

## Borrow with Pride

The problem you face right now, whether at work, at home or in your social life, is a problem that someone else has faced and solved. Why not harness their ideas?

Doctors had a problem with hypodermic needles. Patients were afraid of them. Children dreaded them. The pain the needles caused was not intense but it was unpleasant and it dissuaded many people from having important injections. So the doctors asked – who else has this problem? Who else injects into people and has solved this problem. The answer was quickly given. Mosquitoes insert a tiny needle into people and extract blood. They carry the deadly malaria virus. They go about their deadly work without being felt. By studying how the mosquito stings its victims scientists were able to develop a hypodermic needle that patients do not feel.

Mick Pearce is the architect who designed a retail building called the Eastgate Centre in Harare, Zimbabwe. He wanted to keep the building cool in the hot summers but he wanted to do this with minimum energy use. He studied how termites build their mounds which keep remarkably cool. He designed a natural cooling system mimicking the workings of a termite nest. The building uses one tenth of the cooling energy requirements of conventional buildings.

The scientific study of nature in order to copy its methods is called mimetics. Alexander Graham Bell was a practitioner of mimetics. He copied the workings of the human ear when he invented the telephone. The diaphragm in the ear became the diaphragm in the telephone.

A successful innovation in your business does not have to be an all-new invention. It just has to be something new to your business that is beneficial. Maybe everyone in Singapore is doing it but you are the first in Holland; maybe every consulting firm does it but yours is the first doctors' surgery to try it; maybe everyone in IT knows about this but no-one in hairdressing; maybe lots of youngsters communicate this way but you are the first city councillor to do so.

Rob McEwen took over a run-down gold mine in Ontario in Canada, the Red Lake mine. He was certain that there were good reserves of gold in the mine but the problem was how to find them. He had plenty of geophysical and other data on the mine but gold production kept going down.

At a computer conference he happened to hear about the Linux operating system and how its success was based on its open source principle – anyone could see any of the code. Thousands of programmers around the world analyse, extend and develop Linux code. He decided to borrow this idea and apply it in the conservative world of gold mining. He published all the data about the mine on the internet and challenged people to predict where to drill for gold. His colleagues thought he was crazy – no-one ever gave away all their mining data. But the internet competition he started, the Goldcorp challenge, was a great success. The winner used sophisticated fractal graphics software to analyse the data and accurately predict where to drill for gold. The output of the mine went up tenfold.

How can you borrow with pride? Here are some suggestions:

- Travel extensively and see what similar organisations to your own in different parts of the world do.
- Read about industries other than your own. In the news-store pick up specialist magazines in fields you know little or nothing about.
- Ask customers and suppliers for ideas – especially on new applications in your business area.
- Watch competitors – especially those in remote markets.
- In your brainstorming exercises use Similes (described on page 59) which force you to find analogies for your problem.

The telecoms company Vodafone has an interesting segmentation on its customers. Like every other business it segments customers by revenue and margin. But it also segments customers by which ones it can learn the most from. Vodafone identifies the top 20 clients world-wide who are doing the most interesting things with mobile technology. It ensures that senior managers visit these customers and keep abreast of their latest applications and uses. Some of these clients are very small organisations but Vodafone knows that the ideas they can garner here are very valuable. Who are your most innovative clients? Do you monitor and track them. Do you keep them close? Could you borrow some of their great ideas?

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