5 Steps to Creatively Solving Business Problems



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Being creative in a business environment comes easy for some, but for most of us, it is challenging to come up with innovative and unique solutions to our most pressing problems.

It’s typically easy to see why a problem occurred or even suggest what everyone else should do to solve the problem. But when it’s our responsibility to address the issue, that’s when things get complicated. We often see unlimited options and analyze the consequences of each choice. We see an uphill battle with uncertain outcomes. Howver, we can overcome the fear of the unknown and hone in on the best available option. We can get creative. And the good news is that if being creative isn’t innate for you, there are specific action steps to choosing a path forward.

1. Define the box

Everyone knows the concept of thinking outside the box, but at the same token, we all have boundaries to operate within. We can’t use an endless supply of resources or completely change the rules of business. In other words, sometimes we need to be able to solve problems within the box, staying grounded in reality.

The first step is to outline the boundaries of the situation and our control over it. Define the problem. Develop the scope. See the limitations you have so you know where you can operate. This will give you an idea of what is possible and start to reveal options for resolution.

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2. Come up with ideas

This is the brainstorming step, where we get to throw out a bunch of half-baked ideas to see what has legs. The more ideas, the better at this point of the process. This isn’t the critical point where we evaluate the options. Instead of trying to see which options are best, we want volume.

I used to teach an audio engineering course on MIDI technology, but the tech also spilled over to other areas. I had an exercise where students would think of different ways to utilize it, but they couldn’t have it relate to music or audio production. They all thought it was strange at first, but by giving them a framework for the problem, they were able to come up with some interesting ideas.

The goal is to generate multiple answers. The crazier, the better. Some came up with the idea to use the technology to control lights in a home. Some said they could use it train their dog to do tricks by playing dog-whistle sounds. This

exercise underscored how developing numerous creative ideas helps sharpen our ability to solve any problem.

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3. Narrow ideas down

At this step, we want to shed ideas that require incredible resources or just seem too far-fetched. Seeing obvious holes in an idea means that too much work would have to go into the solution to make it effective.

We aren't looking to eliminate all options. We aren't even disregarding all bad options. The key is to narrow them down, not find the perfect option. We want the ones that seem to have the best odds of solving the problem with minimal consequences to the business. Once you have a short list of ideas that could work, you are ready to move on to the next step.

4. List the pros and cons

Every solution will have positives and negatives. There is no perfect option. By listing the various pros and cons, we can get a clearer picture of each, and see how it impacts other areas of the business, maaking it easier to identify the incidentals and offshoots from deploying each strategy. From there, think about the total system. How would this impact other areas? What ripple could this potentially create?

5. Choose between a bunch of bad options

I've used these five steps many times in my career. By this step, I've often still been left with several options. But

after evaluating each one, clear and costly ramifications would emerge. Maybe it required reducing our margins to get the product sold. Maybe it was ramping up production or delaying other initiatives, or even mean reducing staff or investing in new technology.

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This is where the great leaders separate themselves from the average leaders. This is where the tough decisions are made. But this is also where you get to control your fate. Instead of searching for a perfect choice, choose between a bunch of bad options. All options will seem flawed at this stage. If a perfect option existed, you would have uncovered it earlier in the process and gone forward with implementing it. Move forward to do everything possible to maximize the pros and limit the destruction from the cons.

By following these five steps, your ability to come up with creative business solutions will expand. When a problem emerges, you will immediately define the box you're operating within and start thinking of options and be able to identify pros and cons to guide you towards the best option, even if it is flawed. The more I use this process, the easier it is and the more valuable it becomes, helping to avoid analysis paralysis or short-sighted decisions that backfires, so hopefully you'll keep them front of mind.

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