



Uses for

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Managing Innovation

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This is a simple 'ice-breaker' exercise which focuses attention on creativity and particularly the power of groups in idea generation. The task is simple – ask people to work as individuals (no conferring) and in 2 minutes write a list of all the uses they can think of for a simple object – a glass or a brick are good examples.

Then ask if anyone has 20 items on their list – the result will be that no-one has and many people will be surprised at the question, believing it to be impossible to come up with so many ideas in such a short time. Most will have around 5-10 ideas.

Then ask people to stay with the lists – not to add anything new – and call out while you write down all the uses they can think of for a glass. Simply write these down and let the process run until the flipchart is full – with well over 20 ideas.

Then make some key observations.

- 1 The task itself – this is not like a crossword puzzle where only one answer fits the clue – there is no 'right' answer but rather it is an 'open-ended' challenge, typical of innovation.
- 2 Draw attention to the fact that when you asked if anyone had 20 items they thought you were crazy – yet by pooling ideas it is possible to come up with many more in the 2 minute period. This suggests that there is value in shared creativity – the more minds on the job, the greater the volume of ideas produced.
- 3 But also draw attention to the fact that these are not all the same idea being reproduced. If we take the glass example, there will be many ideas about using it as a container – for storing pens, toothbrushes, flowers, coins, etc. But there will also be ideas about using it as a weapon, as a musical instrument, as a spider trap, as a magnifying glass, as a device to listen through walls, etc. Each of these is different and represents a new class of solution.
- 4 Make the observation that whilst everyone will have some of the classes of idea on their list it is very unlikely that anyone will have all the different classes represented. This suggests a second powerful point about group creativity – that more minds on the job not only leads to greater volume of ideas but also to greater variety.
- 5 It is also worth asking if people had the experience, as someone suggested a different class of idea, that they found themselves thinking in new direction suggested by this alternative class – in other words they began 'hitch-hiking' on someone else's idea. Again make the point that this is another advantage of group creativity the potential to stimulate thinking in new directions.
- 6 The overall message is that innovation depends on creativity and there is value in diversity – multiple players generate more ideas (volume) and more different ideas (variety). But harnessing this effect beyond a classroom game is part of the innovation management challenge – how to make it work for real?