

Challenge Sessions

Introduction

It is well established that groups and individuals think by recognising and reacting to patterns, with most reactions emerging as a result of building on past experiences in a logical and linear fashion. In other words, the underlying assumption is that the future will correlate with the past. Although such thinking is a necessity in certain situations, individuals and groups often get stuck in such modes of thinking, and do not attempt to think beyond them. When a different or new challenge is posed, the manner in which people are conditioned to think means it is difficult to adjust.

The need to apply this understanding in a simple and systematic manner has led to the development of the Challenge Session: a structured problem-solving framework which aims to create changes in the way that groups or individuals think about and solve problems. The roots of the approach are in the work of a Russian patent officer Genrich Altshuller, who undertook a study of 200,000 patents to look for the basic principles and patterns in the world's most innovative products. He found that each of the most successful patents primarily solved an 'inventive problem', defined as those made up of conflicting requirements, or challenges. This idea was taken and expanded by de Bono, who made it famous in his lateral thinking techniques.

Detailed description of the process

The basis of a challenge session, then, is to generate a series of challenge statements, defined as deliberately provocative statements about a particular situation. These are usually generated by taking accepted wisdoms – things which are taken for granted about a particular situation – and treating them as though they were not true. This initially calls for a suspension of judgment, and the uncritical use of specific challenge statements to generate ideas about solving the problem. This logical 'reversal' helps individuals and groups move away from conventional modes of thinking, and provides a starting point for original, creative thinking.

As an example, we could make a statement that modern organisations should not have a physical library. In many situations, this would not be a good idea! However, this leads one to think of an organisation with distributed collections on bookshelves which means that staff have to walk around the building, potentially talking to others as they go. This could contribute to strengthening informal interactions, which are at the heart of effective knowledge and learning within an organisation. With this particular example, there are potential issues, namely, security and stock maintenance, which would also need to be addressed if this challenge statement were to become reality. The process for a challenge session is as follows:

- **Identify the problem:** This should ideally be a well defined problem or issue faced by a team or organisation.
- **Brainstorm a series of challenge statements:** This may be done by the whole group or sub-groups.
- **Use the challenge statements to generate new ideas:** Address the following checklist:
 - What are the consequences of the statement?
 - What are the possible benefits?
 - What special circumstances would be required to make it a sensible solution?
 - What are the principles needed to support it and make it work?
 - How it would work as a step-by-step process?
 - What would happen if a sequence of events was changed?
- **Prioritise the best ideas.** Use pilots to test them out in the live environment.
- **Rollout more widely.**

As with other lateral thinking techniques, use of challenge sessions does not guarantee production of good or relevant ideas. Frequently, though, it can help generate completely new ideas and concepts. The key is effective facilitation of the group through the creative thinking process.

Example: The EUFORIC network

A Europe-wide network of development practitioners asked ODI to help facilitate a session on networking. There were over 40 participants from very different organisations, speaking different languages. The overriding objective was to develop a set of ideas for use in the strategy of the EUFORIC network in the future. The challenge statements were as follows:

- **Challenge 1:** European development organisations and professionals do most of their effective networking with institutions and people that are similar to themselves.
- **Challenge 2:** For European development organisations and professionals, effective networking is largely the result of individual rather than institutional relationships.
- **Challenge 3:** European development organisations and professionals do most of their networking for funding purposes.
- **Challenge 4:** European development organisations and professionals within them do most of their effective networking in an unplanned and opportunistic manner.

The room was divided into groups asked to address these issues in terms of:

- Level of agreement/disagreement
- Consequences of challenge statement being true/false
- Benefits
- Approaches to overcome the problem
- Interesting examples and lessons from own experience

After addressing the issues, the teams were asked to write up the key lessons on flipchart paper. The other participants were invited to mark their favourites, thus identifying areas of key relevance.

Sources and further reading

- De Bono, E. (1993) *Serious Creativity: Using the Power of Lateral Thinking to Create New Ideas*, New York: Harper Business.