

Practice-oriented Insights on Creative Problem Solving

Sanjay Dhir

Indian Institute of Technology Delhi, India

E-mail: sanjaydhir.iitd@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper is based on an interview with Prof Sanjay Dhir of Department of Management Studies, Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Delhi as part of Academic Interface series being launched with this issue. Prof Dhir heads the GIFT School of Strategic Alliances Management. He is a Fellow of the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Lucknow. Earlier he has worked at Mahindra and Mahindra Ltd (Automotive), R&D Department, Nasik for three years. His major areas of interest are Strategic Management, Joint Ventures, Innovation Management, Management of Change and Transformation, Implementation Strategy and International Strategy. Prof Dhir teaches Creative Problem Solving, Management of Innovation, Strategic Management, etc. In this interview, he provides practice-oriented insights on creative problem solving which are equally useful for both academics as well as the practicing managers.

Keywords: Creative Problem Solving, Management Graduates, India

How the concept of Creative Problem Solving has evolved over time?

'Problems' have been in existence since the origin of mankind. Individuals faced problems in their day to day life which were tackled using ad hoc personal methods. With the advent of businesses, problems evolved to a more structured form affecting different dimensions of business. Initially, these problems were solved using structured solutions that were scientifically developed. However, with the continual evolution of the businesses, problems turned complicated, unstructured and unique in form. Each business problem required individual and unique solutions. Further, the solutions had to be developed quickly owing to considerable influence of the problem on business operations. To tackle complicated and unique problems quickly required 'creativity' leading to the term 'Creative Problem Solving' (CPS).

Research on CPS originated in the behavioural sciences which was further gradually taken up by management researchers who realized that business problems are more complex than individual level problems. Soon, many processes and cycles for CPS were developed which could be directly adopted, customized to your problem setting and the applied to solve specific problems. Alex Osborn, regarded as 'father of brainstorming', in 1953 structured a seven step process for creative problem solving. Other prominent researcher of CPS was psychologist Sidney J. Parnes. Both Osborn and Parnes have extensively studied CPS from multiple dimensions. The multiple other researchers have studied CPS specifically from their respective areas.

CPS as a field has evolved through time and currently is being linked with Innovation. Businesses across the world are turning their problems into opportunities. CPS is not only considered useful for problem solving rather it is being treated as a way to tap new opportunities. Path breaking ideas pursued by

entrepreneurs may be attributed to CPS only, be it e-retailing, wallet services, travel or any other industry. Take the case of 'Splitwise', an app solves a very basic problem of money management in groups is being solved. However, it is a business opportunity identified by the promoters of the firm.

Why is it necessary to adopt creative problem solving in place of traditional one to resolve issues at the workplaces?

Modern workplaces are very complex and dynamic in nature. Structured problem solving techniques may be futile in such an organizational setting. To deal with modern workplace problems in an agile and economic way requires out of the box thinking which is facilitated by CPS. CPS encourages managers to think broadly beyond the usual solutions for problem. Furthermore, CPS can deal with ill structured problem, which is spread across multiple business functions in an organization. In organization, CPS is used as a group function than an individual function which facilitates participation as well as varied thoughts on a matter. This supports modern day business outlook of collective work among employees. Furthermore, in comparison to the traditional method of problem solving, CPS provides freedom to managers in the process of problem solving and enables them to go a step beyond conventional wisdom to analyze and understand the problem.

How can organizations develop collective competencies in creative problem solving?

CPS process is a group process requiring inputs from all the people who participate in it. A single individual may not be able to leverage CPS process completely and such a process may not be termed as CPS too. Individual may be trained on group behaviour through a CPS process. There are many CPS techniques that foster development of collective competencies. For instance, 'Six thinking hats' is a very well-known CPS technique which is used by many organizations to stimulate thinking. This technique was even used by erstwhile Indian Cricket team Coach Greg Chappell to inculcate lateral thinking capabilities, simplicity in problem solving as well improve communication. Moreover, the tool lays emphasis on personal emotions, control and above all creativity.

What are the challenges in fostering creative problem solving among employees in various organizations?

CPS is a contemporary tool for problem solving. Application of CPS is negatively influenced by the organizational culture and the type of leadership in organization. Leaders in an organization are flag bearers for instilling CPS in its activities as well as responsible to involve people in the process. Organization culture, specifically in India, may cause impediments in the successful implementation of CPS in organization. Traits like Bureaucratic regime, top down decision making, power distance and uncertainty avoidance observed widely in Indian organizations may not support the successful use of CPS. Moreover, individual employee beliefs and attitude shall shape the effective utilization of CPS in an organization. Being a group activity, it may be quite difficult for an organization to successfully implement CPS across different levels of an organization. Conducive organizational culture, leadership style and employee attitude may facilitate fostering creative problem solving among employees in organization.

How creative problem solving can be inculcated in aspiring managers in Indian context?

CPS as a process may be inculcated in aspiring managers by providing them adequate knowledge and practical training during their graduation and post-graduation level education. Majority of the prominent business schools in India have CPS subjects as part of Strategic Management or General Management course curriculum. This subject needs to have more of practical exposure to students than appraising them theoretically. Concerned faculty must focus on explaining the theory with practical

examples as well as guide students in applying them in different real business problems. CPS is an applied area, therefore due credit must be given to practical importance and application while training aspiring managers.

Organizations must also nurture entry level managers to think beyond the usual work and involve them for decision making in their work domain.

How do you visualize creative problem solving as critical competency in near future, both in Indian and global contexts?

Importance of CPS shall be evident as progress along time. With evolution, the kind of problems that businesses may face shall change manifolds. The problems may be characterized by enormous complexity and abstract nature. In such a scenario, CPS may be the key to solve problem. Moreover, the real gain from CPS as a competency may be derived from its utility of as a way to innovate and tap opportunities. Intense competitions have driven organization to act till its limits. The next step is to innovate, creativity may be first step to it. To identify business opportunities from problems faced by other businesses and market may be the key to sustain in the future.

In the Indian context, with the growing number of multinational firms in the market, the incumbent domestic and indigenous firms may have to act creatively. Business dynamics based on price and quality may not provide competitive edge. Indian organization need to think afresh and tackle their threats and problems for which CPS would be a handy tool.

In the Global context, most industries are saturated in developed nations. To sustain business in such a situation may be challenging to businesses.