



Stanford eCorner

Challenge Assumptions

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Challenging the first and second wave of answers and assumptions helps creative teams move on to breakthrough ideas that appear in the third wave, says Dr. Tina Seelig, executive director of the Stanford Technology Ventures Program. Here the lecture audience participates in an exercise that reveals a group's willingness to go with the first right answer, which can be a major barrier to unleashing full creative potential.



Transcript

To challenge assumptions. So what I want to do is a little exercise here. I normally would do it with a room even with this many people but I think anyone would think I was crazy if I did this. So I would like the folks in the first few rows here - stand up. You're going to be... Put everything down. Perfect, that's great. First couple of rows, stand up. Great. Good.

You're good. Just good. Now, you have to follow my instructions very carefully. You're going to do this? Can you follow instructions? I want you to line up according to your birthdays. That means from January 1st to December 31st. I don't care how old you are, OK? From January 1st to December 31st and you have to do it without talking. Ready, set go. You have one minute. Twenty seconds. Ten seconds.

Nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one. OK, great. OK. Let's see. Let's not clap yet. Let's see what happened. Where's January? OK, let's see. Was there a January over here? No, OK. What is it? January what? I'm 31st so... Oh, that's a little problem right? OK.

Where's February? Where's February? Just one? OK, March. OK, March's in order. March? Twenty-sixth. Twenty-sixth. Thirty. Are you guys twins? No OK. March, April. Jan, February, March, April. Thirty. May.

June. July. OK, what dates July? Twenty-one. Twenty-nine. Now, OK, so that's out of order. OK. Thirty-second. Thirty-second? OK. OK. Yes.

August, good. The 32nd of August. September. October. Oh-oh, November. Oh-oh, December. OK. Why don't you sit down? We're going to talk about what happened here. Thank you for our volunteer. So let's talk about what happened.

What's the first thing you thought when I asked you to line up according to your birthdays without talking? What's the first thing you thought? Oh, no. Right? Oh no, that can't be done, right? Then what was the next thing that happened? What happened? What happened? Somebody made a number. Somebody started making numbers with their fingers, right? And everyone thought they had cracked the code, right? Everyone's started doing that? How effective was that. It was pretty effective. It was pretty effective. But are there any other ways it could have been done? What could you have done? Write it down. You could have written it down. That would have been smart. OK, what else? Pull out the driver license. Put out your driver's license.

Fabulous. Anything else? Any other thoughts? Sung it. What's that? We could have sung. The sun... Sing it. Oh, you could sing it. You're saying we didn't talk but we sang. OK. You could have mouth it, right? You could have sound it and so it may look like read lips. Or somebody could have gotten up on stage and direct it, right? Someone could have managed the whole

process.

Someone could have written down the dates and then put on the floor. So many different solutions. But what happened is, people went-always. I am very confident; I've done this in many groups. It always happens the same way. Because people go with the first right answer. That is a huge, huge problem if you want to be creative -if you go with the first right answer. My favorite concept, is that of the third third, You need to get past the first wave of answers. Even pass the second wave of answers and move on to the third wave of answers- possible solutions- before you start getting to the ones that are truly innovative. If we stayed here all day and kept thinking how to line up according to your birthday without talking, we could probably come up with a zillion solutions.

But the fact is, most people come up with the first right answer. And what happens is, this is why you end up with incremental improvement of things. That's why we have cars. There was a talk here right before about cars. You end up with cars with 15 cup holders, right? If one cup holder was good, 15 are better. OK? But if you end up with say, how we really going to be able to improve this, you end up pushing beyond the obvious answers.