

CHAPTER SIX

BRAIN FLASH

Using visualisation to come up with creative solutions.



Picture this, a boat on a river.

If a picture is worth a thousand words and the pen is mightier than the sword, then surely a crayon must be a weapon of mass destruction? Or something like that.

The same is true of music, you can never adequately express the ideas in music through words – you have to hear it.

Ken Robinson in his book, *Out of Our Minds: Learning to be Creative*, gives this example: ‘The composer Gustav Mahler was sitting in his studio completing a new piano piece. As he was playing, one of his students came into his room and listened quietly. At the end of the piece the student said, “Maestro, that was wonderful. What is it about?” Mahler turned to him and said, “It’s about this.” And he played it again.’

THE PETRI DISH FOR IDEAS

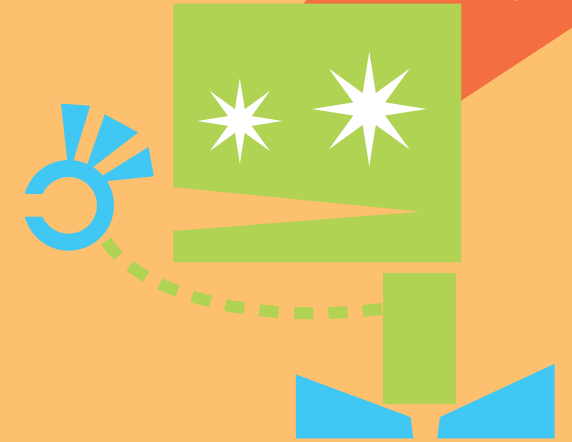
In 1966 researchers at San Francisco State College published the results of a pilot study into how psychedelic drugs might impact creativity. They tested the effects of LSD-25 and mescaline on 27 professionally employed males¹ (honestly, they really did). Tentative findings led them to conclude that, ‘Psychedelic agents seem to facilitate creative problem-solving, particularly in the “illumination phase”. The results also suggest that various degrees of increased creative ability may continue for at least some weeks subsequent to a psychedelic problem-solving session.’ Based upon what the subjects in the study said about their experiences with the drugs,

¹‘Psychedelic Agents in Creative Problem-Solving: a Pilot Study’, Willis W. Harman, Robert H. McKim, Robert E. Mogar, James Fadiman and Myron J. Stolaroff, *Psychological Reports*, 1966, 19, pp. 211–227, Southern Universities Press 1966, Monograph Supplement 2-V19.

“

I often use different methods to ‘break the plane’ with artists I’m working with who are experiencing some sort of block in their creative flow.

Bob Dylan was going through a period in the early 1990s when he was a little lost and searching for inspiration. Instead of us trying to make a record, or finish words to songs (we had recorded about 20 sketches), we went out and shot a film instead. It was much more fun, with just me filming on 8mm cine cameras and Bob wearing a 1920s top hat on his head wandering around Camden Town like the Pied Piper (we ended up being followed by a bunch of people who could not believe what they were seeing, so we got them to act in it too). This was in London in broad daylight and we had no-one with us as security, or any assistants, just the two of us and my three-year old son, Django. We were laughing and having great fun making up sequences and then shooting them on the spot. You can see where some of this footage ended up if you go on YouTube and type in ‘Bob Dylan Blood in my Eyes,’ as later I asked Sophie Muller to edit some of it together for a video to that song and she did a great job.



There is no point in sitting staring at the wall trying to be inspired when the whole world is outside waiting to play with you, or for you to play with it. For instance, another time I took Bob Dylan on my houseboat with my mother, Sadie, and a few other people just to ‘break the plane’ and we went down the canals with acoustic guitars and a tape recorder making up stuff while my mum cooked soup. When we got off the boat I took him to Speakers’ Corner in Hyde Park where people get on a soapbox and say what they want. Bob stood for a long time listening with his hood over his head and heckling a few times. We had a great day and he later wrote a song about it, called ‘TV Talkin’ Song’.

”

the researchers believe that certain aspects of the psychedelic experience support creativity, key among them being a heightened ability for visual imagery and fantasy. Other studies since have also looked at the relationship between drugs like LSD and creativity.²

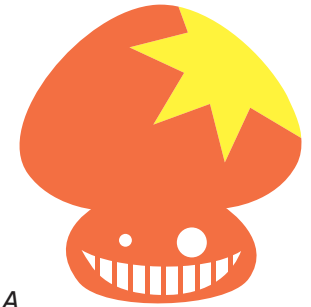
Language processing occurs in the sensible, analytical left half of the brain, whereas visualising is done in its more creative right-sided counterpart, so it stands to reason that creativity benefits from the use of our visual skills, and when we want to put the ideas into words we can get a little help from little old leftie. **To Leonardo da Vinci the ability to think was inseparable from the ability to visualise, the eye was an instrument of thought.**

Here's a simple and legal technique for using your visual powers to think through a problem. Find a comfortable chair in quiet space, kick off your shoes, remove your hat and loosen your tie. Take a large pad of paper and a bunch of pens and pencils and sit down. That's it, now just relax. Clear your mind of the stuff you need to do (... did you tell Bob the meeting was cancelled? Don't worry about it, he'll be fine. And that big presentation you need to write, the one for the board? Just forget about it, not doing it will save some paper ...) and start to think about the creative problem you need to solve. On the left half of the page start to sketch out a picture of what things are like now, not a detailed diagram, just the basic elements that convey your thoughts about the situation. You can add in some simple labels to make it clearer if you want, but this is for you not for anyone else so if they don't get it, that's their problem, they shouldn't be looking anyway.

²We liked 'A Psychobiographical Analysis of Brian Douglas Wilson: Creativity, drugs, and models of schizophrenic and affective disorders', Stefano Belli, *Personality and Individual Differences*, Vol. 46, Issue 8, June 2009, pp. 809-819.

Now on the right-hand half of the page, sketch out how you want things to be. What is your vision for success? Where do you want this to end up? There need to be some big differences between what you drew on the left and what you're going to draw on the right side of the page and you can even exaggerate to make the point. If *solving the traffic congestion in LA* were the problem, for instance, to highlight the differences between what the traffic situation is now and what we'd like it be, we might draw the exact opposite of what is the current picture of jams and snarl-ups. Perhaps we would sketch a vision in which there are absolutely no cars on the roads, or there are no roads at all, just green fields, parks and trees. Ah ... that feels nice.

Don't scrimp on the picture. **Take time with the details so it is as vivid as it can be.** Make it so you can actually picture yourself in that boat on the river, and so you can almost taste the orangey-ness of the nearby tangerine trees and marmalade skies. Now, having sketched out the before and after, the current situation and your vision for success, ask yourself (out loud if you want): 'What are the barriers between how things are and how I want them to be?' Perhaps you see one barrier as the design of your product, or maybe not enough people know how amazing your services are, or a lack of communication between departments means initiatives don't get followed through properly? Whatever the barriers are, find ways to represent them through your sketches and add them into the drawing in a different coloured pen (yeah, that purple is a good shade, try that one). Again, it's a good idea to label what you've drawn. And finally, in another colour (not that turquoise, it'll clash horribly with the lime green you used earlier), sketch ideas for ways to break down the barriers.



But first, take a breather. The right side of your brain needs time to come up with ideas sparked by what you have in your sketch. Stand up. Stretch. Sponge the marker-pen stain off your shirt. Touch your toes. Lick your nose. Lick someone else's nose. Give yourself a while to absorb all the information you've laid out on your big piece of paper. You see before you, in glorious Technicolor, the problem, the vision, and the barriers to getting there and you'll find that as you stare at it you'll start to come up with ways to draw potential solutions to break down the barriers, ones that if you'd just tried to write it all down you'd never have seen. **By not relying on words you have freed up the visual power of your brain.**

Now show it to your boss or partner or neighbour. Don't say anything, just hand it over with a smug 'Aren't I the clever one?' smile on your face and walk out humming to yourself. Actually, on second thoughts, don't do that, you might not exactly get the reaction you'd hoped for. The sketch is for you and you alone. Later, if there's some good stuff in there you might want to adapt the sketch into a simple diagram – that's always a good way to explain something – but for now use it as a way to capture some ideas. Pin the sketch somewhere you can see it so each time you go past you can add something or make a note on it and it can become a Petri dish for new ideas.

COLLAGING

As we said a couple of chapters back, many challenges are best tackled creatively by first pulling them apart and tinkering around with each piece (whether as cherries or fish bones) before putting them back together again. A technique sometimes called *collaging* involves conducting a brainstorm with a mix of folks of all shapes

A method I have found very useful for creating something from nothing is this. I start by taking a photograph, usually of a very interesting woman, if any are available. But if not then it can be of anything – an empty room, a book cabinet – it doesn't really matter. What matters is that you have frozen a moment in time. Now, I look at that picture and give it a title. For instance, last week I took a photo on the staircase of an actress called Natalie Mendoza. We stared at the picture for a while, giving it possible titles like for a movie poster. I came up with 'If Looks Could Kill' and then we talked about what that could mean. Such as, someone could be so beautiful that it ruined their life, or it could mean literally that someone has so much pent-up anger that they can't hide the hate.

So that started a song:

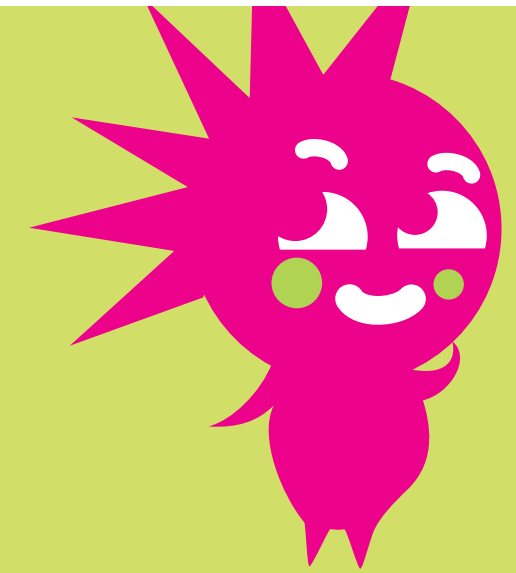
*If Looks Could Kill then you've got
the skill*

And I must have died a thousand times

Then a short film script. It could be about a woman (played by Natalie) who had been so frozen that she actually forgot who she was. One day she wakes up and doesn't recognise a thing, only that she has been tied and bound inside her own mind, which we see in the film. She spends days struggling

to break free, and when she escapes and opens a door it's into the blinding sunlight. And as she steps outside we realise it's from a Hollywood movie-set trailer where she is met by her assistant, make-up lady and the Assistant Director. They walk her to the set, which is all totally unreal to her, but slowly through the movie and the tiny bubble of the movie-making world she realises who she really is! Crazy all back to front ... in other words 'Reality is an Illusion' that occurs due to a lack of scripts!

And now from the same photo shoot we have a song, a film treatment and from another photo I took that day of Natalie we came up with the name 'Butterfly'. Having been inspired by this creative exercise, several months later Natalie came back to Los Angeles with a concept, which I renamed 'Butterfli', and is now being produced into a



graphic novel, an anime mobile series and a feature film starring Natalie.³

Another project I've been working on started life as a little game inside a Nokia mobile phone, this time for a very talented singer I found called Cindy Gomez, who I first met when I was on *Larry King Live* with Ringo Starr, and she had just arrived to perform as a back-up singer. This is the very first time an artist has debuted inside a mobile phone game. And one of the songs in that game is called 'Street Dancing'. So then I started working on an idea for a film called *Street Dancing*, about a boy in India who finds and plays with the game on the phone and he starts really wanting to be a dancer, and enters a competition called – guess what? – 'Street Dancing'. I then thought this could also be a TV format. All things line up, like the stars, and you realise that from this song idea inside a mobile dancing game, it can be a feature film, in a TV show, or even as a lifestyle brand. And, lo and behold, this is what's happening.

Now you are thinking: 'God, what kind of job does Dave have just taking pictures of talented women and dreaming up ideas

about how to have more fun with a song or a film or a gadget?' Well, you are absolutely right! It's what I choose to do, but the amount of work that then goes into executing the song, or 3-D game, or whatever it is we are doing, makes the difference between larking about and running a creative company.

If I was running a company that made tennis balls and had a marketing meeting I might still use this method of taking a picture of a woman then staring at it and saying to myself, 'Now how does that picture relate to balls?' No, seriously. I would give it a title relating to my business like '40–love' or 'Game, set and match', put a web address on the photo, then when people went there it would be a humorous spoof dating site all based around tennis in which the same girl in the photo invites you to join the club. Once inside there'd be a virtual world and you can chat to our girl, but just when things get steamy the screen fills up with tennis balls and you have to give your email to become a member. I'm not saying this is a good idea, I'm just saying how the idea can come about through visualisation.

and sizes to sketch out the different parts of a problem, and then putting the individual sketches together as a collage. The group can then use the collage as a way to spark new ideas.

Here's how. **Split up the problem into as many components as there are people in the brainstorm group** (somewhere between four and eight is

usually a good number, but it depends on how many comfortable chairs you have available) and get them each to start doing a detailed sketch as a way to solve their bit of the problem. Take traffic congestion in LA as an example. Say there are seven people in the group, we could pretty easily split the problem into seven different smaller problems. Let's call them our seven *problemettes*:

- 1 Too many cars.
- 2 People driving alone.
- 3 No good alternative transport.
- 4 The need to travel to get to work.
- 5 People in LA love cars.
- 6 Too few major roads.
- 7 Accidents on roads causing delays.

The choice of seven was purely random. It could have been four, five, six, eight, or whatever number, and so long as we've got the main components of the problem down we're OK, you'll find that you will cut according to your cloth. To expand on the analogy (see the section on metaphors coming up), if you haven't got much cloth available you will end up with a smaller suit, perhaps with shorts rather than trousers and sleeves that only come down to your elbows. If you've got yards of the stuff, you could make a suit where you can wear stilts and the trouser legs still reach the ground. We know that doesn't make sense, but we liked the metaphor anyway, the point being so long as you have a handful of people in the brainstorm there are ways to split up the problem so each of them has a piece of it to tackle.



³Natalie has been cast as the female lead in U2's Broadway musical *Spiderman*, directed by Julie Taymor.



Here is what's known as a mind map. It's from a series done for Coco de Mer, the 'Erotic Emporiums' I am a partner in, together with Anita and Gordon Roddick's two daughters, Sam and Justine. Anita, Gordon, Sam, Justine and I took part in a mind map session

hosted by John Kao, the innovation expert and business strategist who wrote the brilliant Harvard Business book *Jamming*, and mind-map artist Lesley Evans, working on five-foot pieces of paper.⁴ This is just one of about ten mind maps that came out of that session.



⁴Jamming: The Art and Discipline of Business Creativity, John Kao, HarperCollins 1996.

Now as an example of how this works, at random let's take one of the traffic problemettes. We're going to take number two, and as a solution to the bit about people driving alone we make a sketch of lots of people sharing the same car (they'd probably be laughing, slapping one another on the back, making rabbit ears and sharing snacks, but who knows for sure). When each of the brainstormers has done their sketch for their assigned problemette they can show it to the rest of group. The others should throw in their comments (no heckling, please) and their ideas for how to improve what's been drawn, making sure it's done in the spirit of positive collaboration. Then once the sketches are combined into a collage the resulting picture will hopefully represent some great thinking by the group, delivered in a fresh visual way, and it might even trigger some wonderful new ideas.

IT'S LIKE A ... WELL, IT'S LIKE A SIMILE

The researchers at San Francisco State College, who decades ago experimented with psychedelic agents like LSD and mescaline and their effects on creativity, found one reason subjects in the study gave for their improvement was their enhanced ability to play spontaneously with hypotheses, metaphors, paradox, transformations and relationships. Making comparisons between concepts can help highlight their similarities and differences and spark ideas that might be of help. **For instance, a camera is like an eye and an umbrella like a canopy of leaves. The stronger the visual imagery involved in the simile, the richer the comparisons will be.** What is your business challenge similar to? Does it remind you of something in nature or from another field?

NASA was trying to design a satellite tethered to a space station by a 60-mile-long length of wire⁵ but found that when they tried to reel it in it started swinging out in ever-increasing arcs, which took way too long and put a lot of stress on the wire. By seeing that the satellite tethered to a space station was similar to a person holding a yo-yo on a string, and understanding how the winding power created by the spin of the yo-yo pulls it back in, they were able to come up with a better solution for reeling back the satellite. Instead of the space station winding in the satellite, a small motor on the satellite would pull itself into the space station, so cutting out the wild swinging movements (we're convinced NASA are now practising other yo-yo tricks, such as walking the dog, with their satellites).

Or, take the invention of the tasty curvy crisps, Pringles. These wavy wonders were developed as a result of a quest to find a way to package crisps in a more efficient way. When packed loosely in bags, regular crisps take up a lot of room, but when packed in smaller bags they break up and crumble. **Thinking about the similarities between crisps and leaves helped the smarty-pants at manufacturer Procter and Gamble to find a solution.** The researchers thought about how dry leaves break apart easily, while moist ones do not. If leaves are pressed together when moist and then allowed to dry out, there are no gaps between them and so can be packed tightly together without breaking. Bingo. So that's what they tried. Organic chemist Fredrick J. Bauer developed a foil-lined tube with a resealable plastic lid that allowed the Pringles to be packed in tightly together so they wouldn't break when moved around. Incidentally, the cremated remains of Mr Bauer, who died in 2008, are buried in a Pringles container.⁶ Not on sale in any shop near you.

⁵'Improving the Creativity of Organisational Work Groups', Leigh Thompson, *Academy of Management Executive*, 2003, Vol. 17, No. 1.

⁶It's true. It was reported in *The Guardian* newspaper on 2 June 2008.

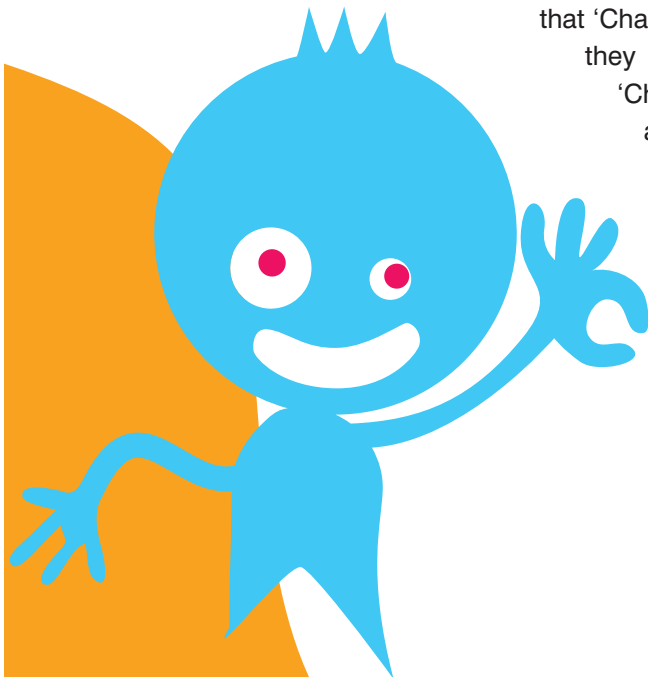
Think of traffic congestion in LA being like a patient with clogged arteries.⁷ Now we have a new way of looking at the problem, one we can visualise, we can start to imagine cures for people with heart disease, such as surgery and a healthier diet. Surgery could suggest putting in a new road to bypass blockages; having a healthier diet suggests preventing the roads being clogged in the first place by reducing the number of accidents or the number of cars on the roads. **Alternatively, why not look at things that are dissimilar between a situation and the creative problem we're trying to solve? For instance: traffic congestion in LA is really unlike a mountain stream.** It is neither clean, nor fast, nor peaceful. And to make it more similar to a stream we would use cleaner cars, keep the flow of traffic moving and introduce noise dampening around the roads (also mountain streams flow in just one direction, so consider one-way roads as a solution). Using an evocative visual simile like this we can picture what this new situation would look like. Imagine sitting next to a mountain stream and think how it makes you feel. Maybe draw a picture of the scene or find one on the web and then start to think about how to recreate that same feeling of peace and calm for the problem you're trying to solve.



⁷It reminds of us of a Monty Python sketch in which courtesans use similes to fling insults. James McNeil Whistler (John Cleese) tells the Prince of Wales (Terry Jones) 'Your majesty is like a stream of bat's piss,' and when the Prince looks insulted, he claims it was George Bernard Shaw (Michael Palin) who had said it originally. Shaw denies it and then tries to explain the insult by saying what he meant by it was that 'You shine out like a shaft of gold when all around is dark,' which the Prince finds most charming.

METAPHORICALLY SPEAKING

In the last film that Peter Sellers made, *Being There*, Sellers plays Chance, a simple-minded gardener who has spent his whole life tending the garden of 'The Old Man'. Chance has had no education, and apart from what he's learned from television he has no experience of the outside world. When The Old Man dies, Chance is told to leave the house and, while wandering the streets carrying all his possessions in a single suitcase, is knocked over on the street by a car owned by a Mrs Benjamin Rand. Mrs Rand, wanting no trouble for her powerful husband, an advisor to the President of the United States, takes him to her estate to be tended to by her private doctor. Neither she nor her husband realise that 'Chauncey Gardiner' (the name they thought they heard when he introduced himself as 'Chance, the gardener') is just a simpleton and instead thinks that he has great wisdom, a wisdom that he delivers through metaphors. In this extract from the novel by Jerzy Kosinski,⁸ who also wrote the screenplay⁹ for the film, Chance is brought into a conversation between Mr Rand and the President.



⁸*Being There*, Jerzy Kosinski, Grove/Atlantic, 1970.

⁹His screenplay for *Being There* was nominated for a Golden Globe in 1980 and won the BAFTA in 1981.

The men began a long conversation. Chance understood almost nothing of what they were saying, even though they often looked in his direction, as if to invite his participation. Chance thought they purposefully spoke in another language for reasons of secrecy, when suddenly the President addressed him: 'And you, Mr Gardiner? What do you think about the bad season on The Street?'

Chance shrank. He felt that the roots of his thoughts had been suddenly yanked out of their wet earth and thrust, tangled, into the unfriendly air. He stared at the carpet. Finally he spoke: 'In a garden,' he said, 'growth has its season. There are spring and summer, but there is also fall and winter. And then spring and summer again. As long as the roots are not severed, all is well and all will be well.' He raised his eyes. Rand was looking at him, nodding. The President seemed quite pleased.

'I must admit, Mr Gardiner,' the President said, 'that what you've just said is one of the most refreshing and optimistic statements I've heard in a very, very long time.' He rose and stood erect, with his back to the fireplace. 'Many of us forget that nature and society are one! Yes, though we have tried to cut ourselves off from nature, we are still part of it. Like nature, our economic system remains, in the long run, stable and rational, and that's why we must not fear to be at its mercy.' The President hesitated for a moment, then turned to Rand. 'We welcome the inevitable seasons of nature, yet we are upset by the seasons of the economy! How foolish of us!' He smiled at Chance. 'I envy Mr Gardiner his good solid sense. This is just what we lack on Capitol Hill.'

Any re-working of language (what I call 'Pasta Talk' because it's the stuff idea spaghetti is made of) is good for the brain, as you have to think in parallel. A good exercise is telling a story in mechanic speak – like, 'I was trying to wrench myself out of the situation before I blew a gasket,' signed 'Full Throttle'.

This is not a business solution, but when you get good at it you can apply that way of thinking to solve a business problem. In other words simplify it, a bit like Chauncy Gardiner did. Jazz players have a language,

a kind of slang. All musicians have it. Weird things like, 'Don't drag the donkey'. Actually, I just made that up, but it's a good way of describing a situation where you've bought or hired a pony to carry your workload and now you seem to be carrying his.



Metaphors conjure up images that can spark ideas.

Start by writing up the problem as a simple question, for instance: 'How can people in LA spend less time in their cars?' We might choose baking as a metaphor and rewrite the problem as 'How can bakers spend less time making bread?' and then picture the baker and his bread-making endeavours and imagine how he might spend less time doing them. For instance, the baker might consider:

Making bigger batches of bread.

Selling less bread.

Making bigger loaves.

Outsourcing the baking to someone else.

Bringing in some assistants.

Closing the bakery altogether.

The ideas for the baking question are metaphors for our traffic problem. Making bigger batches of bread could mean encouraging people to travel in bigger groups, such as in buses or car pools, to reduce the congestion. Or closing the bakery might make us think about closing some roads to force people to travel less. Perhaps they can earn their bread without going to the office so much.

MOVE ONE SPACE FORWARD TO THE NEXT CHAPTER ... OR ROLL THE DICE

Sometimes words are just not enough. Language processing occurs largely in the sensible analytical left half of the brain, whereas visualisation takes place mainly in the more creative right half.

Making pictures, whether actual sketches or verbal ones such as similes and metaphors, can free up our minds to think more creatively.

In fact, when people aren't allowed to sketch and have to rely on words to process information they tend find it difficult to restructure it and discover new way of looking at it. Techniques for visualising problems and finding creative solutions include sketching it out on your own, taking photos, or doing a group collaging exercise that tasks people with creating a sketch together. Similes and metaphors help spark the imagination by allowing us to picture how a problem we're working on is similar or dissimilar to something that might at first seem totally unrelated. In the next chapter we look at how to creatively collaborate with others to build ideas. Gather round, everybody.



Instructions

1. Decide on a problem to solve.
2. Take turns throwing a pair of dice to pick a square on the board, the first die giving the number along the bottom, the second up the side.
3. Each player comes up with an idea sparked by the visual in the square.
4. The best idea gets a point.
5. The winner is the player with the most points after five rounds (or however many rounds players have decided to play).

BOARD GAME: BRAIN FLASH

How it works: Visual stimuli help in the generation of new ideas by tapping directly into the right side of the brain, where creative processing takes place, without being inhibited by the left side, the one that uses language to process thought. So if we take a problem and ask the brain to find connections between it and a visual stimulus, we will potentially end up with some great insights and ideas that we might not have otherwise discovered.

How to play: Players decide on a problem they want to solve and then throw the dice to tell them which visual stimulus on the board they should use to spark ideas to help solve it. For example, if the problem players choose is: how do we improve customer service? and a player throws a 5 and a 3, the square five along and three up shows a picture of some juggling skittles,

and so players might decide to describe the problem as a simile using acrobats – for instance, ‘customer service is like juggling skittles because it means being quick and agile.’ Then players come up with ideas for ways to ensure staff can help customers very quickly, such as giving them incentives based on speed of response. The image of the juggling skittles could have led to a different simile, one about how ‘great customer service is like being an acrobat because it depends on having amazing co-ordination between departments’, in which case players would come up with ideas to improve coordination.

How to win: In each round the player with the best idea gets a point and the winner is the one with the most points after five rounds (or however many rounds the players have agreed to play).

