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Chapter 1: An Overview of CPS

You should read this book if you've ever found yourself in a situation in which you needed to define or understand the nature of a problem, think up some new ideas, or devise and carry out an action plan. You will probably protest, "But everyone has been in those situations, time and time again, in everyday life!"

Exactly! To be successful, everyone needs to be able to find and solve problems. Creative Problem Solving (which we will simply refer to as CPS in this book) is a process *anyone* can use to deal with many of life's everyday problems, opportunities, and challenges, such as:

- "I'd like to attract more customers for my business."
- "My new invention would really be useful to people if I could find a clever way to market it."
- "How can I better attract the attention of my students in my World History class?"
- "We need to get some new program ideas so our organization's members will attend our meetings."
- "I wish our family would find enjoyable ways to spend more time together."
- "I wish I had ways to help my students be more excited or motivated about learning."
- "I'm looking for ways to empower people to take more responsibility for quality and improvement."

How do you feel when you have to deal with any of these situations, or others like them? Excited? Eager? Or frustrated and tense? Do you believe that you can come up with ideas that are as good as anyone else's (and perhaps even better), or are you easily discouraged?

If you have always thought that only a few very special people—real geniuses—can come up with creative ideas, you have most likely been underestimating your own powers of thinking and doing! We

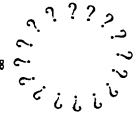


believe that everyone has the ability to think creatively and critically, and that everyone can be successful in solving problems effectively and productively. Unfortunately, left to themselves, not everyone will use the mental power that is easily at their reach. But, *anyone can!*

By learning and applying the simple, easy to use methods and techniques in this book, you will soon see improvements in your own thinking and problem solving. This is a book to help anyone be more creatively productive; it's not about creativity as a form of rare "genius" beyond the reach of most people. This book provides an overview of a systematic approach to Creative Problem Solving (CPS), building upon and extending our own prior work (e.g., Treffinger, Isaksen, and Firestien, 1982, 1983; Isaksen and Treffinger, 1985; Isaksen, Dorval, and Treffinger, 1994) and that of our colleagues (e.g., Firestien, 1988; Osborn, 1953; Parnes, 1967, 1981; Parnes, Noller, and Biondi, 1977). By learning and using CPS, you will increase your ability to:

1. Recognize opportunities, challenges and concerns
2. Examine data in your situation to discover the most important challenge at the heart of the situation
3. Consider many ways to state the problem, and then select a specific problem statement that will stimulate ideas
4. Generate many, varied, and unusual ideas for dealing with the problem you've stated
5. Identify and use appropriate strategies for choosing, analyzing, and developing promising ideas
6. Examine promising possible solutions and then plan for successful implementation
7. Design and carry out a specific and detailed plan of action

Think of CPS as a "toolbox" to help you organize your own creative and critical thinking and problem-solving abilities, and to ensure that the tools you need are handy and ready when you need them. These tools have been drawn from observation and experience with the productive thinking and problem solving strategies people use naturally. They also incorporate the findings of many years of research about the characteristics and skills of creative persons and from knowledge of creative processes and products in many fields. CPS has been used successfully by many people—adults, teenagers, children, at school, at home, and at work—since the mid-1950's. Every CPS method or technique in this book has been used successfully in real life.



Since this is not a technical, academic textbook, we will avoid long theoretical explanations or detailed descriptions of research studies. Concise summaries of much of the research evidence regarding the impact and effectiveness of CPS can be found in reviews by Isaksen, Dorval, and Treffinger (1994), Torrance (1972; 1987), Parnes (1987), and Rose and Lin (1984). In addition to these reviews, several other specific articles providing evidence for the effectiveness of CPS are also included in the bibliography at the end of this book.

Misconceptions about Creativity

There are many common misunderstandings about creativity, some of which we should get out of the way from the very beginning.

1. I am not a creative person. Because many people think of creativity as a rare or special quality, possessed only by a few exceptional geniuses, it is often much too easy for them to be overly doubtful or hesitant of their own creative potential. To the contrary, we view creativity as an important aspect of everyday living—the potential for anyone to be able to think of new and useful ideas, to look at a problem in a new way and find an original and workable solution, to use one’s mind in a productive way to generate and apply new ideas.

2. Creativity is too mysterious to be taught. Some people believe that creativity is a very esoteric phenomenon—a visit by the muse, a divine gift, or an unpredictable and uncontrollable moment of inspiration. Viewing creativity as mysterious takes it out of the realm of “mere mortal” behavior, and makes it seem supernatural. In such a view, it is unlikely that creativity can be studied scientifically or nurtured—and perhaps even risky to attempt to do so, at risk of disturbing the forces that control creativity, or frightening away the muse. In contrast, we believe that creativity is best viewed as a natural, observable process and that many methods and techniques for enhancing creative productivity are rational, powerful, and accessible to anyone who desires to learn and use them.

3. Creativity equals arts. Another common misunderstanding views creativity only in relation to people, efforts, or outcomes in the fine arts. It is not unusual, for example, for people to say to us, “Oh, I’m not very creative; I’m not much of an artist [or a musician, or a poet...]” To be sure, creativity in the arts is very real, and adds a great deal to the quality of human life. But creativity does not occur only in