

no inspiration

It sits down to write a column and no inspiration comes. The well is dry. I'm submerged in some kind of summer miasma, and appropriately enough, this column is looking like a real "labor" in celebration of Labor Day.

Yet there is a topic here for CEOs - what do you do when *your* well runs dry, when the "blahs" cloud your mind and that usually productive instrument has taken its own vacation?

A dry spell may arise as a dead end in generating themes for that new sales and marketing campaign, or a block to new approaches to deal with that thorny personnel problem, or as no way to stretch cash to get to month end.

How do you deal with that dead period, which may be the precursor to panic as the deadline looms nearer, or the length of your inactivity and the size of the problem increase in direct proportion?

Different strokes work for different folks. Let's take a look at some of the approaches to this situation:

1. BRAINSTORM.

So you are brain-dead, but hopefully your associates are not. You get them in. You tell them it's a no-holds-barred, off-the-wall, no rules, off-the-cuff process and ask them to fire away with anything that comes to mind. Be prepared when they take you at your word and watch the solution emerge.

2. GIVE YOUR MIND A REST.

It's on vacation anyway, so just go with the flow. Take a hike. Get out on the bike. Watch the birds, the butterflies and the trees, or the stream or the lake. When I do this I feel like my mind is being cleansed, and usually after the cleansing, ideas begin to flow.

3. GET OUT OF THE BOX.

Sometimes the way we perceive the situation creates the lack of response. Oglala Sioux visionary Black Elk was referring to this when he said, "It is in the darkness of their eyes that men get lost."

Set forth below is a puzzle. The challenge

is to join all nine dots with four straight lines without taking your pen from the page. It's an exercise in a non-traditional approach, or "outside the box." Here it is. See how you do:



(Ed. Note: answer on page 57)

In my workshop experience, I find that many people don't get it, because they're thinking inside the box, but it's like all puzzles that CEOs face - there's a solution out there somewhere, if we can just see the problem from a different perspective.

One of the earliest treatments of this subject I read was *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, which advanced the argument that good art has at its source, not drawing skill, but perception skill. One of the best recent books addressing this subject in a business context is the Arbing Institute's *Leadership and Self-Deception - Getting Out of the Box*.

4. ENGAGE IN UNRELATED ACTIVITY.

During the fall and winter, I participate in the sport of curling. The combination of the intense strategic thinking and pinpoint physical accuracy required by the sport always relaxes my mind. I can then return to my day-to-day concerns, refreshed and ready to get on with them. Others tell me that repetitive physical activity, like working in the garden or scrubbing tile grout with a toothbrush, liberates their creativity.

Any intense or repetitive off-the-topic focus will do, but it must be one that elicits *all* your attention, so that no shred remains attached to the business situation.

5. LOOK UP SOME BOOKS ON THE SUBJECT TO WIDEN YOUR THOUGHT PROCESSES.

An example is *The Fifth Discipline*

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Wayne Caskey

Fieldbook by Peter Senge et al. which discusses, among many other topics, the role of mental models in constricting the individual and collective creative process. It also sets forth techniques for deconstructing those models to liberate the thoughts of the CEO and his or her team.

6. PRAY OR MEDITATE.

Attention to a higher power's will in a particular situation has a refocusing effect. Alternatively, attention to synchronous events reminds us that we are not alone with this mental block, leads us to look for answers in the external environment and has a generally calming effect.

List all possible ways of getting out of the mental block and pick that approach that has the most appeal to you, or is most applicable to the situation.

Suppose, after conscientiously following all of these techniques, there is still no inspiration, no parting of the waters, no clear path. Then...

7. SHELVES THE PROJECT.

Sometimes just the decision to shelve will get the creative juices flowing because our

stultifying sense of personal identification with the project gets released. Contrariwise, it may be that the project truly isn't worth the time we're giving it and deserves to be shelved. Our obsession with it has made it loom large, when in fact it's inconsequential. Or it may be that we're trying to address a situation that isn't yet ripe to be addressed. Letting it go and coming back when the time is right may change the way we view the situation entirely. The problem may disappear, or new solutions may present themselves to us, without anxiety or heavy breathing.

There are parallels between my process as a columnist and the CEO's process. Often the shape of these columns reveal themselves to me as I go along, just as an element of being an effective CEO is the ability to "make it up" or "draw it from the air" or "play it as it lays."

In both processes, often there is no grand plan, and, as in this very column, that's fine because it lets in new sources of creativity. Paradoxically, the very lack of inspiration opens the doors of creativity. As Burke and Tinsley describe for the writer in *The Creative Process*, so for you as CEO: "The creative process is disorderly and recursive. It enlists mental faculties beyond the range of consciousness. It follows impulse. It defies closure on any terms but its secret own."

Wayne Caskey is a three-time CEO who is now an executive coach, workshop leader and speaker. His web site is www.waynecaskey.com and his e-mail is wc@waynecaskey.com.