



Leadership Image and Style Answers
—*Being More Creative and Innovative*



The contents of Leadership Image and Style Answers are copyrighted.
© 2011 Nova Consulting Inc. All Rights Reserved.

Introduction

New ideas, creative thinking, and innovation are the most sought after commodities in almost any business environment. If you hold a management position—or if you aspire to one—your ability to generate fresh, novel approaches can literally make your success. It's easier to recognize that fact than to do it. Exactly how does one come up with creative ideas and new insights?

While inspiration can come out in a flash (represented by the cartoon light-bulb going off over someone's head), more often innovation is the product of certain habits of mind and behavior. Even those tales of people going to sleep with a problem and waking up with the solution have a basis in fact. Dedicated inventors and scientists systematically immerse themselves in issues during the day to reap the rewards during sleep. For example, Thomas Edison developed a discipline to maximize his ability to capture new ideas. He made a practice of catnapping during the day in a chair set over cooking pans. He would place a large stone in each hand and start to drowse thinking of a problem, knowing that, as he fell asleep, the rocks would slip from his grasp to crash on the metal pans. When he was startled out of that in-between sleeping and waking state, his mind often had created visions and symbols that he could turn into new inventions.

This document presents habits of mind and behavior that you can develop in a disciplined way to increase your creativity and innovation. It also tells you how to create the kind of work climate that encourages divergent thinking, learning, and risk-taking in your team.

This document contains two sections to help you make the most of Nova's Training Programs for your specific situation:

Strategies and recommendations that provide a range of immediate answers for your situation. These are the building blocks of new behaviors to improve your performance.

A series of work sheets designed to help you engage actively with the strategies and recommendations to begin making the change you want and learning from your progress to refine your new behaviors.

END OF SECTION

Being More Creative and Innovative

QUESTION THE CURRENT REALITY, CUSTOMS, AND ASSUMPTIONS

Challenge the status quo for new and better ways of doing things. Question the most taken-for-granted assumptions and “realities.” Get past even whatever “best practice” models exist for your professional field or business. Look at other industries or professions for the way they think about problems and define solutions. They have different perspectives because they define “reality,” especially what can or should be done, in a different way. Scan the horizon for new ways of thinking and encourage your team to play, daydream, and investigate other disciplines for different models and paradigms.

QUESTION HOW THE PROBLEM IS DEFINED

Radical, out-of-the-box solutions often come from new ways of understanding the “problem.” Figuring out how to print and distribute news used to be one way problems were defined until new technology made newspapers largely obsolete. The real problem wasn’t faster printing presses and transportation; it was getting news simultaneously to all audiences as fast as it broke. Look around at your work challenges. What’s the most basic presentation of the problem? Why is it a problem? Why are the usual answers any better than others? Why not a different problem? Why not a different solution?

MANIPULATE THE PROBLEM EVERY WHICH WAY

Turn the problem around or upside down. What would be the opposite problem to have? What is not present in the problem, a gap, that you might think should be there? If this problem were solved, what would the next problem be? Is there anything weird about this problem, a dynamic or fact that doesn’t seem to fit—if so what would account for it? What would be the null hypothesis for this problem? Many creative geniuses “torture the problem” until it gives up its secrets.

MAKE THE PROBLEM WORK FOR YOU

Sometimes the very “tightness” or rigidity of a problem’s specifications can ignite new ideas. For example, the strictness of the Japanese three-line *haiku* poetry form or *ikebana* flower arranging have produced myriad masterpieces of astounding variety for centuries, just as the problems of designing things that work in the unusual gravitational and pressurized fields of outer space and deep-sea conditions have resulted in all kinds of new discoveries. Use the restrictions of the problem as a springboard for considering alternative solutions, materials, applications, and relationships among elements. Sometimes you

may even want to “tighten up” the specs by making the problem more difficult than the one you actually need to solve just to see what you can do with more challenging parameters.

CULTIVATE DIVERSE RESOURCES

Make sure to include diverse points of view in your discussions. Confer with people from other specialties on the issue. You may even want them to attend meetings to shake up your area’s usual thinking. Innovative leaders often create teams and consultants from people who may seem not to belong in the same conversation because they represent valuable new perspectives that may lead to novel juxtapositions. Sometimes these are people outside the usual industry channels who have solved similar problems but using completely different methods. Follow ground rules that support innovation, such as suspending any criticism of new ideas presented during a brainstorming session.

EMBRACE DISCOMFORT AND UNCERTAINTY

If you’re comfortable in the innovation process, something’s probably wrong. You should be working in a zone defined by the exhilaration of manageable risk, not complacent certainty nor gut-wrenching anxiety. Work outside your comfort zone when brainstorming new ideas and let go of certainty, strategy, and practicality. Let go of caution, practicality, and the fear of

making mistakes. Push into areas that will foster greater risk-taking. Make it a point to accept ideas and suggestions several degrees beyond your normal standards to give everyone room to come up with something fresh.

MAKE TIME AND SPACE TO THINK

Discipline yourself to create the conceptual space you need for truly innovative thought. If you “can’t spare the time,” you’re not going to be creative. “Obsessing” on a problem is close to the kind of depth and focus you need. Talk about it, doodle about it, meditate on it, see it everywhere you look in some facet of your surroundings. It also helps to dream about it or otherwise “find the problem” in a relaxed frame of mind. Go into the problem deeply and lose yourself in it to come out on the other side.

DON’T GO IT ALONE

Nobody has all the answers all the time, and nobody always feels creative or smart. It’s unreasonable and unhealthy to drive yourself to an imaginary standard. Open yourself up to suggestions from others to spark your own thinking, or frankly ask for help. Practice saying, “I’m stuck here, and just seem to be going around with the same old thoughts. Can you help me see a new way out?” It will build

bridges to others' creativity, just as it takes the pressure off of you, which may be just the help you need.

MULTIPLY YOUR SOLUTIONS AS A MATTER OF COURSE

When a problem or issue arises, always develop at least two solutions, preferably three. This will get you and your people thinking creatively and resisting the quick fix or single approach. Practice seeing every change or challenge as an opportunity for further novelty by developing at least two or three potential solutions to any new situation. Make every activity a potential resource for continued innovative thinking.

BRAINSTORM POSSIBILITIES

Before discarding any of your multiple solutions as inappropriate, play out their advantages and disadvantages. Each alternative, no matter how far out, will highlight and minimize different aspects of the issue. In the end, this exercise will help you see possibilities that no single solution will have revealed. Be willing to listen to new, even outlandish approaches because you can never tell where the next great idea might originate.

CREATIVITY IS THE FIRST GOAL

Understand that conceptual creativity doesn't have to be perfect or feasible.

Every flash of insight could be dragged down by a wealth of reasons the idea won't work—don't do it. Let the idea live like a balloon being batted in the air from person to person until it truly can no longer be viably entertained. You never know what other ideas it may generate.

MAKE MODELS AND METAPHORS OF IDEAS

Great designers and inventors get ideas from the unlikeliest places. A shell may spark the inspiration for a new telephone design. Children are really good at this, too, turning a pillow case into mermaid fins. Get a new slant on your work by making a physical model of a problem you're trying to solve using household items, for instance, to represent the problem, its causes, related issues, and other factors. You may find that considering why you chose a broken coffeemaker to represent your customer interface reveals aspects of the problem you hadn't seen before, and therefore suggests entirely new solutions. Doing this with your team can be unusually fruitful, too. The reason you may have chosen your son's toy octopus to represent new software may be entirely different from the ideas that sparks among your team members, just as their having chosen a lamp and an eraser may spark new insights for you. Do this with images and metaphors, too, such as having

everyone draw something from nature or a vehicle that represents the problem. Sometimes arranging the elements of a problem in a defined space like on a table or the floor reveals patterns or brings new relationships among elements into view.

FIND UNLIKELY PEOPLE TO TALK TO

Even if you're an introvert, the creative process is one time to express yourself out loud. Use other people as a sounding board. Articulating your ideas—or drawing them so someone can see what you're thinking—will stretch you. Instead of talking to the “experts,” try explaining it to your best friend, a child, your hairdresser, or your college roommate. You'll find yourself explaining the issue in different ways and refining your ideas and what's possible. You may also stumble on an insight from someone else that sparks new ways of looking at the problem.

REWARD NEW IDEA GENERATION

Recognize and reward those who suggest new ways of thinking. Champion and celebrate innovative thinking, no matter what the outcome. Develop as many ideas as possible, even if you can only work on one. Reinforce with everyone that idea generation is valued on your team. Your goal is not to reward a specific idea or solution, but to encourage creativity as a team norm.

CREATIVE WORK MEANS MAKING MISTAKES

No creative work proceeds without false starts and dead ends. Innovation is more essential than making the right calls every time. Expect that some mistakes will inevitably occur in activities large and small, and that it's a sign of progress when they do. Encourage calculated risk taking and thinking out of the box. If you extract the maximum amount of learning from each situation that doesn't work out rather than placing blame, you'll accelerate creativity in your group.

GIVE YOUR TEAM ROOM AND TIME TO GROW

Give people as much freedom as possible to allow them to seize opportunities as they arise without waiting for approvals. Let them take chances even when the outcome is uncertain. People need regular feedback to guide their progress, especially when they're stretching into new areas. Support their efforts and tell them what you'd like to see more of and less of in their contributions. Accept that they'll make mistakes because they're taking risks to do new things, and remember that progress will be bumpy, not smooth or consistent. If your group isn't coming up with new ideas that are

on target, look to what you need to change in your direction first before blaming them.

**EXPRESS POSITIVE EXPECTATIONS OF OTHERS,
EVEN IN DIFFICULT SITUATIONS**

In any high-risk environment, people will make mistakes, sometimes big ones. It's imperative to separate the mistake from the person who made it and praise the behavior that deserves praise. Always support the person. When things seem worst, people need to feel safe and appreciated in order to continue to contribute.

**CHANGE PEOPLE'S JOBS TO KEEP THEM FRESH
AND GROWING**

Consider rotations that would give people fresh opportunities and keep them challenged for novelty. Consult them about it to make it a win-win for everyone. Remember, though, that not every person can stretch—or should—into every area. Judicious discernment of talent is needed to determine the best deployment of people and assignments to keep people on their growing edge without burning or stressing out, on the one hand, or taking away too much challenge on the other. Understand the different strengths and limitations of your people and adjust your approach accordingly.

END OF SECTION

Creating a Plan For Improvement

INTRODUCTION

This section is designed to help you work actively with the information and recommendations provided by Nova, first reflectively, then by applying them on a day-to-day basis. Most people find that this practice enables them to identify more quickly critical transactions where they can apply their learning to improve their leadership abilities and performance rapidly.

When you make note of strengths you can develop as well as the interactions that leave you feeling dissatisfied, uncomfortable, or less than successful, you can create strategies to take advantages of opportunities coming your way and to anticipate potential challenges in ways that can resolve them successfully.

IDENTIFYING AND APPLYING MY STRENGTHS

When I think about my performance in relation to the strategies and recommendations, my strengths and best assets I can apply to my situation include the following:

Based on the information and recommendations, I can best leverage my strengths in this situation by applying them in the following ways to improve my performance:

IDENTIFYING AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

These are the three most critical areas where I can improve my performance. List the situations that you find challenging in each area and the qualities or behaviors you would like to develop to improve your performance:

IMPROVEMENT AREA 1

IMPROVEMENT AREA 2

IMPROVEMENT AREA 3

END OF SECTION

Assessing Your Plan For Improvement

CHALLENGE 1, A SUCCESS STORY

This section is for you to track your efforts to change in the coming months. Each time you encounter a situation that involves one of your key challenge areas, capture it in writing. It's best to include not only "success stories," but incidents that illustrate that success isn't always easy. You will learn more and gain greater insight from times when you fall short of your goals in the situation you described, and comparing success with times that weren't so successful is an optimal learning experience.

State the background briefly, the people involved, and what was said or done. Indicate what you intended to accomplish in the situation in contrast to the way it actually turned out. Then write down how you can better manage similar situations—including how you might anticipate them—in the future so can begin to plan and monitor your progress.

CHALLENGE 2, A TIME WHEN THINGS DID NOT GO AS DESIRED

State the background briefly, the people involved, and what was said or done. Indicate what you intended to accomplish in the situation in contrast to the way it actually turned out. Then write down how you can better manage similar situations—including how you might anticipate them—in the future so can begin to plan and monitor your progress.

END OF SECTION

Conclusion

Congratulations! You've now got specific recommendations for new behaviors that can improve your performance, and a way to work those behaviors into your day-to-day activities and learn quickly from practicing those new behaviors. If you consistently act on the recommendations and strategies provided here, you can become an outstanding leader in your organization or wherever your career takes you.