Act Like a Creative Thinker

The best way to become a creative thinker is to act like one. Let’s look at the way creative people act.

Creative thinkers . . .

- Question everything
- Generate ideas
- Seek what might work better
- Bust paradigms
- Take action

Let’s look at each of these behaviors in turn.

Creative thinkers question everything.

For the creative person, curiosity is a way of life. They’re inquisitive, adventurous. They have to know what makes everything tick. As small children, they peeked behind the TV set to see if there were little people going in and out of the back. Show them your new palmtop, and they’ll fiddle with it until they figure out how to use it—without looking at the instructions. Let them catch you putting together a new desk or barbeque grill and they’ll try to help. They’re great at keeping up with technical innovations and new ways of thinking about things, just by following their curious natures.

You say this doesn’t sound like you? That’s a choice. You can develop this ability by practice. Make it a habit to ask “why?” and “how?” Challenge everything and everyone. My friend’s favorite teacher in college, Arthur, was an enthusiastic “aging hippie” who believed passionately in free thinking. One day in class, he was driving home the lesson, thumping on the desk with a fist to emphasize his point. “Question authority!” he boomed. “Challenge authority!”

From the back of the classroom, a student yelled back, “No!” Arthur roared with laughter. His message had hit home.

Creative thinkers generate ideas.

The best way to get great ideas is to generate lots of ideas. The more ideas you have, the greater your options. Inventor Dr. Yoshio Nakamata, holder of 2,300 patents, urges creative thinkers to “stuff your brain, keep pumping information into it. Give your brain lots of raw material. Then give it a chance to cook.” Don’t judge your ideas while you’re gathering them—there’ll be plenty of time to do that later. If you judge ideas while they’re still ripening on the vine, you blight them, and they wither and die. First, pull in your harvest—make it as bountiful as possible. Then you’ll be able to sort bad from good, best from better.

Creative thinkers seek what might work better.

Creative thinkers don’t accept things as they are. They’re always looking for ways to improve situations. Management consultant Fred Pryor says creative people see what others see, “but they think what no one else thinks.” Creative thinkers don’t see problems, they see challenges.
Creative thinkers bust paradigms.

Paradigms are necessary—we all need sets of rules and ways to frame ideas in order to function in our world. But we can become too dependent on the comfort of paradigms. Creative thinkers aren’t afraid to throw away old paradigms to make room for the new. They break through perceived boundaries.

Once a matchbook company received a letter from an inventor who said, “I have an idea that will save your company $2,000 a year. If I tell it to you, and you agree that it will work, will you pay me $500?” The company, intrigued, agreed. The inventor’s response: “Put the little sandpaper strip on only one side of the matchbook cover.” The company happily paid the man his $500. Where is it written that the strip has to be on both sides?

Creative thinkers take action.

Creative thinkers bring ideas to fruition. They use their creativity not only to inquire, gather ideas, and invent new ways of doing things, but also to create the means to carry out those ideas. They’re master planners and strategizers. They’re doers. They know what’s needed at each step because they’re aware of their surroundings, of trends and possibilities. They’re test-marketers. They seek out the actions involved in bringing a plan to actuality. Not all doers are creative, but all successful creative people are doers.

Action is the distinguishing factor between those who merely dream and those who succeed. Back in high school my friend George was crazy about a girl who didn’t care to give him the time of day. George’s usual methods of getting this girl interested didn’t work. He was tempted to give up—instead, he took creative action. At four o’clock one foggy morning when the girl was leaving for her part-time job at a bakery, she found George standing by the door of her car. He held out a white carnation, said, “Have a nice day,” and turned as if to walk away. Then he turned back and held out a red rose. “Oh, and while you’re at it, have a nice week.” Then he vanished into the fog. George and the girl were going steady a month later.

“Life does not consist mainly, or even largely, of facts and happenings. It consists mainly of the storm of thoughts that is forever blowing through one’s head.”

—Mark Twain

Excerpt from Quantum Success by Bobbi DePorter)