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Why Innovation By Brainstorming Doesn't Work

By Debra Kaye

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Anything--even doing laundry--will help you dream up new ideas better than sitting in a meeting, says Debra Kaye, author of "Red Thread Thinking." A case study of the history of the single-use detergent pod.

Eleven men and women file into a conference room and take their places around a large table. Coffee cups and pastries are assembled in front of them. George, the leader, steps up to a large whiteboard and scrawls across the top "SOAP STORM SESSION 9/18/12." "Okay, let's begin," he tells the group. "Let's just start free-associating. What do we think of when we think clean laundry?" he asks. "To get the ball rolling, I'll write a few words down," he says and dashes off chore, piles, whites and brights, and fresh on the board. "What else?" he asks. Several people add a few more words: time-consuming, fold, bright, uncontaminated, pretty, nice, old-fashioned, and pleasant.

The meeting continues for about an hour, with more words and thoughts added. The plan was for the team to come up with a new idea for laundry detergent. When the meeting is over, the team members file back to their cubicles, word lists in hand, to ponder the outcome--but none of them ever produced any new insights into doing laundry that would lead to a new product. That's because the group made the fatal error of trying to innovate by brainstorming around the idea of the central attribute of laundry--cleanliness. So while they came up with a pretty long list of words, none of the few concepts that came out of the meeting--"cleans in a shorter time," "cleans without presoaking," "brightens without fading"--was out-of-the-box spectacular.

This scenario takes place every day in office suites around the world. That's an important point to remember, because companies everywhere are brainstorming the same things about clean laundry as my imaginary team. Everything about clean laundry likely has been thought of before. It turns out that a brainstorming session is a great place to load up on baked goods and caffeine, but it's not so

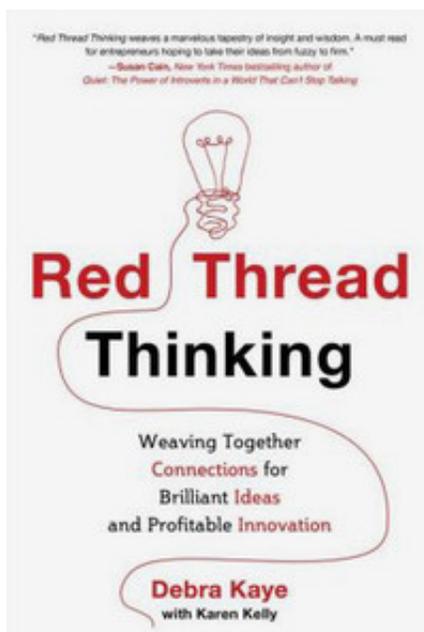
great for generating ideas. In fact, the team in my imaginary example would have come up with more original associations and innovative thoughts had they stayed home and sorted a sock drawer, taken a hike, relaxed in a bathtub, or done just about anything else autonomously--including a load of laundry.

The conventional wisdom that innovation can be institutionalized or done in a formal group is simply wrong. Part of what we know about the brain makes it clear why the best new ideas don't emerge from formal brainstorming. First, the brain doesn't make connections in a rigid atmosphere. There is too much pressure and too much influence from others in the group. The "free association" done in brainstorming sessions is often shackled by peer pressure and as a result generates obvious responses. In fact, psychologists have documented the predictability of free association.

You can see this clearly from the responses to "clean laundry" in my example. One association feeds off the next in an expected fashion. The leader does what leaders often do--inadvertently gets the upper hand by throwing out certain words that generate conventional results, thereby dominating and directing the "free" association of the group.

As I said earlier, the team should have been given the day off to do laundry. That's pretty much what happened at Philadelphia-based Cot'n Wash [1] Inc. Originally the company was a cotton mill that spun cotton and made sweaters. In the 1980s, the owner's wife developed a gentle detergent that would wash the sweaters without yellowing or stretching. Flash forward about 30 years. Nina E. Swift, wife of the original owner's son, Jonathan Propper, was doing laundry one day and realized that even though she loved Cot'n Wash, she disliked measuring and pouring liquid or powder from a jug or a box. Both were messy, and she used far more detergent than was recommended (measuring is imperfect and people err on the side of generous, she discovered).

This was a mega consumer insight. Was it just she who felt this way, or was it everyone? She talked to Jonathan, who thought she was on to something. So he brought the idea to his small company and created Dropps, a single-use package of detergent. One small package, similar to those used in dishwashing packets, washes a load of laundry--all you have to do is toss it in the wash and go. It solved a lot of problems--no more measuring, mess, or waste. The product also benefited the environment by using less water, plastic, and packaging. No phosphates or chlorine means it's green.



"The technology actually existed for the dissolvable laundry detergent package," says Dropps's Remy Wildrick, who calls herself the pragmatic side of Propper's creative mind. "And the patent

happened to be owned by a person in Philadelphia, which was just a nice side note. We bought the technology from him and developed Dropps.” The product is sold online, at independent retailers, and at Target. Other larger manufacturers didn’t introduce their versions of the single-serving detergent pod until years later.

“What’s funny is that the technology was sitting there for quite a while, but none of the big guys were using it. They were sticking to the same old jugs and boxes--but in mid-2012 they all started coming out with uni-packages,” says Remy. Since Dropps is small, it can’t compete on volume sales with the big guys, but it can compete on the product’s green aspects and focus on the fact that it contains Cot’n Wash detergent, which has an almost cult-like fan base, especially among the environmentally conscious.

Fresh ideas come when your brain is relaxed and engaged in something other than the particular problem you’re embroiled in. In the Dropps situation, Jonathan Propper’s wife identified a problem, and he made a connection to a solution, a technology that existed for another application. This is the polar opposite of what happens in brainstorming sessions. Long showers, soaks in a tub, long walks, or doing chores are frequently when those “synapses” that find alternative solutions to a problem in new ways all hit together so that the big idea can spring.

Published as an excerpt from Red Thread Thinking: Weaving Together Connections for Brilliant Ideas and Profitable Innovation [2] with permission from McGraw-Hill Professional.

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[Image: Flickr user Daniel Kulinski [4]]

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