

forever explaining it to them,’ says de Saint-Exupéry. Later in the book the Little Prince of the story’s title, who is visiting Earth from asteroid B-612, talks about grown-ups and their ways: ‘Grown-ups love figures. When you tell them you have made a new friend, they never ask you any questions about essential matters. They never ask you, “What does his voice sound like? What game does he love best? Does he collect butterflies?” Instead they demand: “How old is he? How many brothers does he have? How much does he weigh? How much money does his father make?” Only from these figures do they think they have learned anything about him.’

FOLLOWING TINKERBELL

Here’s something interesting about these two different thinking styles – convergent and divergent – and how they can be used effectively. Evidence suggests that groups are better at convergent thinking, while individuals are better at divergent thinking.⁴ When a problem has a single best possible answer, a group will work more effectively getting there than people working on their own do. But when many different ideas are required, a group comes up with more clichéd and traditional ideas compared to individuals. **Yes, contrary to the received wisdom, perpetrated we suspect by meeting facilitators and manufacturers of snack foods, group brainstorming is not always worthwhile.** In fact, bad brainstorming can be counterproductive, leaving participants feeling frustrated, confused and fat.

One reason for this is that groups generally try to avoid conflict, and yet by their very nature wildly diverse ideas are often in conflict with one another. The group tries to keep things on an even keel so that

⁴‘Improving the Creativity of Organisational Work Groups’, Leigh Thompson, *Academy of Management Executive*, 2003, Vol. 17, No. 1.

“Most creative people like us have more ideas than they know what to do with. They will drive themselves crazy in the middle of the night trying to find a pencil and paper in the dark to make a note of the latest idea so they can fall back to sleep! Most of these ideas are great and you can spend hours discussing them over breakfast or in Starbucks after an espresso jolt. Only, after the espresso the idea you were talking about seems to morph into five other ideas, and in fact all of them are connected somehow to another idea you had three years ago.

By the time you’ve left Starbucks and fought through the traffic or climbed over 50 train commuters, balancing your briefcase and squashed sandwiches on your head, you’ve had a few more ideas about hover shoes and newspaper sandwiches that double up as news and breakfast and, before long, it’s all turned into a Beatles’ song and you are singing ‘newspaper taxis appear on the shore’ as you burst through the office door drenched from English summer rain. Of course, the office staff all think here comes that so called ‘creative’ nutcase again, singing with his sandwich on his head... why on earth do we pay him?

By the time our creative genius has got to his desk he has what we call ‘*idea spaghetti*’. In other words, a plate full of ideas but without a knife and fork! Now CEOs are often looking for ideas, but sometimes people hide the knives, forks and plates and the creative genius is left hyperventilating or behaving like an overactive puppy dog jumping up at anyone around him, yelping random bits of idea scraps or scratching and whining at the closed door of a CEO or chairman. We know there’s a better way to keep the pot bubbling so that everyone gets some of that wonderful spaghetti.”