

## Ten Mental Locks for Creativity and Key Roles to think different

Based on the book "A whack on the side of the Head" by Roger Von Oech (Oech, 2008)

*Friso Coumou, 2012*

### Why would you be creative?

1. To find new solutions in response to changing circumstances.
2. To have fun giving life to new ideas.

### What is creativity?

Creativity is looking at the same thing as everyone else, and thinking something different. Creativity is about making smart recombinations (Berger, 2011)!

Examples are:

- Gutenberg who combined the wine press and the coin punch to create the book press.
- Nolan who wanted to play with his tv and not just passively watch it. He created the first tv-game called "Pong".
- Picasso who took the seat and handle bars from a bicycle and created the head of a bull.



### How can you be more creative?

If you want to be creative, just look at the same thing as everybody else and think something different! But often we don't we think something different. Why?

1. For most of what we do we don't need to be creative. We do most things on routine.
2. Our educational system doesn't really challenge us to be creative.
3. We have mental locks that keep us into thinking more of the same. Being more creative is about opening the mental locks. You have to take on certain roles to open the locks and allow yourself to think different.

## Ten Mental Locks for Creativity and Key Roles to think different



10 Mental Locks for Creativity

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### 1. Be flawless!

The first mental lock is that we have to be flawless and that it's wrong to make mistakes.

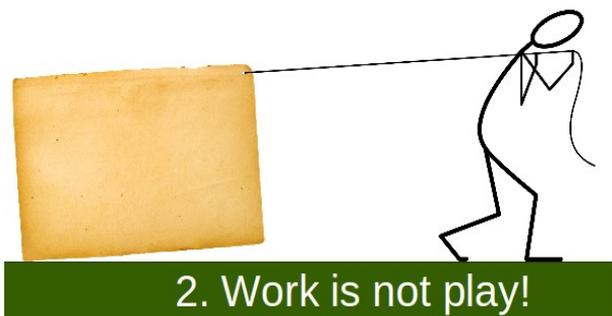
We need errors in the germinal phase of the creative process. Too much adherence to the belief that "to err is wrong" undermines our attempts to generate new ideas. We have to welcome errors as necessary by-product of the creative process. So we see ourselves as **scientists** discovering new territory. And we use errors as stepping stones to new ideas that we might have not otherwise have discovered. We make it a habit to take at least one risk every 24 hours. If we fail we learn what doesn't work and we get an opportunity to try a new approach. Life is not about win-lose, but about win-learn (Berger, 2011).



## 2. Work is not play!

This mode of thinking separates working and playing. It considers play as frivolous and as something to do outside of work.

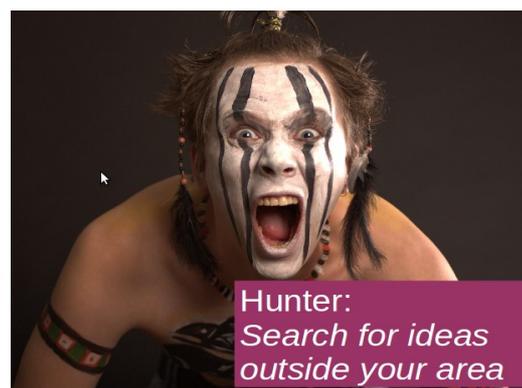
Work and play should be integrated. If necessity is the mother of invention, play is certainly the father! A playful attitude is fundamental to creative thinking. You generate most of your creative ideas when you are playing in your mental playground. That's because then your defences are down, there's little concern with rules, practicality or being wrong. Therefore we see ourselves as **children**. We are children playing and having fun when working on problems and creating new things.



## 3. That's not my area!

This is the thinking that you should work on a specific area, and stick with that. This mental lock draws a clear line between your own area and other fields of knowledge.

An important part of creative thinking is recognizing the basic idea of one situation and applying it in another. The benefits of transferring knowledge gained in one area into another are huge. Therefore we see ourselves as **hunters** and we actively search for ideas outside our area. We schedule hunting time! And we develop different kinds of hunting grounds. We look for analogous situations and capture ideas by jotting them down.

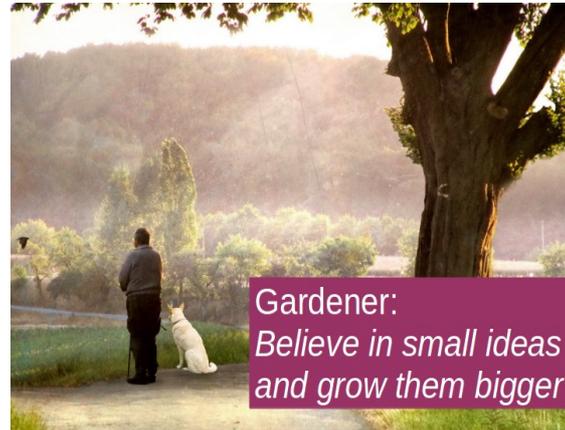


#### 4. I'm not creative!

This kind of thinking separates creatives and non-creatives and has a specific interpretation of the characteristics of the creative class. They're all supposed to be the Da Vinci's and Einsteins with world changing ideas.

Self-confidence is important. If you want to be more creative, you have to believe in the worth of your ideas, and have the persistence to continue building on them. It doesn't all have to be world changing. Pay attention to your small ideas and grow them bigger. Therefore we see ourselves as **gardeners**, building on and growing our creative ideas.

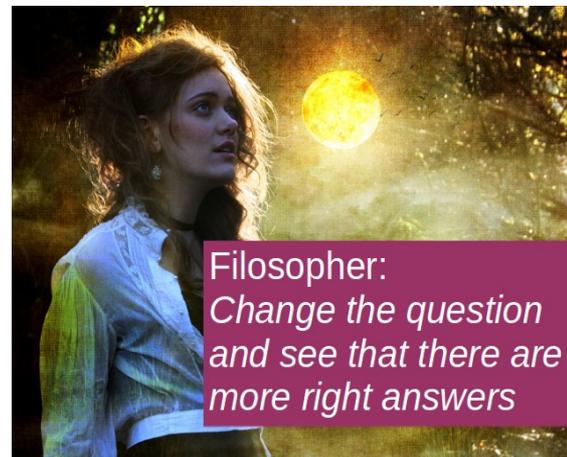
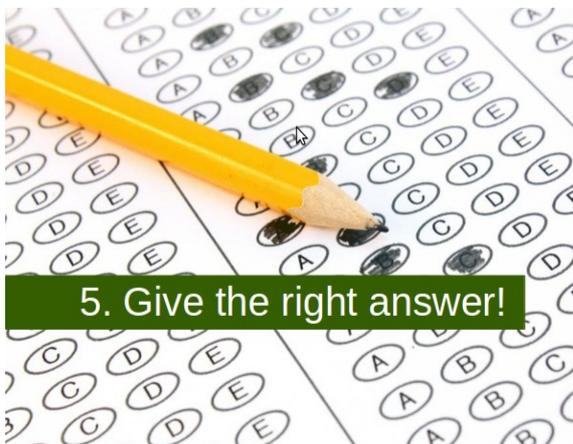
#### 4. I'm not creative!



#### 5. Give the right answer!

This mental barrier states that there's only one question and one right answer, approach or solution. It is in search of the right answer.

In reality, there never is one right answer, meaning or solution. There are always more right answers, meanings and solutions. So we have to see ourselves as **philosophers**. We change the question and we see that there are several right answers.



#### 6. Be logical!

This mental lock requires everything to be logically ordered. It searches for a logical analysis and rational, schematic solutions.

In the germinal phase of idea creation we don't want to use hard thinking and logics because that limits our creative process. Idea creation requires soft thinking. So we think of ourselves as **poets** and look for similarities around us. And we use metaphors to create more ideas.



### 7. Follow the rules!

This kind of thinking requires us to follow the rules of the current system.

If we would follow the rules that would mean we can think of things only as they are. We would get locked into one way of thinking. And some rules make no sense any longer because things have changed. Conformity leads to groupthink and convergent thinking. We want to create new things and think divergent. Picasso once said: Every act of creation is first of all an act of destruction. And for destruction you need to break the rules. So we play the **revolutionary** and challenge or break the rules.



7. Follow the rules!



### 8. Be practical!

This line of thinking requires everything to be of direct and practical use.

Being practical is important in the world of action, but practicality alone will not generate new ideas. And we want to be creative and generate new ideas. So we see ourselves as **magicians** and ask what if-questions! Everyday, in every context. We use the provocative answers as stepping stones to new ideas. Asking what if gives us the freedom to think something different and open us up to new concepts and lines of thinking.



### 9. Be clear and precise!

This kind of thinking wants us to avoid ambiguity. It wants us to always be clear and precise. Too much specificity stifles our imagination. So we see ourselves as **politicians** and take the advantage of ambiguity in the world. We use humor, paradoxes and pose questions and problems in an ambiguous way. We cultivate our personal sources of ambiguity (people, books, things) to look for more meanings to understand what's going on. We interpret things in different ways.



9. Be clear and precise!



### 10. Be serious!

This thinking orders us not to be foolish, get our act together and be serious about everything. Too much seriousness stifles creativity and narrows your mind. For a germinal creative process we need to not take things too serious and use divergent thinking. Therefore we play the **clown** by:

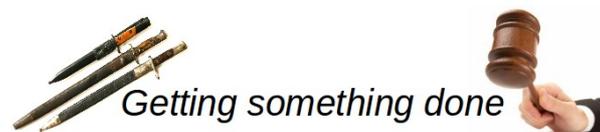
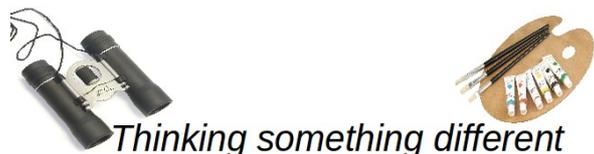
- making a ridiculous use of logic
- being silly and absurd
- reversing standard assumptions
- parodying the rules.



### The creative process

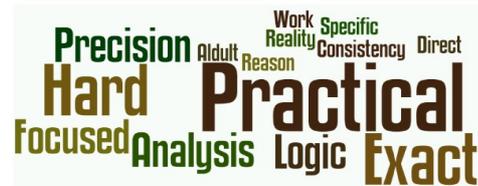
The creative process can be divided into the imaginative phase and the practical phase. The imaginative phase is about “thinking something different”. In this phase you generate and play with ideas. In the imaginative phase people play two main roles: the roles of explorer and artist.

The practical phase is about “getting something done”. In this phase you evaluate and execute ideas. In the practical phase people play two other main roles: the roles of judge and warrior.



Explorers and artists use “soft thinking”. This thinking is like a floodlight. It is diffuse and covers a wide area. It is metaphorical, approximate, humorous, playful and capable of dealing with contradiction. It tries to find similarities and connections.

Judges and warriors use “hard thinking”. This thinking is like a spotlight: it is bright, clear and intense, but the focus is narrow. Hard thinking is logical, precise, exact, specific and consistent. In hard thinking things are black and white. Hard thinking focuses on differences.



There are two main reasons for low creative performance:

- 1) weak roles
- 2) bad timing

The mental barriers mentioned above, are illustrations of this. **The mental barriers consist largely of judges and warriors dictating their hard thinking on the soft thinking of explorers and artists.**

Hard thinking in the imaginative phase limits the creative process. An over-reliance on logic and analysis -especially early in the process- narrows your thinking. This is also applicable the other way round. Soft thinking in the practical phase can prevent the execution of an idea. Here firmness and directness are preferable to ambiguity and dreams. So soft and hard thinking both have their strengths and weaknesses and timing is important. Wrong timing results in sloppy roleplaying and a less successful creative process.

### 1 Explorers: searching for new information and resources

In the examples above, we have seen **4 types of explorers: the scientist, the child, the hunter and the gardener**. In these roles you look for the materials you can use to build the idea. You pay attention to unusual patterns, use different sense, and seek out a variety of different information. You look for facts, concepts, experiences, knowledge, feelings, and whatever else they can find. This role is all about empathizing, observing and asking stupid questions (Berger, 2011).

### 2 Artists: turning resources into new ideas

In the examples above we have seen **6 types of artists: the philosopher, the poet, the revolutionary, the magician, the politician and the clown**. In these roles you follow your intuition, look at things backwards, rearrange things, and turn them upside down. You ask what if and look for hidden analogies. You break the rules, and create your own rules. You make smart recombinations and come up with ideas.

### 3 Judges: evaluate the merits of an idea and decide what to do with it

Judges ask: is this idea any good? Is it worth pursuing? Is the timing right? Will it give me the return I want? Do I have the resources to make it happen? Judges critically evaluate and weigh the evidence. They run risk analyses, question assumptions and listen to their gut. Then they make a decision.

### 4 Warriors: carrying out the idea into action

Warriors implement their ideas. When you become a warrior you take your idea into action. There's competition. You develop your strategy, sell your idea and commit yourself to reaching your objectives. You overcome excuses, fears, idea killers, setbacks and other obstacles. You have the

courage to do what is necessary to make the idea a reality. And you celebrate the milestones on your way to success.

### **References**

Berger, W. (2011). *Glimmer: How Design Can Transform Your Business, Your Life, and Maybe Even the World*. Random House.

Oech, R. von. (2008). *A Whack on the Side of the Head: How You Can Be More Creative*. Grand Central Publishing.

### **About me**

I'm interested in the innovation of the public sector, entrepreneurship, social business, coaching, storytelling, open systems, the commons, talent development and program management.

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