

Consultants prescribe a new play ethic

They say creativity helps companies win

REUTERS

NEW YORK—Silly Putty and Play-Doh put Jordan Ayan in a playful frame of mind. Using such inexpensive tools, Ayan helps employees become better problem-solvers.

He is one of an expanding field of creativity consultants, also called innovation and critical thinking experts, with clients such as NASA, AlliedSignal, AT&T, Kimberly-Clark and Lucent Technologies.

"Organizations are asking their people to do more with less," Ayan said. "Creativity is about the only tool left that people can turn to because they've been pushed about as far as they can be pushed."

What Ayan's "Create-It! Inc." firm in Naperville does is "to teach employees those techniques that get their ideas flowing a little faster," he said.

The use of toys is just one of his ploys. Others include humor, sports, hobbies and "walking sponge sessions" that challenge a walker to see how many new

ideas he or she can absorb.

"If you go back to kindergarten days," Ayan said, "we had a box of 64 crayons with a sharpener on the back, and 12 years later we come out [of school] with the equivalent of a ballpoint pen. Somewhere along the line we've lost 63 colors."

To rejuvenate employees, Ayan said, "We start them with simple brainstorming techniques and take them into power thinking," in which a "stimulus" is introduced, such as a picture or toy.

Many of these aids are described in his just published, "Aha! Ten Ways to Free Your Creative Spirit And Find Your Great Ideas," (Crown/Random House).

Another "critical thinking" expert is T. Quinn Spitzer, president of consultancy Kepner-Tregoe, in Princeton, N.J. "Employees are telling us that they have a lot more capacity for helping the business, and the business isn't using it," he said.

"We're so obsessed with action that in some places we've begun to see a disconnect between action and thought," Spitzer added.

The result, he said, are fads like "empowering, virtualizing, re-engineering, and time-compressing—with spotty results."

His firm's survey of 1,414

employees from more than 1,000 companies found, "Workers and managers believe their organizations are operating on less than half of their collective brain power, work in the dark, and are not thoroughly trained to think."

Employees, Spitzer said, must know how to assess and analyze complex situations, make decisions, solve problems and identify and act upon potential problems and opportunities.

"If you can do those four things well, you're going to be a star," said Spitzer, author of "Heads You Win, How The Best Companies Think," (Simon & Schuster.)

Companies whose employees stand out creatively, he said, include Sony, Honda, British Airways, Corning, Chrysler, Johnson & Johnson, Hewlett-Packard, and Harley-Davidson.

When Bob Lutz was president of Chrysler, "he was so interested in building critical thinking skills of his employees that in one 18-month period they trained the top 25,000 employees," Spitzer said.

"Create-It's" Ayan believes an outside consultant can give a company a "fresh perspective" on thinking methodology, but added, "Your best consultants may already be on your payroll."