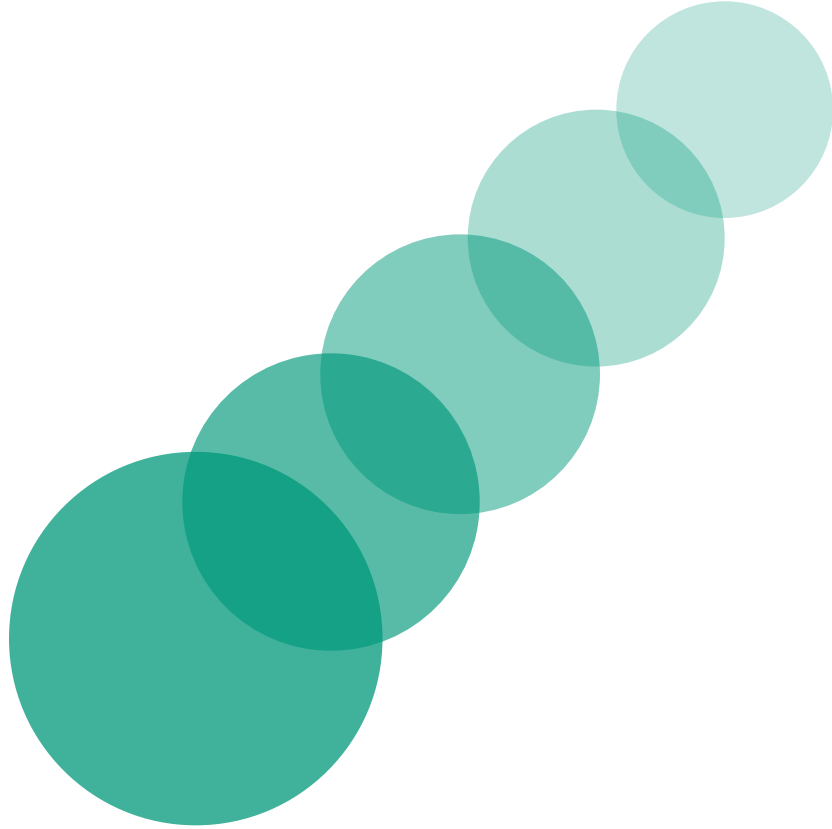# Gordon/Little technique

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>
> *One of the biggest blocks to creativity is being too close to the problem you are trying to solve. This can make it impossible to see the woods for the trees, and tends to generate only trite and obvious ideas.*
>
> JAY, 2000: 96

What's it all about?

The idea behind this problem-solving technique is to encourage you to step as far away from a particular problem as possible. Developed by William Gordon (of Arthur D Little Consulting) in the 1960s, it involves a process of progressively more detailed revelation, to avoid defining the problem too soon and limiting possible solutions. He built this approach in response to a problem he witnessed with classical brainstorming whereby people begin the process by giving what they regard as ideal or obvious solutions and then their creativity trails away.

What's it for?

The purpose of the technique is to bring you out of the immediate detail of a particular problem. For example, instead of asking, "How to we get our audiences to spend another £2 each per visit," you might ask:

- "How do we make our audiences happy?"

- After exploring this question in a little more detail you might ask, "How can we provide good customer service?"

- Once answers to that question have finished you would get more specific still, "What do our audiences want from our programme/activities?"

- Finishing with your original question, "How to we get our audiences to spend another £2 each per visit?"

It is mainly a tool for group discussion to ensure you get as wide a range of perspectives as possible, but you could try using it on your own with post-its and large sheets of paper for doodling your answers. (You would have to suspend your knowledge of the final question though!)

Using the tool

Set up a group and, giving yourselves enough time to work through the various layers of the problem, probably two to three hours, work through the following steps:

1. Explain to everyone involved what is going to happen – that there will be a series of increasingly detailed questions asked and you want them to brainstorm answers. It is worth being clear that you have a final detailed question in mind but that will not be the starting point, in other words it won't be revealed until later

2. The problem is then presented at its highest possible level

3. Generate ideas in relation to the problem as it is currently stated

4. Repeat steps 2 and 3, moving on to the next cycle when the ideas slow down. Each time you go through the cycle, the question should become slightly more detailed

5. Reveal the original problem and review the range of possible solutions that have been generated through the various discussions

What's Next?

Think of a current problem you have been wrestling with and try and write down at least four related versions of the statement that are increasingly broad. Now write down some answers starting with the most abstract statement first. What do you notice by the time you get back to your original problem statement?

Quick tips

- Ensure you give the participants some background to the approach before you begin, to avoid them feeling like they are being manipulated

- Start from the highest level of abstraction you can. Make sure you leave enough space to work from the outside of the problem in

- You may want to use a facilitator for the process to ensure you can contribute to and be able to pull yourself back from the original problem statement

- If you are working with a group, they need to be open, flexible and tolerant of ambiguity

- You can use the technique to redefine problems as well as solve them

References

Jay, R. (2000). The Ultimate Book of Business Creativity. Oxford, UK: Capstone Publishing Ltd.

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