

Uninvited Coach



R Sridhar

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Sridhar



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Uninvited Coach

There was a nip in the air. I was enjoying my brisk early morning walk. As I was turning round the garden, I saw some one crossing the road and walking towards me.

It was a seventy-year-old man. He was trim, and looked very smart in his walking attire. He had what many would call 'presence'. I continued walking when he joined me and started walking alongside.

“Good morning!” His greeting was nice and cheerful, as if it was to a friend.

I reciprocated with a slightly unsure greeting.

“Obviously you don't remember me.”

I was a bit irritated because my morning walks are precious to me and I always choose to walk alone. I do not like any kind of chats during the walk. I was not sure how to respond to him without being disrespectful.

“We were on a flight together three months ago. And you were reading a book as if you were studying for an exam!”

Now I placed him. It was the same man, who sat next to me on my flight and peppered me with some really uncomfortable questions.

“Have you started your blog?”

“I am still working on it”



“I know you will have a lot of starting trouble. Isn't procrastination your big problem?”

His comment took me by surprise. He was right though.

“Sir, do we know each other?”

“No. I know you but you do not know me. I know your dad, David Ogilvy, Drayton Bird, Mani Ayer, Professor C.P. Narayan from your college and Mr. Natarajan from your school. I also know your Gurus.”

I listened carefully curious to see what this conversation was leading up to.

“You see all these men stretched your thinking and their principal method was to ask you tough impossible questions. You responded well and did not buckle under pressure. I believe in their philosophy. I am going to be with you and will ask you tough questions whenever you are stuck.”

I was about to say “Thank you, I don't need any such help”, but hardly got a chance.

“My name is Krishna Rao but my friends have given me a nickname, Prasna Rao. You can call me Prasna.”



“It is really kind of you, but...”

“I know you don't want me around, but you just do not have a choice. Therefore, you might as well make the best use of my time. OK. I have to go now.”

“I do not know what to say.”

“Do not even try. Go back to starting your blog. Think about what stops people from coming out with ideas. Have a nice day.”



“I know you don't want me around, but you just do not have a choice”.

The next minute something strange happened. Prasna had vanished. Just like that!

However, his question remained in my mind.

What stops people from coming out with ideas?



Idea Stopper

Prasna had left me with a question: What stops people from coming out with ideas?

True to his style, Prasna surprised me again. He was on the phone last night.

“I read your last post in your blog.”

“What did you think?”

“Why are you not on the subject? Instead, you are talking about some ideas that you liked. So what if you liked them?”

“No, I was just...”

“This is your problem. Always acting on impulse and forgetting what you are supposed to do. Now get on with the job.”

“Aye, Aye Sir!”

“Cut the sarcasm. Another thing, your posts are too long. Cut it down by half.”

Prasna just banged the phone, leaving me to get on with my work!

When I was in school, I never asked questions in any



class. It is not because I understood everything; far from it. It was because I felt uncomfortable. What would others think? What if the teacher ridiculed me? What if others thought I was dumb?

This changed when I was in my eighth standard. Mr. Natarajan was our class teacher. He encouraged us to ask questions. He was patient and was genuinely delighted when somebody asked a question. That helped me overcome my fear of losing face.

Most people suffer from the same fear when it comes to sharing ideas, especially at work. We are worried about various things.

“Any monkey can think of such ideas.”

“What if it seems foolish or stupid?”

“What if it is not practical?”

“Suppose the boss does not like it?”

Many of these fears are quite real. I have seen brainstorming sessions turning into blame-storming sessions, and the focus of the session is lost.



**“What is blame-storming?
I never heard this one
before.”**



“What is blame-storming? I never heard this one before.”
Prasna, this time standing behind my back reading what I was typing. (Oh! I forgot to mention, Prasna now visits me regularly).

“I heard about blame-storming from my friend Guhesh. It is how people get into blaming each other in brainstorming sessions. The atmosphere is vitiated by unnecessary aggression and defense.”

“OK”

The fact is that everyone has ideas. They

will share their ideas without any inhibition with just a little bit of encouragement. They will get bolder if they feel safe. They will share all their ideas if they know that nothing will be held against them and no one will censor anything. They will be thrilled if they feel respected and valued. They will put all their energy and share ideas enthusiastically, if they feel that there is active support from colleagues, peers and the boss.



They will share all their ideas if they know that nothing will be held against them and no one will censor anything.



“Is that all? Is it that simple?”

“Yes, it is that simple. However, it is not easy to create a climate of safety and encouragement. This is the biggest challenge for the bosses. In fact they have to change their style.”

“This is what I do with my grandchildren. I never criticize them. For me what they is the most brilliant thing in the world.”

“So how does that work?”

“You won't believe it. They tell me things that they will not share even with their own parents.”

“That is right Prasna...”

“Why don't we talk more in your next posting? I have to go.”

“OK”

“How do we create this climate? Think about it.”



Creative Climate

This is my favorite story on creating a creative climate.

Imagine I am working in a company for a long time and I am a very senior person. Our company has been very successful. However, we have been under a lot of pressure in recent times. Our customers are more demanding. We have been losing good people. Our competitors are

turning the heat on. Business conditions have changed considerably. Our

margins are shrinking. It is evident that we cannot continue to do business the same old way. We need some fresh thinking.

Our Managing Director has called for a high-power brainstorming meeting. This is what he tells me:

“We have to put together a new act. I have called a few senior people like you. I have also called a few 'young turks'. Some of the bright MBAs we have hired recently. We must make this meeting productive. I am banking on you.”

I feel strongly about the company; my MD's comments



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spur me on to share my ideas as soon as the meeting starts. As I finish sharing my ideas, my MD looks me in the eye and says, “You have been in the business so long. Frankly, I did not expect this from you. I was hoping to see something very different. You are just rehashing things from the past.”

There is silence in the room. I keep quiet. I do not agree with him but then he is the boss. I decide that if he was so smart he could solve the problem himself.



You cannot insult people into sharing ideas!”

Therefore, I spend the rest of the meeting waiting for tea, sending out SMS messages on my phone to my daughter, and drawing caricatures of the participants.

So what happened here? The atmosphere is Threatening. Obviously, I feel unsafe and do not want to share my ideas. Instead, I spend my energies in protecting my self-esteem. I use silence as my strategy.

“This sounds real. Did it happen to you?”

My friend Prasna had appeared on the scene. “That is



immaterial, Prasna. Just imagine if this happened to you. How would you respond? Most people I know do exactly what I described.”

“What has this got to do with creating a creative climate?”

“It has everything to do with that. Our society thrives on finding fault. You might feel superior and pompous, but that does not help in getting people to share ideas. You cannot insult people into sharing ideas!”

“Words of wisdom son! You cannot insult people into sharing ideas. Well said.”

“Thanks.”

“What else will stop you from sharing your ideas in such a meeting?”



Creative climate scenario 2

Imagine the same meeting where all of us are full of ideas for the future of our business.

Imagine again that I venture to give an idea. This time one of the 'Young-Turks' jumps in with his comments.

He says “I was watching C. K. Prahalad on CNBC the other day. He made a brilliant presentation on some of the new enterprises. Based on the principles of what he said, your idea will not work. I was also reading Harvard Business Review and revisiting Michael Porter's model. From that perspective too, your idea will not work.”

Now everybody in the room is truly impressed. 'Most of us do not get time to read our morning newspapers! Look at this man. He watches the CNBC, reads HBR. See the way he brought those principles and connected it here. Brilliant!'

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idea. He had not given any idea of his own. Edward de Bono talks about how to get intellectual payoffs. One way is to put forth an idea, push it through, implement it and rejoice in the recognition that comes thereafter. It is a great feeling, but it is tough. The other way to do it is to make a brilliant job of killing another person's idea. That is what my young friend had done here.

What do you think I would do? I feel miffed and do not want to say anything anymore. I also notice that my boss did not stop that kid from killing my idea. Therefore, I take out my writing pad and start calculating my super-



annuation dues; loan amounts that I have to clear and how many days leave can I encash on retirement and so on. My mind is not on the task. I use my energy to protect myself.

Somebody tapped my shoulder and I turned around. It was Prasna. “Did you not give up too soon? Should you not have put that boy in his place?”

“That is not the point, Prasna. Just imagine how I felt.

The climate was just too **aggressive and competitive**. Remember my boss was sitting there and did not say a word in my support. I felt that my ideas were not important any more. If the young kid wanted to make a mark at my cost who am I to stop him? I had no energy to get into a heated argument with some opinionated fellow.”

“This really happened. Did it not?”

“I am not answering that question Prasna Rao!”



**My mind is not on the task.
I use my energy
to protect myself.**



Leave them alone!

I just returned after completing a two-day workshop for a client. Here are a few points from the closing comments from my client and some of the participants.

Client 1: I thought that my product category is so a boring, people will have nothing to say. I am amazed at what they have done.

Client 2: Frankly some of the ideas we have decided to go ahead with, are the very same ones we

would have normally rejected outright. However, today they seem exciting and possible.

Participant 1: I like the way we worked. Our ideas seemed to matter. We listened to each other to understand how we could build and collaborate.

Participant 2: I am glad that we did not allow debates And discussions in the beginning. It saved so much time. “What is this - a testimonial for your workshop, or your blog?”



**I like the way we worked.
Our ideas seemed to matter.**



“Prasna, are you always so cynical?”

“I ask the questions remember?”

“OK, I recounted these comments because they were fresh in my mind. Let me continue.”

I listened to the various views that people expressed after the workshop. As I listened to them, it was evident that the climate of the workshop had indeed made a huge difference to the output.



My role was to manage a climate that was relaxed, supportive and encouraging

There were three key players in the workshop. My client had asked for ideas to crack a major business issue. We had carefully put together a set of participants as our advisors. I was the facilitator. My role was to manage a climate that was relaxed, supportive and encouraging. People were happy and comfortable. Even the client displayed no tension or stress.

I ensured that the climate was not threatening or aggressive. Instead, everyone listened to each other, looked for value in every idea and had no inhibition with experimenting with new ideas.



My client was outstanding. Once he finished stating his task, he declared he was just another participant and let his hair down. He participated whole-heartedly in every step of the process and was present throughout the two-day workshop. He read every “post-it” slip (a little over 1000) looking for ideas.

I asked him “So what do you think worked?”

“You really want to know?”

“Yes, of course.”

“It is I who made all the difference.”

I was not sure what he was leading up to, so I kept listening.

“You know the role you played is significant. However, that is what we expect from a good facilitator. The participants gave good ideas. That too is not a surprise, because they are all very smart people. I did the unexpected thing.”

“Go on, I am curious.”

“I did not play boss, I played team member instead. More importantly, once I defined the task I demonstrated complete faith in their ability to find an interesting solution. For the first time they have seen me listen with so much interest, support and encouragement. For the first time I left them alone. That is what worked!”



**For the first time I
left them alone.
That is what worked!**



What is the real issue?

“Where were you? Why have you not written all these days?”

Prasna launched his offensive even as I sat down to write this blog.

“I have been busy, Prasna.”

“I am afraid that is an unacceptable answer.”

“Why is that?”

“Tell me is that the reason why you have not written in the last 20 days?”

“What are you getting at?”

“My point is this. There is more to your not writing, than this bit about being busy. Think harder, you will know what I mean.”

As I began to think I realised Prasna was asking me to practise what I preach. Why did I not write in the last 20 days? Of course, I was busy. I have been traveling. I have a house under renovation. We keep shifting the computer. It is impossible to sit at home with all the dust, noise and strong smell of fresh paint.

Then I thought of things I had continued to do. I had answered e-mails. I had sent out proposals. I had sent out



bills. I had sent out reminders for payments. Therefore, it is not as if my life had come to a stand still.

“Does this mean that writing the blog is not a priority?”
Prasna was quick with his attack.

I realised that it might seem so, but it could not be the real issue.



This in fact is the most important part of my work as a facilitator: How do I help my clients to define the challenge right.

I stopped for a moment to think about the issue. It is not about 'Why have I not written the blog in the last 20 days' It is about “How can I continue to write my blog regularly without a break'.

That is my challenge.

Now I must search for ideas that will help me continue the blog regularly without a break.

“That is good thinking, RS”

“Thanks Prasna. Please let me continue.”

This in fact is the most important part of my work as a



facilitator: How do I help my clients to define the challenge right.

Here is my favourite example.

In many of the workshops, we get an NGO to share a case with the group.

We then use the case to demonstrate how the 'Creative Block



Many brainstorming sessions fail, because we have not defined the problem or challenge sharply.

Busting' process works. The NGO gets a whole bank of ideas free and a chance to talk to a bunch of corporate managers about their cause. For the managers it is a great experience to think freely without inhibition, because they do not have stakes in the issue.

We had an NGO in one of the workshops. She posed the following challenge to the group.

“How can we ensure the loyalty of our donor base?”

Then we went through a simple but rigorous process of reframing the challenge. The final statement she chose from the re-framing exercise was:



“How can I get my current donors to donate more regularly?”

Had we pursued the first challenge, we could have gone astray. The NGO got some outstanding ideas on how to get regular donations, which was her real issue.

Many brainstorming sessions fail, because we have not defined the problem or challenge sharply. That is the foundation step for a good brainstorming session.



Earning Trust and Respect

I was working with the IT Group of a fast growing bank. The VP-in-charge of IT was keen that his team of people goes through the Creative Block Busting Workshop.

On day one we were going to understand the basics of Creative Block Busting, learn how to redefine a problem, how to generate ideas without inhibition and get to know the process by which we will select ideas.

One of the senior members was a woman who came forward to be the Problem Owner. Incidentally, in Creative Block Busting there are three key players.

The Problem Owner, who comes to the group asking for ideas. We insist that he/she should be the decision maker.

The facilitator is the one who conducts the session. He has no stakes in the problem. The Problem Owner is his client. Then there are advisors/consultants who give ideas (Participants).

The problem owner posed a challenge:

“How do we ensure user departments follow IT instructions”

She briefly described the issue the background facts, why it is a problem and what solutions were tried in the past. She outlined what she is looking for.

We use a Creative Block Busting Tool Kit in the workshop. It has a Question Pack. The Question Pack



“How do we ensure user departments follow IT instructions”



has 27 sharp questions that you can ask in any situation. Answering even five or six questions candidly brings more clarity to the issue. The answers bring more detail rich with new perspectives.

This is how we use the Question Pack. We shuffle the cards and every participant picks one card. Generally, there are five or six tables with four people on each table. We do the first round of six questions by randomly picking people in each table.

The problem owner is the client and responds to

the question in any of the following ways. She can answer the question. She can decline to answer the question because the answer calls for sharing sensitive data. She might just say 'pass' because she does not know the answer.

As she answers the question, I capture her detailed answers to each question. I project this on the screen for every one to see. Now participants use the additional information on the issue and reframe the challenge in as many different ways as possible. Every challenge statement is framed as “How can we”, “How might we”, “How do we” etc. Participants write every statement on a post-it.

The client and I go through the entire lot and she short-lists what she believes could be the real issue. After some



Now participants use the additional information on the issue and reframe the challenge in as many different ways as possible

discussion client articulates a new challenge based on all the inputs.

“How do we earn the trust and respect of user groups?”

Then we test this statement for relevance. If we solved this issue, will it solve the original challenge? Client believes that this is the root cause and if solved can solve the original issue too.



“How do we earn the trust and respect of user groups?”

“Very clever”, I could feel Prasna's presence. I kept quiet and he went on to say, “I never thought we could get to the root cause definition this way”



Try this test

Here is something I would like you to try.

Draw a small circle on a sheet of paper. Done?

Now fill up the circle quickly. Yes, as quickly as you can. Have you done that? Good.

Now look at the circle you have filled up. Have you carefully filled it up, so that nothing spilled outside? Yes?

You are in good company. 95% of the people, who try this test, do the same thing.

A faster way to fill the circle would have been to scribble all across circle really fast, without worrying about lines spilling over. You would have filled the circle faster.



The first step to defining a problem right is to free our minds from our past baggage.

Remember; the task was to fill the circle as quickly as possible. There was no discussion about a perfect job.

Why do we respond this way? The reason is that we make assumptions about what is required, what is the challenge. These assumptions limit the quality and speed of our solutions.

The first step to defining a problem right is to free our minds from our past baggage. The other difficulty in defining the problem right is in resisting the temptation to rush into solutions.

Try this quiz. You will know what I mean.



An astronomer and a friend met after a very long time. During this period the friend had been married and had a baby daughter.

“What is the name of your daughter?” asked the astronomer.

“The same as her mother's” answered the friend.

“Mary!” said the astronomer; the friend smiled and said “You are right”.

The question for you is: How did the astronomer get the name first time right?

(“Can I tell you what I think?” That was Prasna eager to add his answer. “Not now, Prasna. I want to hear from the others first.”)

* *Answer: The astronomer is a woman.*



Changing gears

As I start this I dread the thought of facing Prasna Rao. I am embarrassed by my lethargy and procrastination that has led to this long gap in writing this blog. It has been almost six months and I did not realise it. My procrastination has stolen six months! God!

“OK, enough of crying over spilt milk. What are you going to do now? That is more important.” I could recognise the familiar voice. “You see Prasna...”

“Don't worry, these things happen. Why don't you simply start where you left off. I have a better idea.



“Why don't you share some of the lessons from your mistakes? People may get more value from that.”

Why don't you share some of the lessons from your mistakes. People may get more value from that.”

“My mistakes?”

“Yes, your mistakes. I know you had a couple of disasters in the last twelve months.”

“But those were not entirely my fault, you know.”

“Stop whining. Remember how on two occasions some



one else hijacked your process and you were caught completely by surprise? Why did that happen? Did you figure it out?”

“Yes, I did.”

“So what went wrong?”



I had suggested that if he wanted truly fresh ideas we should have some fresh minds.

“In the first case I should have insisted on talking to the decision maker. He was traveling all the time and I was dealing with his deputy. A well meaning person, he too was taken by surprise by the comments of the client(his boss) on day 2, when we had completed a substantial amount of work on day 1. Both of us - the deputy and I were caught off-guard. I should have insisted on meeting the boss before starting the design of the workshop and taken him through the process. I remember, in another case we had waited for six months to get time from the ultimate decision maker and it paid off. I should have done that here too.”

“What happened in the second case?”

“Well here we were looking for some break-through



ideas. I was talking to the decision maker. I had suggested that if he wanted truly fresh ideas we should have some fresh minds. He explained that the team itself was new and there is unlikely to be any baggage. Both of us - he and I - assumed that to be true. Most of the team members had been in place for nearly a year and had formed their own ideas. They were more keen on making presentations rather than having the patience to go through the process of generating new ideas. Had I understood this I would have simply changed the agenda and had them present first and then started the idea generation. I did not even know they had come prepared with presentations! That was in response to an internal memo inviting them to the workshop. I had in many cases helped clients with the invitation draft. Here I had not done that. ”



The most important thing is that I should not skip any of my prudent practices while planning. It is just that I tend to get carried away some times.

“What are your lessons? What will you do differently in the future?”

“The lesson is simple. Validate my assumptions, listen to



my instincts. The most important thing is that I should not skip any of my prudent practices while planning. It is just that I tend to get carried away some times.”

“That is an honest answer.”

“Thank you.”

“Don't feel so bad. All is not lost. Tell me about that workshop which was a huge success.”

“Are you referring to the Voices Within - Business Creativity Workshop?”

“Yes.”

“On this one I can't stop. It is a long and exciting story.”

“Okay. Then keep that for the next one. I got to go. I am glad you are back. Don't just vanish without a trace.”

“Yes, Sir!”

“And congratulations on becoming a grandfather! I hope your grandson kicks you back to shape.”



Procrastination is the thief of 6 months

My last post was in October 2007. And I am now in February 2008. What did I do for the last 5 months?

Did I not have ideas? Did I run dry? Was I too busy? What is the reason that I did not get to writing my blog, in spite of regular reminders from Hasslebot (an automatic call reminder) which said

“Do not forget to write your blog.”.

My friend Prasna, finally gave up in exasperation yesterday. For once he did not ask a question. He simply said “You can take a horse to the water, but what do you do if you discovered it was actually a mule!”



You can take a horse to the water, but what do you do if you discovered it was actually a mule!

That comment has spurred me on to write this piece. A good friend giving up on you, is like you giving up on yourself.

Even as I am writing this I remember the recent book I have started reading. It is called “The Power of Now”. I realised how much time I have lost thinking about the past and thinking about the future. Procrastination in a



way is a great act of optimism! That tomorrow will still be there for us to complete our unfinished agenda.

In the last couple of days, I have been watching that restless monkey, I call my mind. It is so difficult to make it stay in a place or remain focused on something. I have been trying something which seems to work. Every time the monkey tried to jump on to the past or the future I said 'Here do this' and gave it a task in the present. It could simply be counting my breath or the number of steps I climb. Or figure out the exact aroma coming from the kitchen.

This focus on the present is fascinating.

There were times at the

dining table when my hand and mouth were engaged in eating and my monkey was in a client meeting, a workshop or in a fight I had with my friend several years ago. Today I am finding that every time the monkey strays I gently coax him to get back. Sometimes I give him a long rope but I know I will bring him back.

What has this got to do with procrastination, you might ask? And rightly so too. I find that accepting the present



I find that accepting the present and acting on it is a great remedy to reign in the monkey.

and acting on it is a great remedy to reign in the monkey. If the monkey stayed with me in the present and I controlled it then I am not lost.

Today I told the monkey “I am writing this blog and you can't stop me. You know what ?I plan to write about you too. I am going to hold you responsible for stealing those five months.”

“Very clever. But then who let the monkey take charge?”

You guessed it. It was good old Prasna.

“Prasna, you are right. I am not absolving myself. The fact is I did not realise that I was in the clutches of this monkey and he was ruling me!”

“Good. Are you back in action then?”

“Yes.”



One great joke and an idea

Bahadurjee Merwanjee is a Parsi Bawaji.

Like every other parsi, Bahadurjee Merwanjee was bragging to his boss Mr Ayer one day,

'You know, I know everyone there is to know. Just name someone... anyone, and I know them.'

Tired of his boasting, his boss Mr Ayer called his bluff, 'OK, Bahadurjee, how about Tom Cruise?'



You know, I know everyone there is to know. Just name someone... anyone, and I know them.'

'Sure, yes, Tom and I are old friends, and I can prove it.'

So Bahadurjee Merwanjee and his boss Mr Ayer fly out to Hollywood and knock on Tom Cruise's door.

Sure enough, Tom Cruise shouts, 'Bahadurjee Bawa!

Great to see you! You and your friend come right in and join me for lunch!'

Although impressed, Bahadurjee's boss Mr Ayer is still skeptical.

After they leave Cruise's house, he tells Bahadurjee Merwanjee that he thinks Bahadurjee's knowing Cruise was just lucky.

'No, no, just name anyone else', Bahadurjee says.

'President Clinton,' his boss Mr Ayer quickly retorts.

'Yes,' Bahadurjee Merwanjee says, 'I know him, let's fly out to Washington.'



And off they go. At the White House, Clinton spots Bahadurjee Merwanjee on the tour and motions him and his boss over, saying, 'Bahadurjee Bawaji... WHAT A SURPRISE!! I was just on my way to a meeting, but you and your friend come on in and let's have a cup of coffee first and catch up.'

Well, the boss Mr Ayer is much shaken by now, but still not totally convinced.

After they leave the White House grounds, he expresses his doubts to Bahadurjee Merwanjee who again implores him to name anyone else.

'THE POPE,' his boss replies.

'Sure!' says Bahadurjee 'I have a lot of friends in the Vatican, and I've known the Pope for a long time.'

So off they fly to Rome .

Bahadurjee Merwanjee and his boss Mr Ayer are assembled with the masses in Vatican Square when Bahadurjee says, 'This will never work. I can't catch the Pope's eye among all these people. Tell you what... I know all the guards, so let me just go upstairs and I'll come out on the balcony with the Pope.'

So he disappears into the crowd, headed toward the Vatican. Sure enough, half an hour later Bahadurjee Merwanjee emerges with the Pope on the balcony.

But by the time Bahadurjee returns, he finds that his boss Mr Ayer has had a heart attack and is surrounded



by paramedics.

Working his way to his boss Mr Ayer's side, Bahadurjee Merwanjee asks him, 'What happened?'

His boss Mr Ayer looks up and says, 'I was doing fine until you and the Pope came out on the balcony and the man next to me said 'Hey ! Who's that on the balcony with Bahadurjee?'

That is great joke alright, but what is the idea? The idea is simply this - unhinge yourself from other people's expectations and mental patterns. That is the idea.

“Give people what they want but never in a manner they expect.”



“ Give people what they want but never in a manner they expect.”

“That is powerful. Is that an original thought from you?”

“No Prasna, that is from a famous hollywood scriptwiter.”



How to take a walk

I am just back after my walk.

It was still dark when I started this morning. As I turned right, the street lights went off. That made me alert. As I started looking at things keenly, my hearing too sharpened.

I noticed several new things. First is the chirping of birds. It seemed as if the crows were having a great party. It could have been hundreds of crows. As I started listening to them carefully, I started picking up sounds of other birds too. I started identifying the sounds and to my surprise I realised that there were at least 5 different

sounds other than the predominant crowing. I do not know anything about birds, so I could not



**First is the chirping of birds.
It seemed as if the crows were
having a great party.**

match the sounds with the names of the birds. There were other sounds too that caught my attention.

Buses and trucks plying on the main road. I could make out the doppler effect. Some of them were obviously speeding and were using the horn incessantly. Irritating.

Then I heard the sound of overflowing water from the

overhead tank in some one's house. As I walked further I heard the sound of an aircraft in the sky. It was probably waiting for a clearance to land - I saw the same aircraft three times hovering around.

As I walked past several houses in the colony I noticed some windows were open. I could see large TV screens. I could notice a religious channel, a sports channel, a news channel and a movie channel - as early as 6:30 am. In one house a young kid was studying and I could see an animated discussion between the tutor and the student. The colony streets began to get busy with newspaper vendors, milkmen, and young kids washing cars.

I have simply described my walk. What does this have to do with 'How to take a walk'?



**Keep all your senses active
Pay attention to what
you see, hear, smell
and experience.**

I think I discovered so many things during my walk today; things that were always there but I was blind to them. Usually my morning walks were lost in various thoughts jumping from one to another. Very often I came back with lots of ideas on things to do. It was as if I was thinking, and incidentally taking a walk.



This is the first time I reversed the order. It was truly enjoyable. So if you take a walk, then take time to enjoy it. Savour every bit of it, every step. Keep all your senses active. Pay attention to what you see, hear, smell and experience.



It is so invigorating; not only do you wake up fully, you feel so alive.

It is so invigorating; not only do you wake up fully, you feel so alive. And ready for the day.



Want fresh ideas? Look in your waste paper basket first

I was in a client workshop day before yesterday. When we re-assembled after lunch my client showed a short clip of a nice cat. The cat was cute. Just as we watched and wondered what it was going to do, the cat began to doze off and its head drooped!

And the client said 'Well, our cameras are catching live shots of the audience and we will get to see who is giving company to the cat.' I thought that was really neat. Every one wanted a copy of the clip from him. There were many who wanted to know where he got the clip from. Some wanted to know how he linked the idea to the post-lunch-dozing-syndrome!

This is often the reaction when you share a good idea. People want to know: Where did you get this idea from? Some want to know how?



People want to know: Where did you get the idea from? How did you get them?

Inherent in the question 'from where did you get the idea?' is the assumption that there is some place where there are millions of ready to use ideas and you can just go and pick up what you want. Unfortunately it is not so.



What is true however is that there are millions of things - words, anecdotes, images, etc stored in your mind. You just have to try connecting what you know to the issue on hand. There is another way too. You can start looking around you for inspiration. A connection might just occur between

what you see, what is stored in your mind and the issue you have on hand.



there are millions of things - words, anecdotes, images, etc stored in your mind. You just have to try connecting what you know to the issue on hand.

Where do you look, is the question.

1. Try the internet. That's a great source today. Put a search string using the key words from your issue. Some times you can type a full question. I am amazed at the kind of material I get.

2. Try Amazon.com. I find going through book titles is very inspiring. I often read the contents page and some text from the book, if it is available. Otherwise I read reviews by other readers. This opens up my mind.



3. I talk to a few friends, my daughter and my wife. I pose the issue in a generic way and I often get very useful practical ideas. Most importantly I get insights which are true gems.

4. I browse through biographies of inventors, scientists, artists, politicians and great business leaders. Great source of inspiration.



What is important is to have your own access points which simply say 'when you are looking for ideas, try me'.

I can keep adding to the list, but that is not the point. What is important is to have your own access points which simply says 'when you are looking for ideas, try me'. Each person must put together what works for him or her. What works for me may not work for you.

Please recognise though, that most ideas hang around under your own nose or behind your ears. Places that we obviously overlook! So look at ideas that you might have thought of, ideas that were suggested by others - things that you summarily rejected. Reason: Childish, foolish, stupid, risky, outrageous, expensive, etc. In short look in



your waste paper basket first.

Why the waste paper basket? Because that is where you will find all your rejected ideas. People reject ideas because they 'think' the ideas are childish, foolish, impractical and so on.

There will be many ideas that could be new and because they are new might

scare you! Those are possibly fresh ideas that could be developed well. That is why the waste paper basket is a good source for fresh ideas.



Most ideas hang around under your own nose or behind your ears.

While you are at it you can also ask people for ideas from their waste paper basket. They will happily give them to you. If you want more insights, ask them why they rejected them. Their reasons will give you what you will be up against if you have to make the idea work. A great way to get fresh ideas with some home work too!



“Ratan Tata is an unreasonable man”

I must confess that I do not know Mr. Ratan Tata , and I have no basis for making such an audacious statement. In fact, from all that I have read about him and his interviews I have seen on TV, he comes across as a rather self-effacing, quiet gentleman. How then do I make such a bold statement, you might ask.

I quote George Bernard Shaw in my defense. He said “Results are achieved by unreasonable men.”



“Results are achieved by unreasonable men.”

I read this quote a long time ago. I did not agree with it, when I read it the first time.”Why? You were a pretty unreasonable guy yourself.” said Prasna*
“Yes, Prasna. You are right. But I came to realise that I was not unreasonable but the demands I made were unreasonable.”

“What is the difference?”

“I could simply be difficult and therefore unreasonable. On the other hand, I could be a reasonable man but make unreasonable demands. Such as asking for things much faster than any one else. My unreasonable demands could make a significant difference to overall performance.”

“Give me an example”

“I used to have a secretary called Rajani Ganesh. These were days before every one had a computer on their desk. I had a number of books and documents in my office. I was always in a hurry and my 'unreasonable' demand was that whatever book or document I wanted she should retrieve it in less than 5 minutes.”

“Did she do it?”



**I was the pain
in the system.**

“Of course she did. Brilliantly. She developed a library system of her own and made sure that she would retrieve what I wanted in less than 5 minutes. She had one condition though.”

“What was that?”

“She insisted that she will handle all the stuff herself. I was not allowed to take out anything or hand over anything to any one.”

“Why?”

“Because she realised that I was the biggest culprit. I used to take out some document and never keep it back in its original place. Give a colleague a book but did not remember who I gave it to. I was the pain in the system.”

“She had the guts to tell you that?”



“Yes, she had. And I listened. So it worked.”

“Giving yourself a pat on the back, eh?”



Every one thought it was a stunt, it was impossible and so on. That is the reaction you get to such unreasonable goals.

“Not really. Let me come back to Mr.

Ratan Tata. I think the launch of the Tata Nano car proves my point that Mr Tata is an unreasonable man - as defined by Bernard Shaw.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Just think about it. You want a 4 door car, spacious enough to carry 4 passengers, safe, meeting all the emission standards in Rs 1.0 lakh. Every one thought it was a stunt, it was impossible and so on. That is the reaction you get to such unreasonable goals. Like the now famous 'phone call at the cost of a post card vision' of Dhirubhai Ambani. People laughed then but today it is Reliance that changed the whole industry in this country.”

“So what is your point?”

“My first point is that all things of significant progress



happens when one man makes an unreasonable demand, fully knowing that there are no known ways of meeting his demand. My second point is that all of us must look for some unreasonable goals to chase, be passionate about it and make it happen.”

“Why should all of us do it?”

“OK not all of us, but those of us who are ambitious. Ambitious enough to make a mark on any field.”

“Be specific.

Otherwise your statement would be a classic motherhood statement. Every one would agree but no one would do anything about it.”



Especially the Swiss - the watch makers to the world- laughed and ridiculed the idea but Titan went ahead and did it.

“I was at an Innovation Awards function the other day. One of the winners was Titan Watches. They made the slimmest wrist watch in the world. Every one, especially the Swiss - the watch makers to the world- laughed and ridiculed the idea, but Titan went ahead and did it. It was an incredible feat. They have left an indelible mark on the watch industry. That is what I mean.”

“So what do you want people to do?”



“This is what I would like people to do. Ask 'what is the one thing I want to achieve really badly, which no one in the world has ever done? Something that will make every one say 'you are mad. This is impossible. It cannot be done.' Write that down. More importantly make the goal public. And go after it.”

“Are you going to practise what you preach?”

“Why not?”

* Prasna Rao is my invisible friend who appears from nowhere at unexpected times and keeps asking uncomfortable questions. Especially when I sit down to write my blog.



“One man's bug, is another man's business”

We were working with a group of housewives. The task was to arrive at a new value proposition for a kitchen equipment. We were listening to the housewives talking about their dream kitchen.

As we were coming close to the session I asked “Tell me, what bugs you most about your kitchen?” I might as well have opened the flood gates in a dam. Every body had something to say. We could also feel the intensity of their feelings. Later when we analysed the output from the session we found that the 'bug list' exercise had produced the most valuable insights. Which also led to several new product and service ideas. “One man's bug is another man's business” I quipped in jest.



Tell me, what bugs you most about your tooth brush?

In another brainstorming session the following week, I tried the 'bug list' technique. Here again it yielded excellent results. Since then I have tried it in several workshops. It always yields excellent results.

Let us assume you are designing a toothbrush. Then all you need to ask is “Tell me, what bugs you most about your tooth brush.” It could be anything. A product, a



service or a process. With a bug list in your hand you can improve almost anything.

My wife and I tried this during our daughter's wedding four years ago. We were planning for the wedding and were keen to have a wedding where every body had a good time. In a moment

of inspiration I asked
“What bugs people most
about typical South
Indian weddings?” We



**“What bugs people most
about typical South Indian
weddings?”**

generated a decent list. We then sent a mail to some of our closest friends who in turn helped in adding to the list. The list changed the way we were looking at organising the wedding. Even the smallest details were brought to our notice thanks to the list. Here is an example. The wedding was in June. Because of the rains the approach to the washrooms was generally wet and posed a big risk to the elderly. Our contractor had two people there wiping the floor every 10 minutes and keeping it dry.

I often think of examples like Sony Walkman. It must have bugged some body that he has to be glued to a place to listen to music. “Why can't I listen to music on the



go?” must have been his question. In a new product development session we looked at what pained consumers most. In developing a conference product for a hotel chain we asked 'conference organisers and travel managers' - “What bugs you most about organising conferences?” At another level we asked “What bugs you most about organising conferences at 5 star hotels?” Both yielded great results. We came out with several ideas to introduce a completely new offering.

I often wonder about this. If every businessman 'actually listened' (as opposed to just reading customer satisfaction reports) to what bugs his customers most, he might unearth a goldmine. Imagine if a business were to design a separate room called “The Bug Room”. The room must be equipped with a one-way-mirror facility.

Every month 20 customers are brought in and they talk about what bugs them most about the company's product and services. Senior managers from all the functions, listen in from the other side of the one-way-mirror. The mandate: they must produce enough ideas in the



Imagine if a business were to design a separate room called “The Bug Room”.



following hour to 'remove the bugs through improvement or a completely new product'. If this is part of the CEO agenda then “The Bug Room” can become the key differentiating factor for the company. The difference would lie in how intelligently we listen to the bugs, interpret the pain areas and identify opportunities with speed.

Then one man's bug, could really become another man's business.



How to deal with a dumb idea

As part of our Creative Block Busting programme, we spend time talking about how to look at new ideas. We emphasise that there are only plus points and practical implementation concerns to an idea. There is nothing called a dumb idea.

Of course, no one was willing to accept this. In fact, managers felt that soft-peddling the issue of 'dumb ideas' would bring down their company's quality standards. There is nothing like calling a spade a spade.

Most often, the idea may not be dumb but the person with



We tend to throw the baby with the bathwater. We end up confusing form with content.

the idea does not communicate it well. The idea itself could have promise. We tend to throw the baby with the bathwater. We end up confusing form with content. We could also dismiss an idea as 'dumb' just because we have not thought about it or we had never thought of it that way before or we have not understood it.

Let us assume that a young colleague approaches you with an idea. Frankly, you think it is dumb! How should you handle the situation?



Scenario 1 “How could you think of something so dumb? Frankly I expected a lot more from you.”

Honest and forthright. No 'Yes, but' diplomacy. No dancing around. You convey your views without any frills or fuss.

Does this guarantee that your young employee will



There will be an unintended outcome too. His colleagues will get a message that you do not tolerate vague or stupid ideas.

come back with a better idea? Chances are he will never come back with another idea to you.

There will be an unintended outcome too. His colleagues will get a message that you do not tolerate vague or stupid ideas. Therefore, no body will waste your time.

Is that good? Not really. This will ensure that no body will ever discuss 'possibilities' with you any more. They will constantly spend time second-guessing how you will respond.

Scenario 2 “Frankly I have never thought of it this way before. Therefore, I am very uncomfortable about it. I do not wish to take a risk with any thing like this.”



Again honest and forthright. Shifts the onus to the self rather than blaming the other person for bringing up a dumb idea.

Here your message to the person and every one else is that you are not averse to receiving new ideas but are not comfortable about such ideas. Therefore, you may not act on them.

This will not put off your people. They may occasionally come back to you if they think you will be comfortable with the idea.

Scenario 3

“I don't know how to react because I have never thought about it this way.

Tell me more.

How will this benefit our company for instance?”



You are willing to listen even if the idea made you uncomfortable. You do not dismiss an idea just because you do not understand it.

“This will improve our image.”

“Is it? How do you think it will happen?”

“This is my gut feel.”

“Ok. What else is the plus point of your idea?”

“I have to think in detail about that.”



“I will tell you what. I think you might have an interesting idea, even if I do not understand it. Can you spend some time thinking about the various benefits and advantages of this idea? How will it benefit our customers? How will it help us? In what way will it help us fight competition? Suppose we implemented this, how will media react? How much time would you need to think about all this? When can we meet on this?”

This will stretch the employee to think hard and look at different



This will stretch the employee to think hard and look at different angles. It might help him improve the idea and articulate it better.

angles. It might

help him improve the idea and articulate it better. He will learn more about how to discuss an idea in a more productive manner.

Chances are next time around he will come prepared. The idea may not sound dumb any more.

The good news about this approach is that it may not take very much time. The conversation described above may take no more than 5 minutes.

In the process, you have sent a strong message about your approach to new ideas. You are willing to listen even if the idea made you uncomfortable. You do not dismiss an idea just because you do not understand it.

You are even willing to take time to understand the idea



better by asking some sharp questions. You show commitment by willing to spend more time. You give clear directions in terms of what you might be looking for in any idea.

In your own non-threatening way, you help this person learn.

Why bosses find it difficult to react this way

1. Pressure on time
2. Too many irons in the fire
3. Fighting Fire all the time
4. Unwillingness to make commitment
5. Impatience, low tolerance, can't suffer fools
6. Inability to deal with ambiguity
7. Personal style that demands total clarity and water-tight logic all the time
8. Poor opinion about the individual who suggests the idea
9. Inadequate resources for experimentation
10. This not a burning issue right now



You show commitment by willing to spend more time.

Next time one of your colleagues or employees approaches you with an 'apparently dumb idea' try a different approach. And see if it makes a difference



“When you are big, the trick is to think small and act fast.” - Shiv Shivkumar, MD, Nokia, India

Shiv is a good friend. I have known him for more than a decade. I have admired his thinking, his clarity, his way with people. He is a good speaker, and excellent mentor and teacher. He is passionate about growing his people.

I received an assignment from a client in Delhi and learnt that Shiv was going to talk to these managers in the morning. I made sure that I was there to hear him speak. I am so glad I did, because his speech inspired me as much as it inspired the young managers in the room.

I am sharing with you some points from my notes. It was a quintessential

Shiv, - warm, forthright, sincere and absolutely clear. He was talking about



“Sustainable growth comes from the floor, not the ceiling. Raise the floor, not the ceiling.”

Growth. He had a few questions to the managers. What is growth? What is the alternative to growth? What does growth do? Why do growth companies stall? Why are people scarred of growth? What is good growth and bad growth? How do you measure growth? What will you do to grow yourself? What will you do to grow the business?



Here are a few gems that provoked my thinking.
“Sustainable growth comes from the floor, not the ceiling.
Raise the floor, not the ceiling.”

“Humility when you are a leader is a great quality to have.”

On market share “Extend the lead over competition, don't just maintain the lead.”

“You must be paranoid about your growth engine. You never know when it can stop.”

“Coca-cola grew because they looked at the 'share of throat' when they defined the market.

They looked beyond other colas. They thought beyond the bottle.”

“You must be paranoid about your market share, especially when you are the leader.”

“Growth is about people, not just numbers.”

“People are scared of growth, because they cannot visualise the impact of growth. They fear the unknown.”



**Do not be a cynic.
Cynics do not
achieve anything.**



“Think about logic and magic. Logic closes doors - magic opens them.”

“Do not be a cynic. Cynics do not achieve anything. No body wants to work for a cynic. Have you ever heard anyone say 'I want to work for Mr. X. He is a great cynic.’”

“Move with successful people, people with the right attitude.

Observe and learn the way they tackle tough situations and tough people. ”



“Sink in money into people and brands.

They are transferable assets - unlike plant and machinery.”

“Sink in money into people and brands. They are transferable assets - unlike plant and machinery.”

“Life is about being able to contribute positively. ”

His talk was full of examples, stories, anecdotes, little exercises that he asked the managers to work on. Not one dull moment. He was spontaneous.

Here is an example. Talking about Nokia, he asked “How old do you think the Nokia organisation is? Any one who comes closest gets a Nokia cellphone.” (No one got it right. Nokia is 145 years old!)



The question answer session was brilliant. Shiv handled the questions with aplomb. The answers were simple, direct and sincere. The effort was to help improve the understanding of the person who asked the question. It was not to demonstrate Shiv's superior knowledge or vast experience.

When you hear a great speech two things happen. We could say “What a great speech!” and give the speaker a standing ovation. That is the reaction most speeches and speakers get. The other reaction could be “Let us do something about it.” My belief is that several of the managers would act on many of the tips that Shiv so generously shared.

So what am I going to do? Just write this blog and feel smug about it?

Or is there

something else I would do? I run a workshop called “Mission Impossible”. It is about business growth and helps companies with stagnant businesses/brands to rejuvenate the business /brands. There is so much more I can do with that workshop and really help my clients get great growth ideas.



This is what a teachable point of view is all about. It makes you wonder, contemplate and act.



As Shiv was leaving I said “I loved your point about 'raising the floor for sustainable growth.' I have never seen it that way.”

Shiv smiled and said “Sridhar. This is what a teachable point of view is all about. It makes you wonder, contemplate and act.”



“Failure is a speed-breaker. It may slow you down, but can never stop you

Fear of failure (FEFA) is an old friend. I have known him for several years now. We do not meet too often these days though. I must say however, that when he shows up he still makes me a trifle uncomfortable

FEFA is a bit of a bully. I remember he had me in his complete grips one time. It was soon after my BSc examinations. The morning after my last exams I was sitting at home reading a newspaper. My father was getting ready to leave for office.

“How were the exams? How have you done?”

I was stunned by my own candor. I did not know how I got the courage to tell him that.

“I am not sure.”

“What do you mean you are not sure? You are not sure if you will get a first or a second class?”

“No”

“Then?”

“I am not sure if I will pass or fail.”

“What?”

I was stunned by my own candour. I did not know how I got the courage to tell him that.

“Assume that you will pass. Would you want to study further or go for a job.”

“I guess I will go for a job.”



Do not allow fear of failure to stop you from thinking and acting.

“Then I suggest you just get off that sofa and start looking for a job from today.”

“Who will give me a job before my results?”

“I am not sure about that. But then getting a job after your results are known will be even more difficult. So you have to beat the results and get yourself a job before the results are announced.”

He said “Look, you cannot do anything about your results. We will tackle it when it comes. But you can outsmart your results. Get any job. Salary does not matter. What matters is that you learn from your work. Get your confidence back. Do not allow fear of failure to stop you from thinking and acting.”



FEFA whispered in my ears “So you now want guys slamming their doors on your face? Will any body in his right mind give a BSc-Fail a job?”

I saw my father standing next to me with his hand on my shoulder. “Get up son. You will be OK, just act now.”

I got a job in the next two weeks with a management consultant called The Systems. Mr Arvind Gordhandas, the principal consultant, hired me after hearing my full story. I remember he had a twinkle in his eye when I told him that I might fail.

Once I got my letter, I went to my father's office to tell him



He treated my little success as if I had got an IAS posting!

that I got a job. He said “Let us go for lunch.” He took me to The Taj Mahal Hotel for the buffet. That was the first time I had seen anything so grand. He treated my little success as if I had got an IAS posting!

I used to assist Mr. G in his documentation work. He used to ask me to sit in, when he was interviewing people for recruitment on behalf of his clients. My job was to observe what happened in the interview and tell him my views about the candidate! It was fun observing the

people but it was quite tough sharing my observations with Mr G. His probing questions made me think and realise how I was making assumptions and forming opinions. He used to say “Separate Facts, Feelings & Opinions.”

Mr. G made sure that I worked hard and had no time for FEFA. Days



**“Separate Facts,
Feelings & Opinions.”**

were long and I often reached home after ten. I had just enough time to eat and go to sleep. FEFA was just waiting to get me and he got an opportunity the day before my exam results. He was taunting me. He said I had no future. He told me that once the results were announced Mr. G would throw me out. He really tormented me and shattered my confidence.

Next day the results were announced. As expected, I got a miserable third class. It would have been better to fail; I could have studied and done better in September. When I went to work that morning, Mr. G was already in. “What happened?”

“I got a third class as I expected.”



“So your assessment is correct. So why are you looking like Devdas?”

“But I got a third class.”

“So what?”

“I will be stuck with that for the rest of my life.”

“So what?”

“That's the end of everything.”

“Says who?”

“Everybody”

“Did any one say that you today?”

“No.”

“Who is likely to say that to you? Give me the names of a few people. Friends, relatives, professors?”

“Can not think of any.”

“So it is all your imagination. Let me tell you something. You are a first rate person who happened to get a third class. That is what matters. Don't get confused between the two things. Treat failure as a speed-breaker; it may slow you down but can never stop you. Just get on with your life.”

He summarily dismissed FEFA and I was free for several years. (But FEFA used to haunt me in my dreams for a long time. I used to dream that I was in an examination hall. Every one gets their question papers and answer



sheets. While others write furiously I am staring at the paper, frozen by fear. I am blank and I do not know anything.)

Though a victim of FEFA I have myself been guilty of unleashing FEFA on some of my colleagues. I remember one particular instance. I had come back from a particularly

bad client meeting, walked straight into the creative department,

and demanded to know who had worked on the rejected work. Obviously no body spoke up.

Later one of the creative people used an expression I can never forget “Fear stalks the corridor”. It took me a while to understand that demanding great creative standards is not about creating an 'or else' climate.

FEFA is most active in situations when people are talking about new ideas. In one of my client companies they have mastered a technique that shuts him up. It is based upon the principle of 'confronting consequences'. Here is how it works.

1. List out all the fears that we have of all the things that can fail, if the new idea were to be executed.
2. List out all the reasons why each of the failures can occur



It took me a while to understand that demanding great creative standards is not about creating an 'or else' climate.

3. Seek out the help of experts to advise on how to fix the problems
4. Weigh the risks of not being able to solve all the issues and go with the idea

This is similar to what we practised in the direct response business. We used to list out all the things that can go wrong in a

mailer, as a result of which we do not get the required responses. This worked brilliantly

because we anticipated many problems and fixed them.



“Understand that you are not afraid of failure but its (assumed) consequences. Confront those consequences and the matter solves itself.”

Finally I remember what a Swamiji, a practising philosopher and vedantin told me. “Understand that you are not afraid of failure but its (assumed) consequences. Confront those consequences and the matter solves itself.”



“What do you do?”

“Good morning!”

I heard the familiar voice and I knew it was Prasna Rao.

“Morning Prasna. Where were you all these days?”

“Remember, I am the one who asks questions.”

“Ok, please ask your question then.”

“Remember the Ogilvy party you attended last month?”

“Yes, it was nice.”

“Remember you met several old friends and a few who you did not know?”

“I do.”

“They asked you a simple question and you failed miserably in answering it.”

“Really?”

“Yes, the question was: 'What do you do?' I am going to ask you that question now. So, what do you do?”

“I am a consultant.”

“That describes you are, but it does not answer the question. So, what do you do?”

“I am an Innovation Coach.”



“That sounds very fancy, but what do you do?”

“I am in the Corporate Creativity and Innovation Domain.”

“Pompous but useless. What do you do Sridhar?”

“I run IDEAS-RS, a professional consulting firm.”

“Says nothing. What do you do?”

“Prasna, do you have to take yourself so seriously?”

“Yes, especially when you sound so bad. Let me explain.

When people ask you the question 'What do you do', you can convert



When people ask you the question 'What do you do', you can convert that into an excellent conversation starter or make it a dead end.

that into an excellent conversation starter or make it a dead end. All your answers so far are dead end answers. So let us try again. What do you do?”

“I am stuck. Help me Prasna. How do I tackle this?”

“Ok. Try filling the blanks in these three sentences:



'I'm a _____ (descriptor/designation/profession).

I help ____ (people/clients) who want to _____ (benefit)

'I work with ____ (people/clients) who want to (benefit)

'I'm like a _____ (descriptor/metaphor). I specialise in helping _____ (people/clients) _____ (benefits)'

“You think this will work?”

“Why don't you try first?”

“I'm an Innovation Coach. I help my clients who want to get out of habitual thinking and open their minds to fresh new ideas.”

“Can you make it tighter. Say it aloud. Shorten the second half of your answer.”

'I'm an Innovation Coach. I help clients who want to get rid of mental blocks.’

“Sounds better. Let us try the other two. What do you do?”

“I work with clients who want to get new ideas for business growth.”

“I work with clients who want to develop new product ideas.”

“I work with ambitious clients who want to achieve impossible goals.”

“You are getting it Sridhar. Let us try the last one now. *What do you do?*”

“I'm like a plumber. I specialise in helping clients remove



their mental blocks and facilitate a continuous flow of fresh ideas.”

“I'm like a mental lubricant. I specialise in helping clients overcome their barriers to new ideas”

“I'm like a coach. I specialise in helping clients win in the innovation game.”

I'm like a mental broom. I specialise in helping managers remove the cobwebs in their thinking.”

“You are getting better. Do you know why I asked you to do this?”

“No. Why did you ask me to do this?”

“Because you were missing opportunities to share with people some of the interesting things you do.”

“But how will these answers help?”

“In 90% of the cases it will lead the other person to ask 'How do you do that?' and opens the door for a dialogue. Unless of course you make that answer pompous and boring. and create a new dead end.”

“Why did you do this? I thought you only asked questions.”

“Even today that is what I did. In addition I oiled your thinking with those tips. They helped remove the rust!”

“Oh! you are being so kind!”

“One last question. What will you do differently now?”

” I pass.”



**I'm like a mental broom.
I specialise in helping managers
remove the cobwebs in
their thinking.**



Raise both your hands

It was a workshop held by IDEO for the winners of an innovation award called Purpose - an award for social innovators over the age of 60.

The facilitator was closing the session and said “I have time for one last question.”

Several hands went up.
One man had raised
both his hands!



**'Raising both hands'
is not just about
being smart or clever**

The facilitator selected him and answered his question.

When I heard the story I was amused and laughed heartily. However, when I narrated the story later in one of my workshops, I saw new meaning in it.

'Raising both hands' is not just about being smart or clever. As I see it, it is about the art of creating a difference with the resources you have but seldom use.

I see 'Raising both hands' becoming a powerful idea for differentiation during these turbulent times. The trick is to look for resources within your command and use them smartly.



In our workshops we often use a technique called 'Leveraging your tangible & intangible assets.' It is a very simple technique. You prepare a master list of all your assets including

buildings,
factories,
brands, people,
knowledge,
expertise,

competencies, networks, relationships, customer base,
vendors etc.



I see 'Raising both hands' becoming a powerful idea for differentiation during these turbulent times.

The next step is to look at each item and ask yourself 'How can leverage this to make a difference?'

Here is an example of what happened in a client workshop. They had listed distribution as one one of their assets. We did not get too many ideas on that. During the tea break the marketing director mentioned to me “Our distribution strength in Uttar Pradesh is unbeatable. No one can match it.” When we got back up, I wrote this on the chart and we generated several ideas. One idea I still remember is to use the railway stations for mass sampling of one of the products.



To 'Raise both hands' you do not have to have a 2-day offsite workshop. You can do that effectively through e-mail or through your intranet site. Here is how you can do it.

First publish a list of tangible and intangible assets. Ask every one to

contribute to the

list. Once you have compiled your master list, post a challenge: “How can we create a difference in xyz?”

Every one must generate ideas leveraging the current tangible/intangible list. Visit the master list every month and add to the strengths, if some thing is missing. Make this a habit. Every time you are looking for ideas ask “Have you looked at our assets?”

Incidentally the man who raised both his hands at the IDEO workshop is Mr. R. Umashankar, an NRI living in the US. He is one of 1,200 nominees for the Purpose, an award for social innovators over the age of 60. After several rounds of interviews, he was selected as a winner and received the prize and a cash award of \$10,000. The



**Every time you are looking
for ideas ask
“Have you looked at our assets?”**

ceremonies were held at the Stanford Graduate School of Business followed by the workshop at IDEO. He runs ASSET India Foundation, a non-profit organisation founded by his daughter.

([Http://www.assetindiafoundation.org](http://www.assetindiafoundation.org))

ASSET (Achieving Sustainable Social Equality through Technology) India Foundation helps train the children of sex workers and girls rescued from trafficking, in technology, so they can escape the sex slave industry in India. ASSET India has successfully established training centers within several major cities within India.



ASSET sought the development of a solar-powered wireless router to reach small rural towns with limited electricity or available internet access

ASSET sought the development of a solar-powered wireless router through InnoCentive's network to enable them to reach small rural towns with limited electricity or available Internet access. GlobalGiving, a non-profit organization that connects donors with community based projects around the world, made the Rockefeller Foundation aware of ASSET India and worked with them to get the Challenge posted on InnoCentive.



InnoCentive, Inc., the global innovation marketplace, announced the winner of the Challenge posted by ASSET India Foundation seeking the design of a solar-powered wireless router. Zacary Brown of Texas was awarded \$20,000 for his design by the Rockefeller Foundation, which sponsored this Challenge.* The Challenge was posted to the InnoCentive's website for two months beginning November 28, 2008 and closed at the end of January 2009. Over 400 InnoCentive Solvers analyzed this Challenge, and 27 solutions were submitted.

* The Challenge sought the design of a solar-powered wireless router composed of low-cost, readily available hardware and software components. The router is to become part of a reliable Internet communications network connecting metropolises and remote towns in developing countries. ASSET India will own the Intellectual Property rights to the design.

* The Solver, Zacary Brown, is a software engineer who joined InnoCentive's Solver community in 2006 and has solved two Challenges to date.

* The solution runs on a Linux-based system and is powered totally by a battery that is charged through solar



panels. It was built with hardware that is able to withstand daily outdoor use and can be controlled remotely, allowing network operators to activate the switches with pre-paid cell phones.

* This solution will allow teenagers in small centers outside the big cities to handle



This solution will allow teenagers in small centers outside the big cities to handle some of the work that is coming from technology companies in the cities

some of the work that is coming from technology companies in the cities and gain the skills to achieve greater career opportunities in the future

* ASSET India works with children in India, ages 16 to 20, and provides educational training in English as well as computer literacy.

* The prototypes for the solar-powered wireless router will be built by engineering students at the University of Arizona this year as part of a year-long Senior Project for two undergraduate classes

Certainly an inspiring story for innovators.

Lesson 1: Do not shy away from asking for help.
(Innovation is not an I, me, mine game)

Lesson 2: Ask the right person for help, at the right time!



Handling tough times

“Are you asleep? Or simply enjoying the bliss of ignorance?”

“Good Morning Prasna*. Long time since you visited.”
(*Prasna Rao is my friend and well wisher. His way of showing his affection for me is to keep asking me questions, that make me feel uncomfortable. Our conversations often lead to some interesting ideas for me.)

“Looks like I need to visit you more often. You are getting into bad habits.”

“Now what have you done?”



“When was the last time you gave your client a business building idea?”

“When was the last time you gave your client a business building idea?”

“Well, may be a couple of weeks ago.”

“How do you spend time now?”

“Prasna, you are now sounding like my Dad!”

“No friend, I am telling you that times have changed and you have not changed. You are complacent.”

“That is a strong statement. Complacent! You are accusing me of being complacent!”

“Yes, I am. Look at your work. Times have become tougher. Your clients are facing trying times. And you continue to peddle the same old stuff.”

“How does that make me complacent?”

“Wake up
friend.
Practise what
you preach.
You used to



**Times have become tougher.
Your clients are facing trying times.
And you continue to peddle the
same old stuff.**

talk about 'different strokes for different folks'. Shouldn't there be different strokes for different times'?”

“So what do you suggest?”

“I suggest that you spend time thinking about your clients and their customers. In what way can you serve your clients?”

“I am sorry to say Prasna, but this is text book stuff. You just want to make me feel miserable.”



“What are most clients doing today?”

“They are tightening their belts. Cutting down travel. Avoiding 5 star hotels. Doing things themselves instead employing consultants and vendors.”

“Does that give you any idea?”

“Not really. Does that give **you** any idea?”

“It is about your clients, your business. Think, my friend.”



“**May be I can offer something where they do not have to travel.**”

“May be I can offer something where they do not have to travel.”

“What else?”

“May be they can pick each other's brains without leaving their seats.”

“What else?”

“May be I can deliver training where they are. They do not come to me, I reach them.”



“Now you are getting somewhere. Can you design a service using these ideas?”

“That is a tall order.”

“Can you create a new concept? Assume it is a matter of survival and you have no choice”

“That is vague. Put yourself in your clients' shoes. What would they like?”

“I can create something online, through the Internet.”

“That is vague. Put yourself in your clients' shoes. What would they like?”

“OK, let me try. What if I created a platform on the web, where I can facilitate workshops with a bunch of managers. The group size could be 10 to 15 at a time. It could be a cross functional team from the same organisation. The people could be from anywhere in the world. All of them are working on the same issue.”

“Go on.”

“We have the facility to speak as well as enter ideas like



in a chat session. Everybody gets to see the ideas and build on them.”

“Sounds good.”

“All the ideas are captured in one place. They will be useful for further development.”



“What is in it for your clients?”

“What is your business model?”

“What does that mean?”

“How will you make money?”

“Hmm. I could look at a subscription model where the fees are attractive. As opposed to that, a one-time session could cost more.”

“What is in it for your clients?”

“They save a lot of time, money and resources. In addition the sessions could be more productive through skilled facilitation. I could also support the client on idea development through the same platform, by working with



the implementation group. We can set up sessions faster. They could get the best brains in their company from around the world involved. It would be impossible to achieve this in regular meetings.”

“You are sounding like you are really convinced. But I see a lot of problems in this.”

“Tell me some.”

“You could have drop outs. You could have a



They could get the best brains in their company from around the world involved.

distracted manager, multi-tasking - attending to e-mail, eating, etc. You might have a few technically challenged people. Everybody may not participate equally well.”

“Which is the biggest issue?”

“Distraction, I think.”

“Then it is my business to make the session interesting and engaging. I must create an experience they enjoy. That becomes my job. That is what I have been doing all the time for the last nine years. In another one week I am entering my tenth year as IDEAS-RS”



“What are you going to do for your clients in your tenth year?”

“Give them a range of products and services that support them during these difficult times.”

“Makes sense.”

“Prasna, may I ask you a question now?”

“OK, just this time.”

“You still think I am complacent?”



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