

Avoiding the convergence trap: COCD-box

A practical tool in idea convergence and innovation

2000. Jim van den Beuken¹:

Good convergence is crucial to innovation

Highly creative people seem to have found a good way of handling the paradox of innovation. How to be naive and expert at the same time? How to be passionate and critical? How to be goal-directed and open to the unexpected? How to be creatively playful but not stupid? Until 1997 COCD focused mainly on helping organisations generate new innovative perspectives and ideas. Today we feel that the lifecycle of generative, divergent thinking has matured and good convergence is becoming the next critical success-factor.



Divergence is like...

*Flying free from frontiers
Soaring the sky of imagination
Creating sparks that connect our spirits*

Convergence is like...

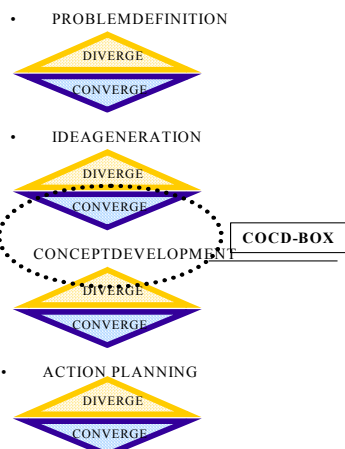
*Trusting your guided heart
Playing the potential
Giving birth to reality*

Every aha moment is intuitive convergence

What happens after out-of-the-box divergent thinking? Brainstorming sessions often come up with a lot of new and fresh ideas, breakthrough ideas even. When selecting the most promising ideas for further development organisations abandon many valuable ideas because people assume these ideas are either too new or simply not feasible at the present time. During this convergence phase organisations are prone to behave according to the convergence trap (or the creadox): they need new innovative solutions but at the same time select known, low risk alternatives.



COCD BOX IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS



¹ *) © Jim van den Beuken. Telephone: 0031 182 689 213; jim@creativepower.nl. Jim is international innovation consultant and co founder of Creative Power (www.creativepower.nl).

*) Starlab is a scientific playground, thinktank and initiator of new companies based in Belgium with 70 employees from 23 different nationalities. Starlab is a new type of laboratory or university doing fundamental research that is funded by companies who want to explore future visions, technologies and its implications and possibilities.

***) Offshore company Heerema invented a new technology based on the analogy with the growthstrategy of carrots. Instead of traditional drilling a tunnel, a small rod is pushed in the ground and from that point the tunnel is pulled to its position.

How to use the COCD box in a session?

Imagine you listed 150 ideas on a flip-over sheet and want to select the most promising ones in order to develop interesting concepts. You give every member of the brainstorming group 8 blue, 8 red and 8 yellow dots. Blue indicates the common and feasible ideas, red the innovative and feasible ideas, yellow the original, new but not (yet) feasible ones. Everybody reads the ideas and looks for attractive ideas and chooses individually and silent the 3 types of ideas by writing the idea numbers on the stickers. When every body is finished, typically after only 20 minutes, all dots are attached to the ideas. Select the 6- 24 ideas with the most dots (f.e. more then 3). According to the objective you focus on a good mix of blue, red and yellow ideas! Allow participants to add one or two if they feel the democratic process filtered out some very interesting ideas. Combine and elaborate the selected ideas into concepts. Then evaluate concepts on criteria like risk, potential and spirit.

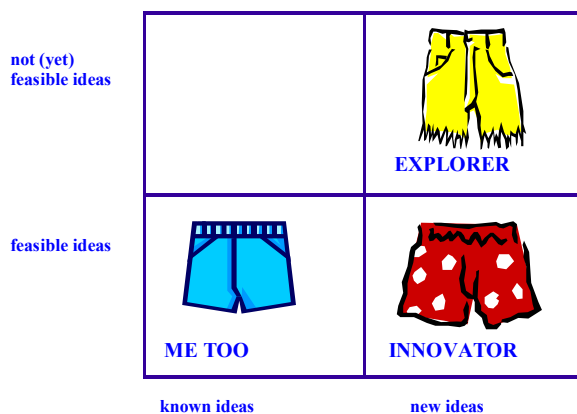
Functions and values

Bridge from many ideas to a balanced idea portfolio

The box is a fast and easy tool for idea selection in groups. It helps entrepreneurial and innovative thinking and manages uncertainty because of the portfolio of ideas. The box reflects your idea harvest and organises the ideas in a goal-directed way. It consists of a good mix of quick wins, innovation projects and potential breakthroughs.

The box provides a framework for creative realism. It focuses the fuzzy front end of new business development by indicating risk types to the strategies. For example, organisations work with blue, red and yellow objectives, with blue, red and yellow productportfolio's, with blue, red and yellow scenarios for the future or a blue, red and yellow team.

“A box, creatives actually want to stay in”



Using team creativity and expertise to create best concepts

People will judge ideas differently in terms of feasibility and newness. There are two main reasons: 1) some people know more than others and 2) people have different visions how an idea will look like. Clarifying the nature of an idea (2 red, 1 blue, and 1 yellow) helps to share and mobilise knowledge in the conceptdevelopment phase. This is a good way to make team expertise transparent and productive. An example from a recent brainstorm in the food industry showed that a marketing manager labelled an idea as interesting, new, but not feasible (yellow) while the researcher knew that it was easy and feasible (blue). They both were surprised and took their own view for the company truth. Both people started to work on the

concept focusing on how to make it both new and feasible using the attraction and newness of the yellow evaluation and the acceptability and risk reduction of the blue evaluation.

Pay extra attention to the yellow ideas: they are your potential competitive advantage. If you think at first sight ideas are impossible so will your competitor. Put some creative energy in them to see how they can develop into concepts.

Language for innovation

When did you present for the last time an unfeasible new idea to management? Idea types give a language to explore the impossible and are a constructive way to discuss innovation strategy. Talking in blue, red or yellow is immediately clear for all involved. The blue involves planning and action, the red involves development and (internal) selling and the yellow involves development, dreaming and finding ways of doing the impossible. A recent example is in banking where a project team presented a new business portfolio with a yellow idea to the board. They expected the board to dismiss the idea for lack of realism but instead the board was very interested and wanted to know why it wasn't red!

There are some warnings too. First it takes more time than hits. Second because of the speed some people have a need for clustering ideas to feel assured all good ideas are included. Third some people are enthusiastic about yellow ideas and declare "war" on blue ideas, so point out those blue ideas can be very helpful to solve the problem and a good way to headstart a more innovative project.

Conclusions

Good convergence is a critical success factor for business the coming years. So while a fresh idea is very valuable when ideas and resources are scarce, good choice is essential in times of (idea) abundance. The COCD box is a start and a good tool for idea convergence in groups. One of the interesting aspects is that it explicitly focuses on the not (yet) feasible and new. Thinking ideas are not feasible is one of the main barriers to innovation. This judgement comes usually way too early, without even a good understanding of what the concept is or could be. So using the box helps people to defer judgement because they know that different types of ideas serve different purposes and they experience that feasibility is not a given but can be changed by time and creativity. You will hopefully find the COCD box a good way to "outcubate" and it makes convergence more fun.

I invite you all to share and develop with us some good blue, red and yellow convergence tools in every phase of the creative process!