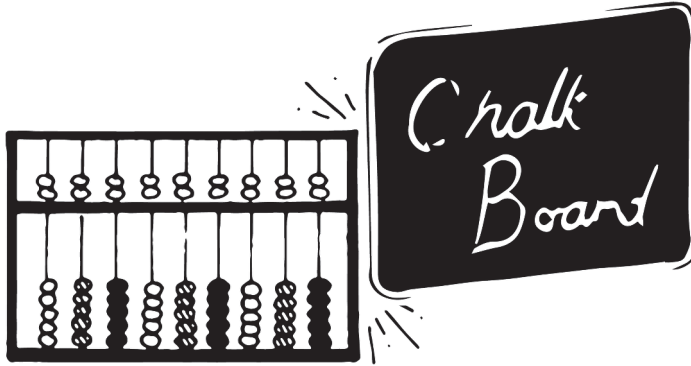




# Why today's thinking is so outdated



*Stock markets tumble*

*Unions grumble*

*Pensions investment fumble*

*Will the EU crumble?*

Banner headlines love using the negative-sounding ‘-umble’ words. Yet while these may be just headlines, they are succinct pointers to the big issues that big business faces today. But this isn’t a new thing, for big business has always faced big issues – and always will. To handle these big issues they recruit smart, skilled people and put processes and systems in place to support them. Unfortunately, this isn’t guaranteed to help these smart, skilled people to resolve all the big issues they come up against. Especially the ones that are in need of a new and creative business solution.

## Being paid to know the answers isn’t always a good thing

If you’re employed by a business and are reading this book, the chances are you’re smart and talented. You must have a level of knowledge and expertise in some area that your employer values – which is why they offered you a job in the first place. Unfortunately, it’s this

knowledge and expertise that may be stopping you from being innovative. Why? Because as an expert you are generally expected to know the answers to any questions that arise in your business that relate to your domain of skill and knowledge.

As an example, imagine you went to your superior with a big and bold question that you had no idea how to answer. Which of these three responses are you most likely to receive?

- 1 Don't bring me problems, bring me solutions.
- 2 You're expected to know the answer to this – it's what we pay you for!
- 3 I thought this was your area of expertise?

Hardly the sort of response that stimulates the asking of new and intriguing questions in your area, is it?

An alternative approach that you can test out is the next time a senior manager asks you a question, try answering it with 'I don't know' or 'Sorry, I haven't got a clue' or 'I'll need to spend some time finding a new answer to that'. Responses like this are likely to be serious CLMs (Career Limiting Moves), for there's a corporate expectation that everything should be known.

The educationalist and creative expert Sir Ken Robinson summed this up by saying, 'In our culture, not to know is to be at fault, socially.' You, as an expert in your field, always need to be seen to know the answers – but in doing so you tend to repeat, recycle and upcycle things that you've done before, and that you know will work. Because that's what experts do.

Frequently, this is acceptable – for when an existing and known solution will work satisfactorily, then there's no need to expend further effort on the issue. But when do you make the judgement call that it's time to review the situation from anew and do something different? The easier route is always the known over the unknown.

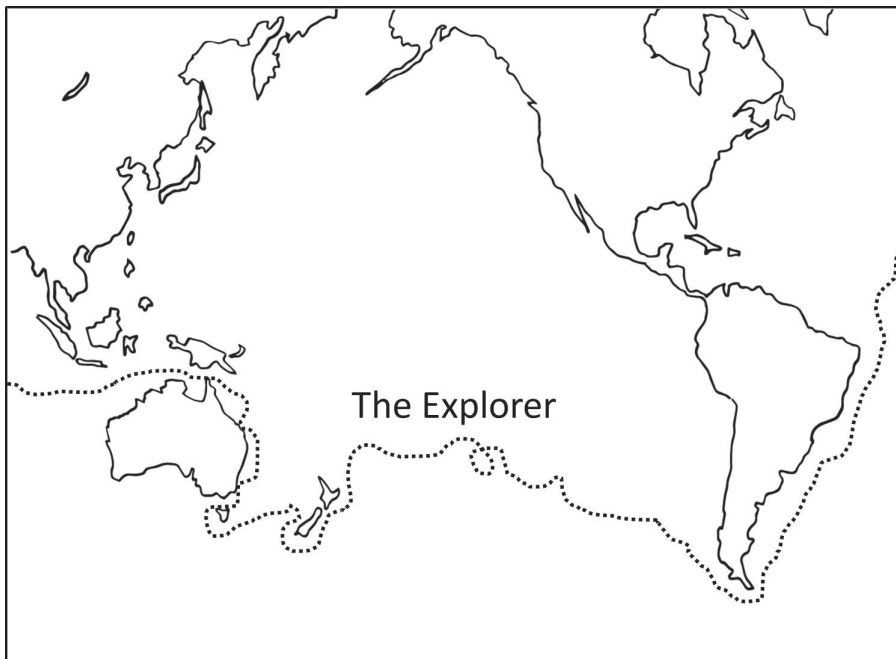
## We shield ourselves from exploration

We inherently love answering questions that only we know the answers to, as this cements our place in the organisation as the expert in a given field. And it also fuels our self-esteem. However, to be

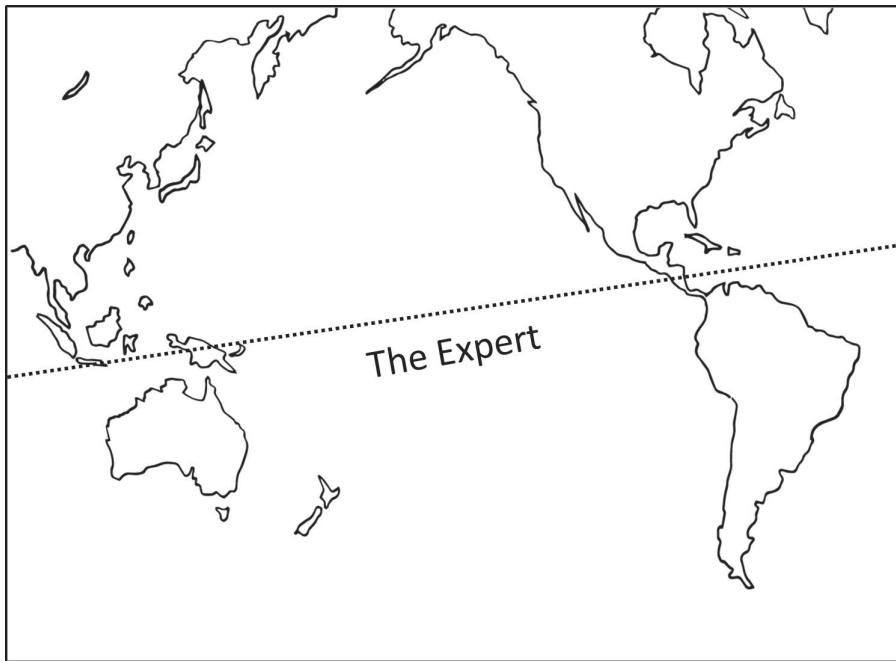
innovative we have to do something new – and that’s to go beyond the realms of our existing knowledge and to find some new things. *Some things that are unknown.* And this is worrisome for an expert because it’s intended to highlight the things that we don’t know.

When Captain James Cook was on his voyage of discovery (1768–1771), it included his search for the hypothetical Terra Australis – the presumed great southern continent. From the top mast of Cook’s ship, HMS *Endeavour*, a crew member could only see a distance of 12 miles in any direction to the horizon due to the curvature of the Earth. They couldn’t be sure where to go, so they went where they saw birds flying, or where they saw fresh foliage in the sea – and of course where the prevailing winds took them. They had to follow these hunches as they had such a limited view in the vastness of the Pacific Ocean.

This is true exploration. And in true explorer style, they traversed an erratic course, but on their journey they made amazing discoveries – such as New Zealand and Australia. The botanists in the crew also discovered many smaller things, such as new species of plants and animals. The diagram below shows the route that Cook may have taken in his exploration.



When you are on an international journey by plane and resort to reading the in-flight magazine, invariably towards the back will be a map of the routes that the airline flies. These will be depicted as straight lines traversing the globe from central hubs like London, Dusseldorf or New York and covering all major points on the planet. This representation is analogous to how an expert thinks. They like to go directly from a question to an answer. If Captain Cook had been an expert rather than an explorer, then his journey may have potentially been more like this:



He'd have completed his journey much quicker but would have missed out on discoveries like New Zealand and Australia. For innovation to happen, where new things are discovered, we have to be willing to meander and explore – but frequently this isn't in the nature of an expert.

To start out on a journey to discover new answers and opportunities, we've got to prepare to get at least a little bit lost – and to start out by asking a question to which we don't have any immediate answers.

We need to be asking big and bold questions. But before we can do this, first we need to understand why we are fearful of asking powerful questions of this nature.

## Why our expertise fears difficult questions

If, as a business, you ask yourself the question, 'Where will we get an additional five per cent increase in revenues this year?', the solution isn't likely to be some radical change to your business, or some game-changing new product. It's likely to come from a series of smaller changes that will each add value and which accumulate to give the desired additional five per cent result. These smaller changes will most likely appear to be blindingly obvious in hindsight – as all the best new ideas are. Unfortunately, this can have the potential to make the expert look a little thoughtless, for they may not have been the ones to come up with these ideas – which seem to reside within their domain of expertise.

When it comes to experts and the worth you bring to an innovation process, your real value comes in applying your knowledge and expertise to answering other people's questions, or issues related to their areas – not your own. This way you apply your mass of experience to seeing their issue differently – from your perspective – and so you can add value to the discussion that others can't. It's similar for the other experts around the table who will also be adding value to the discussion from their own area of expertise – but to other people's issues.

How many business growth questions have you been asked recently where the honest answer that you gave was that you didn't know? Most probably none. It's not the business protocol to ask this kind of question. And if you only came up with a certain idea for growth now – and it's a really simple and smart one – then why didn't you suggest this last year? In hindsight, it's often a no-win situation for the expert, which they subconsciously try to avoid by not asking the bold questions in the first place.

To correct this, we need to be asking questions that we don't know the answers to. Experts need to mentally change in a creative meeting

from knowing everything, to knowing nothing – and to leave their expertise outside the door and become explorers for a while. As an expert, you might not be comfortable with the idea of not showing your expertise, but you need to consider yourself to be the explorer, and to apply a broad array of knowledge to other people's issues. To be an explorer for them. Later on, when it comes time to shape the opportunities into deliverables, then you can re-engage and assert your expertise to help with the execution. Making this change to becoming an explorer is hard – but very effective. Being an inexperienced explorer and avoiding commenting on your own area of expertise is one of the most effective ways for you to deliver greater degrees of innovation in your business.

## Being too keen to answer the question

Additionally, because we as experts may be unwilling to explore, or don't have time to explore, we settle for the first best answer – and here's an example. When you lose your keys where do you always find them? The answer is in the last place you looked! That's because once you've found the solution to your quest – you stop looking. You can't find your keys again when they're already in your hand. But when you are trying to be innovative and find some alternative answer, it's different. Once you find one brilliant opportunity you must look even harder, because this shows how you've broken through the barrier of the obvious into new and uncharted ground, and more opportunities will undoubtedly exist close-by – but only if you continue to look and explore.

Unfortunately, and as we've seen, exploration does not come naturally to the expert. Once a good solution has been found to a question, then we like to move on to the next question – rather than move on to the next answer. When the expert stops looking, the explorer continues looking. For powerful questions have many different answers – not just one.

## Cultural issues, too

And being British doesn't help either. Think of a workshop where there's a discussion on the growth a business could achieve by doing

new things. The conversation covers a broad range of topics and for each one the appropriate expert is expected to spout forth words of wisdom in that area. By default, the expert will talk about what they know – not what they don't know. And in line with British cultural mandates, the other people in the room stay quiet, in deference to the expert at the table. But maybe things should be different.

When any specific topic is being discussed, and the people at the table are looking for fresh opportunities, perhaps the expert should be the one to shut up and so allow the rest of the people to talk. Because for innovation to happen, new things first need to be uncovered – and this is achieved through a process of exploration which is best done by those that don't know the area.

## **Demands on our time**

Every organisation in business today is facing a wide range of demanding issues. Externally there are the state of the economic cycle, environmental requirements, increasingly restrictive legislation around many aspects of business and the risk from IT security issues – and an increasingly short-term focus on delivering results, to name just a few.

Internally there are over-worked employees in downsized companies trying to solve ever more complex situations, with smarter, more empowered, demanding and frequently sceptical customers expecting amazing service across many channels and devices – all wanting responses immediately on a 24/7 basis wherever they are.

Email, mobile phones, wearable devices, personal computers, automated systems, better transportation and telecommunications have all made productivity so much more efficient. We can work from home through secure virtual private networks and use a myriad of conferencing and collaboration tools to make our work more effective from almost any location in the world.

We're eating our five-a-day of fruit and veggies, not drinking and driving, and smoking less tobacco such that our life expectancy is steadily on the increase. We are getting fitter through exercise and lifestyle assisting gadgets, and chronic illness and previously



debilitating medical conditions are now under control, while dreaded diseases like cancer are irrevocably being beaten. We are able to continue working when many of our forebears would have had to give up work altogether.

Things are so much better now in so many ways – but there’s only so much time in a day. We are permanently connected through our mobiles and tablets and so are always on, no matter where we are. Software tools enable others to access our calendars and to schedule us into meetings with every working hour seemingly being double- or triple-booked.

The speed of business is beginning to outstrip the speed of our thinking. Fortunately, for the moment, there’s so much new material being developed that broad thinking and delivery expertise is enough to make it work, but the core fundamentals aren’t right. Environmentally and socially we are reaching critical tipping points that may irreversibly change the planet and our societies. Some of our business and commercial activities too are putting our global economy at risk. We need to re-focus on some of the bigger issues that need a deeper level of thinking but there’s no planned time for quality thinking. No off-time or down-time when we can allow our minds the freedom to think like a philosopher of old and to just contemplate on useful and interesting matters again.

But also, there are other reasons that good thinking doesn’t flow naturally . . .

## Why individuals struggle to be creative

In the 1960s, creativity researcher Dr George Land was approached by NASA to assess the creativity of the engineers they employed. The methodology he used worked so well for NASA that he started to apply it to children to assess the degree of creative genius they possessed. He tested the same children at five-year intervals to see if it changed over time, and these were the astonishing findings he uncovered:

- At 3–5 years of age, 98 per cent of children were rated as creative geniuses.

- At 8–10 years of age, only 32 per cent of *the same* children still rated as creative geniuses.
- At 13–15 years of age only 10 per cent were so rated.
- By the age of 25 and above, only 2 per cent of them were rated as creative geniuses.

The reason for this decline in creativity is believed to be that, as growing human beings, we are raised to conform to a wide range of norms, whereas young children are permitted much more freedom. While this may not be considered a critical issue for the majority of businesses who aren't involved in the design or creative industries, it turns out there are other similar issues in these creative industries too.

iStock (part of Getty Images) are an online provider of digital imagery and photographs, and in August 2013 they commissioned KRC Research to conduct a survey of over 400 young, creative professionals across the United States and United Kingdom ranging from art directors to graphic designers. Their published findings showed some unexpected and alarming results.

- 48 per cent believed the levels of creativity in their industry had stagnated or declined in the last decade.
- 23 per cent spent less than two hours of their day doing 'creative' work.
- 63 per cent said they don't have the time they need for 'creative reflection and inspiration'.
- Only 34 per cent rated the workplace as one of their top three locations for creativity.

If our creative professionals are struggling to produce inventive and effective solutions in an increasingly stressful work environment, what about other industries when their managers need to be creative in some way?

It's also interesting that the 'over-25' group that was identified by George Land are the junior to mid-level managers responsible for running large parts of any business today.

So what about those few times in a year when there's a real need for creative thinking to open up a new opportunity or to solve a difficult

problem? These are the times when our over-25s need to step up to the plate and create – not conform. But are they able to achieve this? If the creative professionals are struggling to achieve their desired levels of creativity, what are we doing to assist our managers in this area?

Often, when people realise that as individuals they don't have the creative nous to find a new answer, they may decide to involve a wider group of people to identify some new opportunities. The usual course of action may be to call a meeting where the attendees do some brainstorming. Unfortunately, this frequently doesn't address the issue as well as one might expect – or it fails to add any practical value at all – and here's why . . .

## Why the business world's favourite thinking tool is letting us down

It was 1953 when Alex Osborn's book *Applied Imagination* birthed brainstorming. It was a cutting-edge concept at the time. It thrived in the same corporate environment alongside accounting's hand-cranked adding machine and marketing's action list written in chalk on the blackboard in the director's office.

The earliest investigations into the effectiveness of brainstorming happened at Yale University in 1958 – just five years after the process was developed. The surprising findings were that 48 solo participants had roughly twice as many ideas as 48 participants formed into brainstorming groups. A panel of judges also regarded the individuals' ideas to be more feasible and effective than those from the groups.

Over fifty years later in 2012, Keith Sawyer, a psychologist from Washington University, summarised the findings on brainstorming by saying: 'Decades of research have consistently shown that brainstorming groups think of far fewer ideas than the same number of people who work alone and later pool their ideas.'

If you find that brainstorming frequently fails on its promise to deliver, you're not alone. When six people have spent two hours in a room and plastered the walls with scores of sticky-notes – what's left at the end? Rarely the amazing new idea that was hoped for. Conventional

brainstorming is a terrible waste of good people's time, because it works contrary to what is required to deliver exceptional business thinking. While a brainstorming group will get more ideas than any individual ever could working on their own, it's an inefficient and fundamentally flawed process.

Let's start by looking at the traditional guidelines for brainstorming to see why they don't work.

## #1 There are no dumb ideas so encourage wild and exaggerated thinking

There are plenty of dumb ideas. Everyone in a brainstorming session knows that many of the ideas that are created will be impractical, way beyond the scope of the issue, too risky, not aligned to the company values or business aims – and so on. Wild and exaggerated ideas aren't intentionally stupid ideas, they're just totally impractical, pie-in-the-sky stuff – so they might as well be termed 'dumb'.

## #2 Quantity counts at this stage, not quality

No, it doesn't. Quality is always important. Fewer ideas but with a better sense of quality will always be of more value than a large number of useless ideas.

## #3 Don't criticise other people's ideas

There's limited time available in any creative thinking session, and if someone is being consistently unrealistic, then wouldn't a little constructive guidance help them to potentially create the one idea that's being looked for within the likely acceptable zone? Is there any other aspect of business where we encourage people to be wrong? Not offering guidance is a clear failure of any process.

## #4 Build on other people's ideas

Sometimes useful, but often it can start adding weight and credence to an idea that wouldn't have made the grade if someone hadn't started to build on it.

## #5 Every person and every idea has equal worth

No! Everyone has an equal opportunity to contribute something useful. How they use that time is up to them. Allowing people to wander too far into la-la-land starts to waste their chance for meaningful contributions – and it can also start to lead other people’s thinking astray too.

## #6 Create a fun environment

The future growth of your company often depends on these brainstorming sessions – so do you think that fun is at the forefront of your Board of Directors’ collective mind? Children need to have fun. Serious professionals relish the chance to stretch their brains. There’ll be more overall satisfaction among the participants if they sense a successful outcome rather than them having a fun time creating nothing of practical value.

## #7 Only one person talking at a time

When you’re trying to concentrate on some important thinking issue, do you find it useful to have someone blabbing? Especially when you are supposed to be paying attention to what they’re saying? Doubtful. Your best ideas frequently come when you have moments of silence to consider the issue in your mind. This brainstorming rule ensures that there may only be one person talking at a time – but also that there’s *always* someone talking.

So the basic principles of a brainstorming session are flawed. But that’s not all. There are other deeper issues that cause problems too.

## #8 HiPPOs rule the waves

The highest paid person’s opinion (HiPPO) openly and subconsciously influences what success will look like. What they offer in the way of ideas, how they comment on the ideas of others, and the slow-nodding of their head in agreement when they hear a good idea. HiPPOs adversely affect what people say and do in brainstorming

sessions. Having a HiPPO in the room can also limit what ideas people voice for fear of making a career-limiting move through the suggestion of an idea which the HiPPO may regard negatively.

## #9 Accepting the lowest common denominator

Rather than allowing a motivated individual to develop a feasible idea that they feel passionate about, a brainstorming group often promotes the idea that they feel most comfortable with. This is the lowest common denominator of agreement, which isn't necessarily of the highest value or potential. It's similar to agreeing to just take the low-hanging fruit, which invariably consists of lesser, and easier ideas to execute. While the brainstorming group is promoting the lowest common denominator as their recommendation – the best opportunity for the business may invariably be left as a sticky-note on the wall – as it's deemed too high up on the fruit tree.

## #10 False anchoring

Early in the session, somebody puts up an idea which gets a supportive comment like 'that's brilliant'. This is a recipe for disaster, for from that moment on, this idea acts as a false anchor or a black hole for thinking. Similarly with a HiPPO's comment too. The early ideas in a session frequently tend to get prominence, as people openly (or inadvertently) state their pet idea with some supporting comment designed to influence people. The early ideas (if they are strong) tend to define the terrain and also form immovable anchors. Additionally, people who are the acknowledged experts in their field will invariably tend to provide artificial anchor points through the ideas they voice in a group.

## #11 Aggression or agreement

If a team is involved in brainstorming an issue, they are generally encouraged to sit around being supportive and reaching a consensus. However pleasant and warming it may feel, in-breeding isn't a desirable trait to encourage. Teams need to get outsiders in to challenge their thinking. This is contrary to the brainstorming approach where a

team want to be seen to be getting along. Potentially, it's during this search for new opportunities where the existing 'pleasant stability' needs to be most strongly challenged.

## #12 Voting on ideas

Frequently at the end of a brainstorm, people vote on the best ideas to take forward. Unless the team are all responsible for the success of the outcome, the choice of what to do next should be left to the owner of the issue. They, as the responsible person, should decide in the light of a new day what will be taken forward. In longer ideation sessions that have an overnight break, it's remarkable how often the priorities identified at the end of the previous day change as a result of the overnight subconscious of the participants being given time to influence – without any formal exercises being done. If a brainstorming group vote on the best idea in a session, it's demoralising for them when a single person has to override their decision at a later stage.

## #13 The illusion of productivity

A group of people working towards the same company goals will invariably feel that their combined skills, knowledge and abilities working in a brainstorming session will have added value to the business. The aforementioned lowest common denominator effect potentially means that they will deliver outputs lower than their potential to achieve. Unfortunately this starts reinforcing beliefs that mediocrity is deemed to be success – and that the process has been successful.

## #14 Group hugs

At the end of a session, it's customary for the sponsor to thank people and be complimentary about the output. If six people have been in the meeting, five will walk out having been warmly thanked by the sixth, and feel that they've added value in the time they gave up. The sponsor, meanwhile, is left to try and pull some magic out of a sticky-note hat. One unhappy person, five happy – and the myth of another valuable brainstorming session is perpetuated within the business.

## So what now?

Times may have changed and the adding machines and blackboards are sitting in landfill sites or in museums, but shockingly, thinking about growth opportunities frequently still depends on brainstorming.

There are reasons today why we are old-fashioned thinkers. It's because we know no different, and also because we allow ourselves to be guided by others who know no different than brainstorming. Brainstorming is always well-meaning and intuitively feels like the right thing to do – and some benefits may accrue as it gets people in the same room and talking about an issue which they wouldn't normally do otherwise.

The year 2018 will be a year for celebration, as brainstorming will be 65 years old – the official retirement age in many businesses. However, any company that is serious in its need for better growth opportunities should retire it earlier. Like right now! Brainstorming is a broken model with too much ineffective momentum locked in for it to be turned around. It's an inefficient thinking process which needs to be replaced with a new approach that is based upon our contemporary knowledge of how the mind works.

Brainstorming encourages passive thinking – a peaceful, wait-your-turn, unbounded type of thinking. Unfortunately for brainstorming, business growth needs something better – and today is as good a day as any to put brainstorming out of its misery. It's time for a 21st century approach to thinking. A more aggressive, focused and stimulating approach that will help businesses to out-think their competition.

It's time for *The Idea Generator* to deliver a new thinking approach for you.