

Pathways to creativity

Coach, facilitator, trainer and author Jonne Ceserani explains to Nick Keith how his commonsense ideas have helped many well-known companies, and can benefit the quality of your business

Quality is a mindset, insists Jonne Ceserani. And he believes the keys to establishing this necessary mindset include good communication, flexibility and a supportive business climate.

On his website he says: "In a messy, complex world I try and present ideas simply, using straightforward language so that broad groups of people can get a common understanding of tools, techniques and structures for understanding themselves, understanding one another and working together collaboratively."

Companies and business people work smarter if they speak a common language. "Nobody communicates well," he says. "I find this in most businesses, although some are better than others. This is a human failing and not confined to nationalities.

"Cut out all the buzzwords and labelling. All the popular ideas such as 'business process re-engineering', 'total quality', and 'continuous improvement' are about much the same thing. They are saying: 'We can do better than this, so let's take a look at what is going on, and change it'."

He advises you have an attitude of 'positive intent' in communications, promoting the

language of "I wish", "How to", and "I need a way". "That language structure gets the brain thinking about possibility and the future. You get detailed, positive and focused feedback. Using structured language forces people to be positive, and to have meetings and conversations with a positive intent."

Flexibility is also crucial to quality because the world changes. "If you just stick to what you do, it won't continue to work commercially in the long run. All systems fail over the long term, but some fail more quickly than others."

And a healthy business climate flourishes under strong leadership. "Without a supportive climate, energy gets frittered in different directions. You need all your energy focused. You only get that with strong leadership, which is not just hierarchical but personal. It is not all about getting ISO9000 – which can be bureaucratic, get in the way, and may even work against quality."

Effective meetings

"Life," according to Ceserani, "is fundamentally a set of problem-solving meetings. Most of the time, business people [find

themselves] in meetings, which they tend to handle badly. We assume that we can have [effective] meetings because we can have a conversation, but that is not correct. Meeting skills need work, in the same way that people devote time and effort to their professional skills. Having meetings and solving problems form the core of what creates innovation and raises quality; and also using ideas to get to decisions."

Holding effective meetings are a means of improving communication and business: "You need conversations to be more open and specific; to remove some of the guessing which gets in the way of understanding and communication. You waste less time and get quicker results."

One area of communication breakdown in meetings is with questions. "When you ask a question, does the person have to guess what you are really asking? A way of managing that is to get people to think about the question and put it clearly. Often questions hide ideas so they need to be banned in creative sessions."

Questions often need clarifying, or they will lead to

Jonne Ceserani advocates side-stepping jargon: "In a messy, complex world I try and present ideas simply, using straightforward language so that broad groups of people can get a common understanding"

working wisdom



mishearing and misunderstanding. "So I ask the questioner to explain to me what is behind the question, what they are thinking. By bringing things out into the open, you can be more open and honest.

"In meetings you see what are called 'revenge cycles' where a criticised person goes quiet until there is the chance to hit back. This can lead to a downward spiral of people discounting each other. Often people mishear and misunderstand. They think they are being criticised when that was not intended, and they take umbrage. We ask people to assume positive intent to get people focused.

"If you think someone is going to criticise, you stop listening and start preparing your defence. So you don't hear your critic properly. One helpful model is for people to paraphrase what they have just heard. At first it may take them

five times or more before they get it right. In the end, they often find that they agree but have simply misheard. These simple things get in the way of good communication. If you mix cultures and languages,

"In meetings you see what are called 'revenge cycles' where a criticised person goes quiet until there is the chance to hit back. This can lead to a downward spiral"

the process becomes even more complicated."

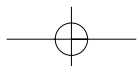
The size of meetings is also important – "in large groups you can share information and hear opinions, but you can't make decisions". So eight is the recommended maximum for problem-solving groups.

Innovation for solving problems

Staying flexible and solving problems requires innovation and creativity. "The paradox about creativity is that it needs good structure, while the process of creativity and that moment of insight is unstructured. Creativity is about not knowing. How do you maximise the chances of that process of innovation succeeding, and how do you spot it? The chances are that you will walk straight past a creative insight or dismiss it. Then how do you use it? That's how you get the loop back to quality in a business."

Innovation comes from a person making a connection, so it is important to give people a way to manage their listening. While paying attention aids understanding (as we were all taught at school), a more important skill for creativity and problem-solving is to hear to

what is in your head. "Ideas may be stimulated by what is going on around you, but they come from within."



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Ceserani suggests videoing a meeting because it's a very effective way to demonstrate to people how they behave. Once people see how they come across it can help them improve their body language

Ceserani values two quotations from Einstein:

- "Imagination is more important than knowledge."
- "If an idea is not at first absurd there is no hope for it."

Both these principles are essential for creativity: "You have to imagine the possible even if it seems difficult to achieve or even absurd – as flying once did."

Leadership: trust and ownership

From the perspective of leaders and senior managers, it is vital to establish trust. At one company the issue was a coffee machine; when that was changed trust was built immediately. "As a result, people start wanting to perform, and this raises quality in the business because they have managers they can trust."

Case Study: Meetings, Walkers Crisps

Walkers used to have two-day meetings between 15 account managers and a group of marketers. The account managers used to criticise the marketers and the meetings achieved nothing. It became clear that only certain account managers needed to be at the meeting at specific times.

So the single meeting was broken down into smaller meetings, with an afternoon session of presentations – with

rules such as minimum slides, no questions or interruptions until the end, and structured comment (without abuse).

As a result, the two-day session was transformed into a one-day meeting, with a saving of £100,000, plus the benefits of a set of decisions and people leaving the meeting feeling good.

"It's hard to put value on that, but it represents a big change from some simple things," says Jonne Ceserani.

"If you work in a place where you feel threatened, your energy is directed to protecting yourself. If you feel supported, your work goes into work, creativity and quality. So if a business wants to raise quality, the simple thing is make sure people feel supported and protected. The company can still have a hard-nosed business edge but that can be achieved in a fair way."

What is missing in many businesses is ownership. "Problem-solving needs a clear problem-owner, whose job is to make decisions and to give direction to get to those decisions. Usually only one person can make a decision. I don't have much time for this myth of industrial democracy and making decisions together. Someone has to take responsibility for the decision."

Tools and models

Models and tools provide an illustration and means of understanding, but then you must build some flexibility because life is complicated.

Videos are useful tools, because they demonstrate to people how they behave. The fastest way for Ceserani to explain his views on effective meetings is to video a standard meeting. Once people see their body language and hear their words, it can help them transform their behaviour and remove critical, negative ways.

Other useful tools include Synectics, Insights, and NLP (Neuro Linguistic Programming): "Synectics is both a company and a body of knowledge. The name derives from two Greek words, syn and ectos, and means

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Ceserani uses the Insights profiling system to recognise core attributes in people, enabling them to emphasise their strengths and minimise their weaknesses



bringing together diverse elements from outside. Synectics is a way of formalising the creative process for people

"The Insights model deals in colour energy; and we have four: fiery red, cool blue, sunshine yellow and earth green. This

normally it is and people accept it. They then need to learn to value their strengths and not to compare them with others.

"When they understood from the Insights profile how each made sense of the world, it transformed relationships"

tries to avoid putting people in boxes, but to recognise that we have a core of energy attributes and

Summary

Models and tools work best if they are simple and easy to understand. The same can be said for Jonne Ceserani's common-sense approach, which has helped many organisations by improving communication, saving time and money and helping businesses solve their problems to survive and succeed.

who are having ideas."

Insights is a pure Jungian profiling system devised by a jazz musician and actuary to update Myers-Briggs.

need flexibility beyond that."

Profiling shows people their strengths and weaknesses, and they make a judgment whether the assessment is accurate –

Case Study: Tools

A 300-strong defence organisation needed to become more creative and explore new markets. They wanted their team of 25 in R&D to be more outgoing, lively and "creative on-call" – more involved with the commercial side of the business.

"Stereotypically, R&D people are bright and one of the main contributors to business in terms of innovation; but they are introverted."

One of the issues was crossing the divide between R&D and production. In this case, some simple Synectics problem-solving tools transformed the group's ability to work and contribute. And

Insights gave them information about behaviour preferences, where the typically introverted people in R&D clashed head on with their typically extrovert commercial colleagues.

"When they understood from the Insight profile how each made sense of the world, it transformed relationships, they worked together and got things done as never before.

They communicated better; they appreciated the differences; their meetings were more focused and this all translated into higher quality work."