'd like to share, I welcome it. Just email me at: kevin@kevincarroll.com.

Enjoy.

Let's get started with your first brainteaser...

Home, Sweet Home

A man runs away from home and runs a certain distance. He then takes a left turn and runs the same distance. He then takes another left turn and runs the same distance again. Finally, he takes yet another left turn and runs back home. When he gets home, there are two men there with masks on. Who are the two men?

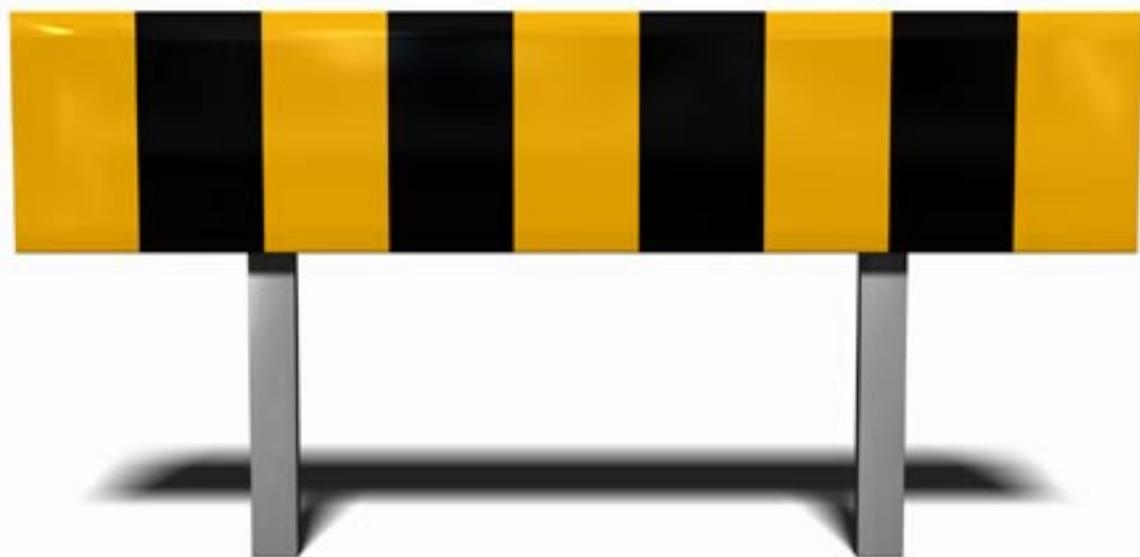
Remember, if you get stuck, try applying the thinking techniques that appear later in this book. Frankly, it's not important whether or not you solve the brainteaser. The main thing is that you start using the tools I've given you. On the next page are some hints that should help.



About the brainteaser...

- Are you clear on your objective? (You're trying to figure out the occupations of the two men.)
- What is the relevance of taking left-hand turns? (The man is not allowed to take right-hand turns.)
- Why might the two men be wearing masks? (Masks can be used for many purposes, such as to protect, to disguise, to entertain...)
- Why would someone run? (He could be scared, or perhaps he's exercising, or maybe chasing someone, or...)
- What assumptions are you making that you don't even realize you are making? (Analyze the brainteaser carefully. What words can have more than one meaning?)

Hope these hints help, because that's all you're going to get. Sorry.



I.

**Think Outside
Your Blocks**

So what keeps us from being better at breakthrough thinking? Mental roadblocks, that's what. Roadblocks that get formed as a result of our personality, sex, birth order, family, education, life experiences, friendships, socioeconomic level, culture, and lots more. For example, when I finished writing the third draft of this book, I gave it to a few close friends and family members to proofread. I thought they might find a little typo here or a minor grammar suggestion there. Well the comments that came back were numerous and they were insightful. Other people found ways to improve my work that I never could have.

As you read this first section, consider your own life and think about some of the mental barriers that you may have. (They often take the form of biases, prejudices, insecurities, jealousies and anxieties.) Once you become more aware of these psychological obstructions, you'll be better equipped to navigate around them.

Fear Not

I once coached an executive who, at a very young age, had risen to V.P. at a major financial services company in Manhattan. I asked him what he attributed his success to and he told me, “I’ve never been afraid to tell people what I think.” How many of us don’t tell the higher-ups what we think because we’re worried about how they’ll react?

It’s important that you appreciate that you’re a smart person who has a unique perspective that deserves to be heard. If you find yourself backpedaling and testing the winds before you speak, then are you providing as much value as you could be?

For those of you who feel held back by fear and anxiety, I highly recommend Susan Jeffers’ book, *Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway*. Dr. Jeffers gives specific methods for managing anxieties. If you’re hindered by the fear of failure or the fear of speaking up, this book is for you.



Keep in mind that it takes courage to speak up and ask questions in public. Lots of times we fear that those around us may think our questions are dumb, but the odds are that somebody else in the room is thinking the same thing. Breakthrough thinkers ask lots of questions.



Go for it.

Tut, Tut, I'm in a Rut

A few years ago we had a leaky faucet in our upstairs bathroom. After about three months of gentle reminders, my very patient wife suggested that if I wasn't going to repair it, then perhaps I should call the plumber. Again, months passed and the drip, drip, drip continued. Eventually Mary took matters into her own hands and called the plumber herself.

The day after Pete the Plumber fixed the faucet, I went to use the sink and discovered that Pete had reversed the threads on one of the handles which meant that when I needed water, I had to remember to turn my hand in the opposite direction than I was used to.

I wasn't happy!



Well, since I'm always challenging my clients to try changing their habits, I decided to see how long it would take me to reprogram myself and learn to turn the handle the new way without having to think about it. Any guess how long it took? (Drum roll please.) It took six weeks!

If you want to become better at breakthrough thinking, you'll need to begin by challenging yourself to break some of your old thinking habits. It won't be easy. To get you started, here's an exercise that will really challenge you to break some of your thinking habits: Start a friendly conversation with someone you don't like. (It could be a neighbor or a co-worker.) When you talk to that person, see if you can find something you actually like about him or her and then give them a genuine compliment. You may just find that they aren't as bad as you thought and that it's possible to reprogram yourself.

“I’m not creative.”

Let’s put this to rest right away. You may think you’re not creative, but trust me, you’re creative.



Many people assume that “being creative” means the same thing as having the skills or talents that a painter, musician or playwright possess. To me, these two things are very different. If you have the ability to make associations, concoct games, solve a puzzle, or amuse yourself when you’re on line at the Motor Vehicle Bureau, then you’re creative.

Invariably, when I teach my Breakthrough Thinking class, some participants walk in sheepish, feeling that they're in over their heads. Yet as soon as we begin, many of those same people demonstrate a willingness to ask questions, listen, explore ideas, be spontaneous and keep digging until they can get to the root cause of a problem. Interestingly, others see these people as creative, but they don't see themselves that way.

As Henry Ford said, "If you think you can, you can. And if you think you can't, you're right."

Creative people think they're creative.

Do you?



Eschew Obfuscation

A number of years ago I was teaching a course on effective communication skills. During the class I asked each participant to stand up and give a short presentation. One person kicked off his speech by stating his objective as follows: “We are here today to recalibrate our commitment to the simplification initiative.”

Yikes!



Recalibrate our commitment to the simplification initiative? For the life of me, I couldn't figure out what he was talking about. It turns out that what he was trying to say was: "We need to decide if we're going to continue to try and simplify things or not." Now isn't that a little clearer? (By the way, isn't it ironic that the "simplification initiative" was intended to make things simpler?)

When it comes to thinking innovatively and solving problems, you must make certain you clearly state what the problem is that you're trying to solve. I've found that you can put a bunch of intelligent people in a room to work on an issue, but they'll get nowhere if they can't plainly describe the problem or the objective.

A major takeaway from this book is the importance of having a simple, understandable objective. If an eighth-grader can't follow you, you may need to make it clearer.

“I Quit!”

When our son Collin was ten he wanted to try out for the football team. My wife and I let him with the understanding that if he made the team, he had to stick it out.

The first two weeks were misery. Between the physical conditioning, the bulky equipment and getting knocked around like a human piñata, Collin was not a happy kid. He wanted out.

But my wife and I had made a pact. (Easy for us, we weren't the ones getting tackled every afternoon.) To his credit, Collin stuck it out and continued to play football for years after that. In fact, he went on to play rugby in high school. (He likes to live dangerously.)

Based on the research I've done on problem solving, innovation and leadership, I've found that persistence is a common thread. When you consider all the best thinkers and inventors, not only were they brilliant, they were relentless.





The Activity Trap

I like being with doers. Doers don't lounge around all day thinking about what to do or how to do it. They go ahead and do it. But there's a potential downside to being a doer and it's called the activity trap. (I didn't come up with this concept, but it's a good one.)

The activity trap occurs when someone is so anxious to do something that they don't take the time early on to think through the problem. They're quick to react to the symptom without considering the underlying cause or future impact.

Recently my watchband broke so I replaced it. A few hours after I put on the new watchband, it broke again. I couldn't believe it. When I looked closer at the problem, I realized that it had nothing to do with the watchband. The plastic casement around the watch was cracked right where the watchband was attached to the watch. What I actually needed was a new watch, but I got caught in the activity

trap and immediately reacted to what seemed like the obvious answer. If I had only taken a few extra moments to find the real problem it would have saved me time in the long run.

Step back, look carefully at the problem and then move forward.



*“If you don’t know
where you’re going,
you might end up
someplace else.”*

Yogi Berra

Which Switch?

You are standing on the first floor of a house. Next to you are three light switches that are connected to three lights upstairs. Your challenge is to figure out which light switch downstairs is connected to which of the three lights upstairs given the following constraints:

- You must start downstairs.
- You can flip the three light switches any way you want while you are downstairs.
- You are allowed only one trip upstairs and while upstairs you have to decide which switch is connected to which light.



Here are some assumptions you can safely make:

- When a light switch is flipped up, the light is on and when the switch is flipped down, the light is off.
- There are no dimmers on the light switches.
- You can't see whether or not the lights are on from anywhere downstairs.
- You must go upstairs to determine if a light is on.
- It's daytime, so even if you went outside you still wouldn't be able to tell if a light is on or not.
- You are alone. (Poor you.)

If there were just two light switches and two lights, this would be easy. But with three light switches and three lights, it's more difficult.

Once again, if you get stuck, try applying the thinking techniques that appear later in the book. The more you practice the techniques, the more they will become second nature.

Head to www.kevincarroll.com for the answer.



II.

Corporate Quagmire

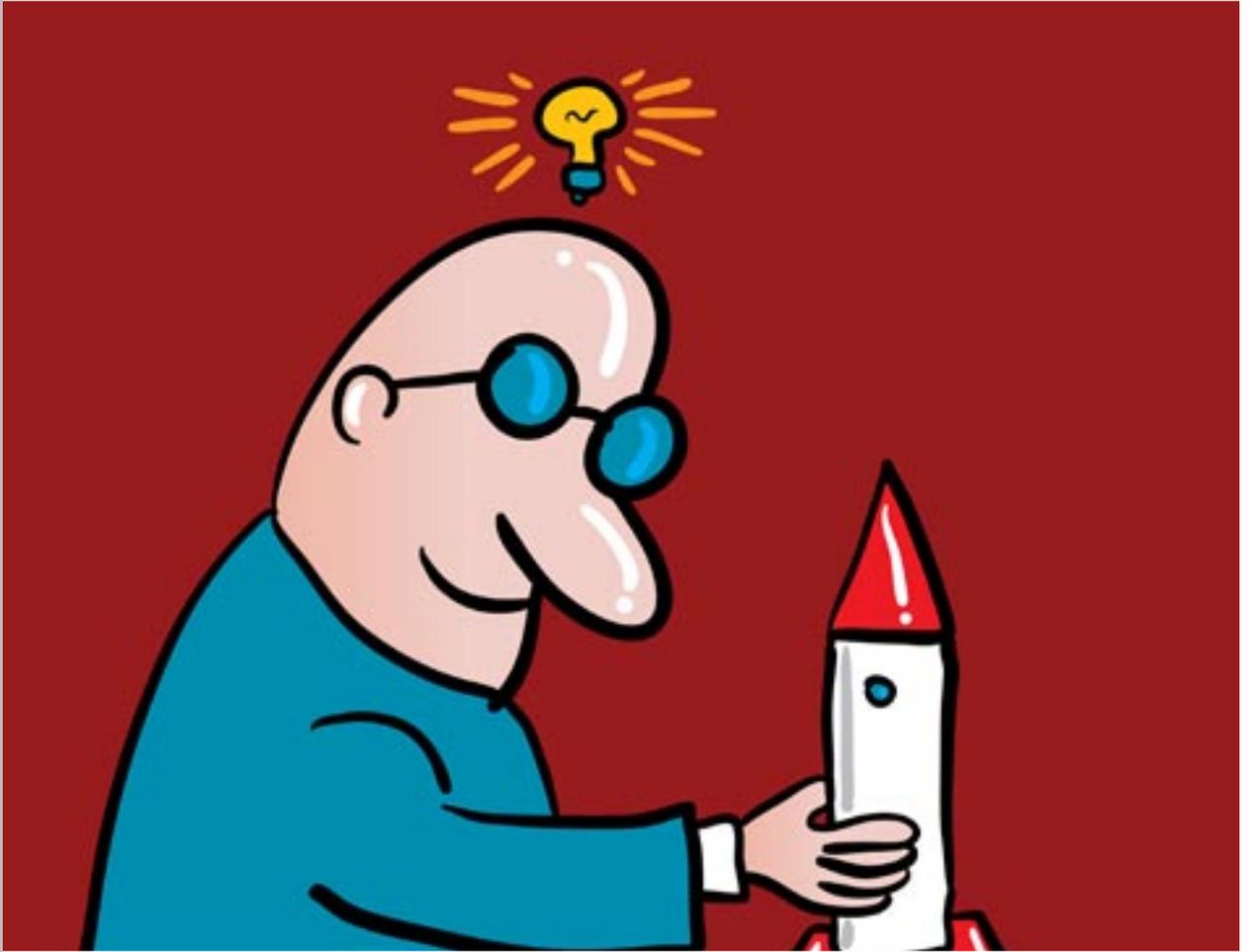
Just as people have self-imposed roadblocks, so do organizations. While we're not going to solve the woes of corporate America here, at least we can become more aware of the barriers that hinder ideas. Look out for these roadblocks in your organization and find ways to work around them.



Policies, Procedures, Processes

When “going postal” was very much in the news in the 1990’s, I was hired to teach conflict resolution for the US Postal Service. (I kid you not.) One of the things that became quickly apparent to me was that the post office had policies and procedures for everything. Some supervisors took the policy manual very seriously and wouldn’t cut their subordinates any slack. Other supervisors found ways to be more flexible which, in turn, made the workers feel more empowered. Too much bureaucracy can suck the living daylights out of any person, any organization, or any creative idea.

I’m reminded of what a friend once told me about the dress policy that was in place at the company he once worked for. Very simply it stated: “When determining what appropriate dress is, and what it is not, use a simple rule: If you are not sure, it is time to go back to your closet.” That’s empowerment.



It's Not Rocket Surgery

Organizations need clarity of purpose just as much as individuals do. Fuzzy thinking leads to fuzzy results.

In advertising, it was common for us to spend months doing all sorts of quantitative and qualitative research studies on our client's product or service. We'd research the consumer, the competition, the distribution channel, the packaging, and so on. Ultimately, we'd end up with a knee-high stack of reports.

Once we sifted through all the numbers, we'd then boil the research down to a one-page creative strategy brief. That brief would then be distilled down to one clear and concise sentence which we referred to as the unique selling proposition. It was this one sentence that gave our creative team what they needed to create terrific ads. Here's an example of a unique selling proposition: Volvo is the safest car on the road today. It's tight and there's no room for misinterpretation.

While one could come up with a dozen things to say about any product or service, the power of a strong ad campaign comes from the fact that it's focused. Paradoxically, a tight creative strategy is the very thing that gives a creative team the ability to create high-concept, attention-getting advertising. If you have a loose, wordy strategy, with no specific direction, your advertising will be all over the place.

The same is true for any aspect of business. So whether you're in operations, finance, sales, R&D or supply chain, you need to be able to clearly state, in one sentence, what it is that you're trying to solve. Here are some examples:

- How can we lower our cost of goods 10% within the next 12 months without lessening our quality?
- How can we lower out-of-stocks at Wal-Mart from 6% to 5% by the end of third quarter?
- How can I convince our retail customer to carry two SKU's of our new 48 oz. sizes?
- How can we achieve customer satisfaction scores of 4.5 by July 31st?

Ready, Aim, Aim, Aim...



Slow and steady wins the race.

There's a part of me that agrees with that. If a company produces a high-quality, consistent product and keeps moving slowly forward, it can get somewhere. But on the other hand, organizations that aren't willing to challenge the status quo or risk some exposure will never get to where they might have gotten.

A few years back, one of the consumer packaged goods companies I consult with saw that they had become very much of a risk-averse company and were losing market share because of it. They made a conscious effort to try to get their people more comfortable with taking risk. One concrete way they did this was by encouraging employees



CAUTION C

to make decisions with *70%* of the information they needed rather than waiting until they had all the information.

If you work for an organization (or a boss) that likes to overanalyze everything, opportunities will pass you by.

Instead of Ready, aim, aim, aim...

You might try Ready, fire, aim once in a while.