



A conversation with Dr. Min Basadur

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GKVP: *In the design business, teams are unfortunately often 'thrown together' without any collaboration training or preparation. Obviously that is not something you would recommend.*

Dr. Min Basadur: *To work effectively, team members need group skills training before they begin. There may be a learning curve in the beginning but the process is designed to be simple and the impact of mastering such skills is significant. We have an equation that we use to underline the need for both process and process skills:*

QUALITY RESULTS = CONTENT (knowledge) + PROCESS (how) + PROCESS SKILLS (training).

For more information please contact us!

Marg Forrest
*Director, Office of Dr. Min Basadur
Basadur Applied Creativity*

*mforrest@basadur.com
1888-88-SOLVE*



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*A conversation with Dr. Min Basadur
by G.K. VanPatter*

Dr. Min Basadur
*Founder: Basadur Applied Creativity
Professor of Innovation, MBA Program, School of Business, McMaster University
www.minbasadur.com - email: min@basadur.com*

by G.K. VanPatter
*Co-Founder, NextDesign Leadership Institute, New York
http://www.nextd.org - email: gvanpatter@nextd.org*

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GKVP: As part of this Exploring Innovation Leadership series we thought you would be an ideal person to connect with regarding the very real challenges of building multi disciplinary innovation capabilities within organizations. To begin, can you tell us from which direction and discipline did you initially approach this field?

Dr. Min Basadur: I did my doctorate in Organizational Behavior at the University of Cincinnati's School Of Business Administration but I began my problem solving work in the Research & Development Department at Procter & Gamble where I worked for 20 years, first as a product development engineer and later as an innovation process facilitator.

It was in the course of working with multi-functional internal teams developing new consumer products that I began to look more closely at problem solving processes as well as innovation in general. Procter & Gamble was perhaps my greatest learning institution, my greatest school, where I learned how to identify what I would call inadequacies in thinking among all of us - people on teams, in organizations as a whole, and in individuals which could be improved by learning thinking and process skills.

My undergraduate education had been in engineering physics but I was happy to be given the task, shortly after arriving at Procter & Gamble, of concentrating on developing new creative innovation processes that could be utilized by individuals as well as groups. It was a wonderful opportunity for me.

The multi-disciplinary environment of Procter & Gamble became my experimental laboratory and I began to weave what I was learning into my product development work, keeping notes of every application. I noted what processes and structures worked with the R&D community, what worked with the marketing group, etc. Bit by bit I talked others into using the concepts that I was learning and developing. Over a period of years, from that very practical research & development beginning, emerged the design of the methods and tools that we now use in our consulting practice: Basadur Applied Creativity. Today this applied creativity system is being used by many progressive corporations around the world to help address internal issues and improve external services, products, etc.

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The divergent process is not allowed to flower and the convergence process is poor because there is nothing to converge on. Often people think they are actually doing someone a favor by cutting them off or explaining to them why their fledgling idea is not a good one. They think they are saving time but they are not because the group is not going anywhere. They are not developing the divergent ideas strongly enough. We stress the importance of synchronizing divergent and convergent thought throughout the problem solving process and the trigger is the principle of deferred judgment which permits the separation of the two. These are very important skills in successful teamwork yet it is not uncommon to find them missing in meetings and in organizations. Without such skills, meetings and teamwork can be non-productive and frustrating.

The tools that we provide break down the barriers that occur in competitive, organizational environments and removes the confrontation from the collaborative creative process. We provide the language and structure to enable the group to move deliberately through each phase in a productive way.

GKVP: When you are acting as a facilitator in a group problem solving process you hand out to each participant a list of often used verbal 'torpedoes' that can not be used to disrupt the dialogue while the group is diverging (generating ideas). Can you refresh my memory on what those 'torpedoes' are?

Dr. Min Basadur: We call these Killer Phrases. These are expressions that people throw into dialogue for various reasons, to shut down a train of thought, interrupting the diverging mode, sometimes with good intentions. It might be a judgment of a fledgling solution, perhaps not intended as negative but perceived that way by others. It can be analysis or logic inserted in the wrong place, prematurely dissecting a fact offered during divergent fact finding for example. Killer phrases might reflect the user's lack of understanding of an option or a biased viewpoint that favors a predetermined outcome. Whatever its intention a killer phrase makes people in the discussion apprehensive and reluctant to offer further thoughts, thus 'killing' the creative process. Examples: that idea is all right in theory – but; We have been doing it this way for a long time and it works; It's not in the budget; That is against company policy; That is not our job; The president would never go for it; We tried it that way once; Too hard to administer; If it is such a good idea why hasn't someone thought of it before; etc.

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options. Some challenges are directed within the organization while others are related to some aspect of their business externally. They include inter-functional projects of all kinds, strategic planning, new product development, strategic design, new process development, marketing development, conflict resolution, team building, quality and cost control, etc. At the individual level we work with people ranging from top management to shop floor workers. Many are professional people. Some are learning how to better consult with their own clients. Some are interested in improving internal innovation abilities. Others are particularly interested in learning how to parallel process with others. We work with many disciplines, including product designers, systems developers, senior managers, market research, purchasing, advertising people, etc. Name a discipline and we have probably worked with them.

When we begin an engagement, we first work to define the specifics of what is required. We don't just assume that the specific challenges are well known by all participating persons. We have done a lot of work with university boards of directors helping them grapple internally with their responsibilities and how to create meaningful strategic plans by involving the faculty and others. We believe strongly in the inclusive approach. We also work with design teams on product strategy issues of all kinds. The concepts of innovation and creative problem solving are very pervasive and our work would be of interest to every part of an organization.

In essence, we concentrate on teaching and building skills to enable people to work with other people, to creatively define and solve problems. As facilitators we provide processes and the orchestration rather than the content.

Developing the ability to separate content from process is part of what we teach. In the big picture sense, we are trying to get corporations and organizations to mainstream applied creativity in their day to day operations. Many organizations have come to the realization that it is not enough just to have an innovation philosophy. To be truly effective, one has to have clearly definable processes adaptable to multiple issues and multiple disciplines.

GKVP: Upon being exposed to your work, one of the things that becomes evident is the lopsidedness of constantly focusing on improving and upgrading computer skills without updating thinking process skills in tandem. I recall an old Alvin Toffler metaphor here in reference to this tendency, often seen in the business community of upgrading one without the other. Toffler refers to it as being equivalent to attaching a Concord jet engine to the chassis of a 1952 Chevy! When organizations contact you about working with them on internal issues, is it because they have recognized that the underlying chassis need some work?

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Dr. Min Basadur: That is a very good question. We are just on the verge of people starting to understand that we have to learn how to think differently in order to make any substantial change in how we operate. Like flavors of the month, many change tools and management ideas have come forward over the years in western business culture – prosperity teams, quality circles, total quality management among them. Many such initiatives die on the vine. This is because the organizations have not understood that you have to change fundamental thinking skills to make any of these new tools work up to their potential.

Organizations cannot bring in a bunch of training on a new tool without first providing some underlying adaptability and creativity process training. The new tool then fits within this process. Many organizations would rather write a cheque and send their people to training on various flavor of the month tools rather than really come to grips with the reality that new change-making adaptability behaviors are needed at the top levels and that the top people in the organization must model such behaviors themselves.

GKVP: What do you mean by adaptability behaviors?

Dr. Min Basadur: Adaptability is a critical factor today. In yesterday's relatively stable world, organizations might have been able to concentrate on improving efficiency alone but in a changing world that focus alone is no longer enough. While efficiency implies mastering a routine, adaptability means mastering the process of changing the routine. To remain viable today, organizations must mainstream adaptability thinking and get it to be part of the day to day fabric of the organization. In terms of education at the individual level, this means including both efficiency process and adaptability process training.

GKVP: Why is teamwork often so difficult and what can be done to improve it?

Dr. Min Basadur: There are many reasons why teamwork can be difficult and frustrating. Many people are not aware of the difference between content and process and so continuously mix them together, creating confusion.

Also people often believe that the way they think (as individuals or as a discipline) is the way everyone else thinks and fail to articulate simply or clearly enough. People have different styles of innovation. Depending on the nature of the team, some participants might be generators, others might be conceptualizers, optimizers, or

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implementers. All are needed in the problem solving process and we try to make people aware of these individual differences. This realization is often missing from the teamwork equation. Keep in mind that there are many types of teams. Some might consist of designers, manufacturers, and end users, some might consist entirely of administrators, etc. etc., depending on numerous variables.

Most important in teamwork is the presence of a visible process. When you get a group of people together, unless they have a common process that they can articulate and follow together, chaos results and much time is wasted. Without process orchestration, common teamwork problems tend to occur, among them: jumping directly into 'solving the problem' without first considering what the real problem is – without defining it properly. Focusing only on content and not process is another tendency, which means meetings turn into undisciplined discussions; facts, ideas, evaluations, action steps and new problems are introduced at random.

Becoming mired in territorial disputes instead of focusing on a problem at hand is also common. In many organizational atmospheres, meeting participants say only what they believe the boss wants to hear instead of talking about what the real issues are. Rather than trying to draw upon their wide-ranging backgrounds and experience, they simply jockey to look good and or ensure the boss looks good. Sometimes group members don't trust one another enough to share what is really going on. Participants being in different phased of the process at the same time without realizing it is also common. If someone is trying to define a problem and someone else is already trying to solve it, there is bound to be conflict. Often meeting leaders, themselves lacking skills in facilitating group processes, steer towards their own points of view rather than coach the group toward innovative action. Rarely do groups critique their meeting process to see how they might improve future gatherings. People often settle for holding unproductive meetings in lieu of, or as an excuse for, not developing bold, innovative solutions. All of these tendencies impact the effectiveness of teamwork.

GKVP: In your book, *The Power of Innovation*, you stress the importance of orchestrating a two-part thinking process i.e.: diverging and converging. How does such orchestration affect teamwork?

Dr. Min Basadur: The key thinking skills that we all have are the ability to diverge, which is to create options, the ability to converge, which is to make selections and the ability to defer judgment. In most meeting settings, people, unaware of these skills, mix diverging and converging continuously. No sooner does someone venture an idea or an option in the divergent mode when someone converges at the same time and explains to them why that was not a good idea.

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GKVP: Why is there such a high level of interest in obtaining and or updating creative problem solving process skills today?

Dr. Min Basadur: The size, number, complexity and time frame of the issues facing all of us today impact the interest in such knowledge. Certainly the reason that I was able to get started at Procter & Gamble was directly related to these critical factors. As the world outside the organization changed and became more complicated, competitive and faster moving, the company recognized that new innovation processes were needed – that it was impossible to handle all the problems and opportunities coming at the company with the old processes and on an individual basis.

No one individual could handle the number of issues because there are so many aspects to them. You had to get people working on inter-disciplinary teams inputting their piece because nobody knows everything. Often we have to operate in areas of uncertainty where the team, assembled from diverse areas of expertise, puts together the best it can from many fragmented pieces of the puzzle.

It then must trust that judgment. Most problems are multi-faceted today. Long gone are the days when you could say that a problem is just a product development problem, or a marketing problem or a purchasing problem. Often problems are interwoven, mixed together, to form larger issues facing the organization. The speed with which we need to address problems and opportunities has also changed. We simply do not have time to do things the way we used to where everything was sequential. We must work in parallel now. We can't wait until the marketing department passes its ideas on to the product development department, which then passes them onto manufacturing, etc. We have to get the groups working together. With our methods we can get a group of inter-functional people coming to a decision in about five hours with the same quality that would have taken nine months of memo writing, sequencing things the old way. With complexity rising and time frames being compressed, the need to be able to work together across disciplines has never been greater. For these reasons alone there is considerable interest in what we are doing.

GKVP: Can you give us a glimpse of what kinds of problem solving you are asked to facilitate in your work?

Dr. Min Basadur: We work with all kinds of organizations, corporations, manufacturers, institutions and individuals to facilitate innovation. When we are approached for help, the outcomes envisioned by clients cover a wide range of

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