



the painted sky

**Case Study**

# **Creative & Innovative Thinking: Developing Problem Solving Skills Using Art-Based Methods**

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## Creative & Innovative Thinking: Developing Problem Solving Skills Using Art-Based Methods Kuala Lumpur, December 2011

The imposing Westin in KL was the venue for APAC Sales & BD managers of a major US healthcare company, who met in early-December 2011 for a learning and review offsite, to take stock on progress so far, understand challenges and putting in place new learning practices for the way ahead. Participants hailed from the Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand and India. From diverse backgrounds and different client-facing roles, servicing different businesses spanning the region, the team was led by the company's Regional VP. Over four intense days, the team was to take a long hard look at their performance so far, issues confronting them, and plan steps to improve their performance, looking at the future.

**The challenge:** Viren, the Learning & Development lead for the region had taken stock of the situation during the year, and realized that there were some fundamental issues that the sales teams faced, across the countries. The company, a prestigious name in the healthcare business, had also built a name in the beauty and rejuvenation space. Its products, under the name of 'Brand X', were not only popular and fast-selling; they were also used and endorsed by some of the most visible faces from across the world. Their core brand had reached generic status, and, prima facie, there appeared to be a lot of demand in the market.

With such success came challenges – the sales team's target customers were not end-users, but medical and cosmetology practitioners, who were not as swayed by branding and reputation as the consumer markets seemed to be. And since this was a critical beauty space, there were always fears of misuse of Brand X, or its incorrect application, which made both the doctors and their clients wary. Finally, seeing the success of the product line, many cheaper 'me-too' brands had mushroomed in the local markets, riding the wave of success of Brand X, and they neither conformed to stringent test and safety standards of Brand X, nor followed business ethics. This was impacting the overall reputation of the market, and hurting Brand X as well.

The sales teams were losing focus and getting frustrated, since the tested sales models, which had worked so successfully in the mature markets, were finding little purchase in the price-sensitive, highly-competitive South East Asian markets. Viren realized that the team needed a rethink, and exposure to approaches that would make them more creative when it came to offering novel solutions to clients.

With time running out, and pressure of performance building, the Brand X sales teams needed to learn how to think out-of-the-box in the face of challenges, and develop the ability to think beyond the obvious.

**The solution:** To run a full-day workshop on innovative thinking, developing novel solutions and approaches, to help participants explore their creative abilities. The objectives of this programme were to

- allow for free communication between teams, for experience sharing and out-of-the-box thinking,
- collaborate and work in teams to help participants understand and learn from each other,





- work with people collaboratively, in the face of barriers and pressures,
- think beyond the beaten track, come up with new ideas, and explore and express them assertively, and
- work in a creatively stimulating environment that allows for introspection, planning, expression and fun, help reduce stress levels and improve motivation.

The idea was also to do something novel and different, that allowed participants to explore their creative side and relax in a non-threatening atmosphere.

*The Painted Sky* was approached to run this programme for the sales teams, to offer participants an interactive and fun platform with paints and canvasses to allow for creative expression, towards the above objectives.

For the assignment, *The Painted Sky* created a customized programme, in which participants were to go through a series of exciting activities that would allow them to introspect, ideate and come up with novel ideas and solutions in a non-confrontational atmosphere. They were to understand the bigger picture, take a broader, more strategic view of matters, and approach problems through alternative pathways, for innovative solutions. The aim was to



- Explore the creativity inside you through the unique medium of art
- Develop articulation skills by using picture building words and stories
- Look at creative ways of communicating
- Reduce the scope of assumptions through precise language
- Develop skills to observe, interpret, process and speak up
- Reduce stress levels, improve motivation, and have fun!!



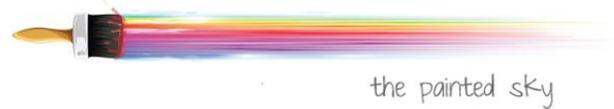
At the end, each participant was to come away feeling excited, energized and motivated, with deeper understanding of the need for creative thinking, and deeper sense of aesthetics, and a respect for team members and the challenges they all faced. The programme was designed to instill a sense of achievement and bonding, and make each participant proud to understand his or her potential.



**The result:** Participants came into the programme aware that the day would be spent in various artistic activities, but were not given any details of how the programme would unfold. Through group activities and brain-storming sessions, they explored their current strengths and areas of improvement, addressed challenges and issues they faced, and looked at developing a road-map for the way ahead. Key areas of focus, like communication, teamwork and developing a new approach to promote Brand X for the organization were identified.

The morning session started on the right note, right from creative introductions, to using visual aids to dramatically represent ideas. Activities also enabled a bird's-eye view to the challenges faced at work, to help develop a 'big picture' approach and understanding.

The afternoon had the teams roll up their sleeves and step out in the open, and take up a different challenge altogether – a blank canvas and piles of colours, and a brief to represent “**Innovation**” through artistic representation. In groups, but with individual tasks, the team had to come up with visual representation of what the topic meant to them, after some serious brainstorming and visualization. Typical resistance followed, with many expressing reservations on their ability to hold a brush after years. However, soon, the participants relaxed,



and went through an exhilarating three hours of creativity and collaboration, painting their own 'masterpieces', to present their view of their organization. Using the theme, each participant painted with enthusiasm and focus, coming up with many brilliant depictions of their thoughts and visions, challenges and strengths. Individual works then had to be compiled and connected to depict a 'larger story', throwing a further challenge to creative expression.

Each group had to then present their group paintings to the others, which helped remove ambiguities and established common ground for expectations and performance, for the team.

Participants demonstrated different working styles, some taking risks, and demonstrating a free approach, while others had a more structured approach, and tread gently and systematically to develop a collective story, at all time careful about the original idea of the canvas.

All the groups were delighted with their team work and found a lot of similarities in the way they approach situations at work too. The groups were able to understand how to develop an eye to see beyond the obvious, and appreciate and express ideas better. They were encouraged to, and came away with an enhanced sense of aesthetics, and an understanding towards how to creatively look at challenges, and come up with innovative solutions. The feedback that resulted was a beautiful and intelligent mix of adopting the best from each styles as well as the "A-ha" moment of arriving at self-awareness.

**The feedback:** The feedback received was extremely positive, with most participants emphasizing on the elements of appreciating creativity, looking for out-of-the-box solutions, collaboration, understanding and communication as the key takeaways. Also, through an expertly devised debrief, the participants brought up key challenges and road-blocks they faced, and expressed how they reacted to situations, thereby allowing for idea sharing and further introspection on best practises. They spoke of the opportunity to get to know everybody's thought process and communication as critical factors that would determine their functioning in future, especially as the markets get tougher, and customers choosier. They also outlined some key learnings from this experience of working as a team, namely,

- to appreciate differences, in approach and execution styles,
- to understand the expectations of all stake holders clearly, and handle the same,
- handle disagreement and discord over ideation and execution,
- to realize the need to constantly seek new solutions to problems,
- to communicate frequently and freely, so as to address issues, disconnects, and challenges early, to avoid having them snow-ball.

At the end, the participants left with a huge sense of positivity and connection, a feeling of camaraderie and collaboration, full of thoughts and understanding having whole-heartedly expressed their appreciation and delight at being a part of this Art-Based programme.