

**The Creativity Consultant of Silicon Valley**

# **A Whack On The Side Of The Head**

## **How To Unlock Your Mind For Innovation**

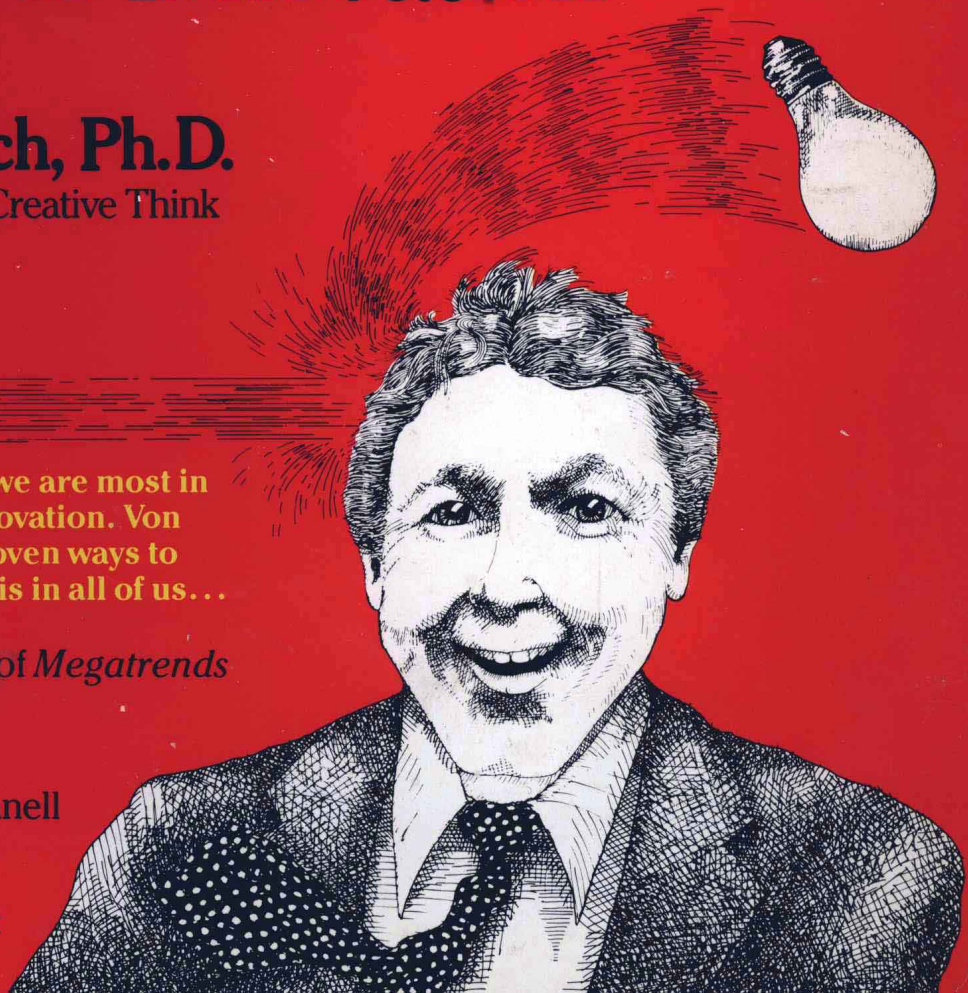
**Roger von Oech, Ph.D.**  
Founder and President, Creative Think

**"In a time of great change we are most in  
need of creativity and innovation. Von  
Oech provides us with proven ways to  
release the creativity that is in all of us...  
A very helpful book"**

**—John Naisbitt, author of *Megatrends***

**Foreword by Nolan Bushnell**  
Founder of Atari, Inc.

**Illustrated by George Willett**



WARNER BOOKS 38-000 \$8.95 (U.S.A.) 38-001 \$10.75 (CAN.)

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**How To Unlock Your Mind  
For Innovation**

**Roger von Oech, Ph.D.**

Foreword by Nolan Bushnell

Illustrated by George Willett



**WARNER BOOKS**

A Warner Communications Company

Warner Books Edition

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Warner Books, Inc., 666 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10103



A Warner Communications Company

Printed in the United States of America

First Warner printing: October 1983

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

**Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data**

Von Oech, Roger.

A whack on the side of the head.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Creative thinking. 2. Success. I. Title.

BF408V58 1983 153.3'5 83-12489

ISBN 0-446-38000-8 (USA)

ISBN 0-446-38001-6 (Canada)

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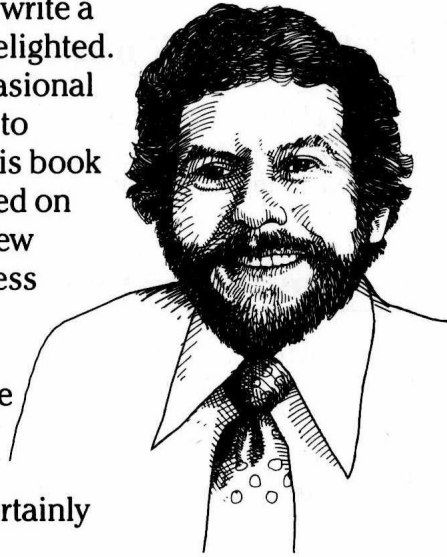
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## Foreword by Nolan Bushnell

When Roger asked me to write a foreword for his book, I was delighted. I think everyone needs an occasional whack on the side of the head to stimulate their thinking and this book certainly does do that. It's based on Roger's experiences the past few years helping people in business throughout the country to generate, manage, and apply ideas more effectively. I believe that his ideas will help you unlock your mind for more innovative thinking, and we certainly need a lot more of that.



One of the benefits of writing the foreword is that it entitles me to share a few of my own ideas on the subject. Personally, I believe that innovation is a lot of fun. This is what has motivated me to try the various things I've done. You see, I love to build. When I was a kid, my favorite toy was my erector set. Since then I've gone on to engineering and then to business. I see each of these activities as a subset of the other. The creative aspects of how something is put together whether it's a toy bridge, or an array of integrated circuits, or a new company really excite me. With the toy bridge, you have to balance the pieces to create a sturdy structure. When you're building a new company, you have to create a product that people want, have hiring policies that attract good people, and provide an environment where they can be efficient and innovative.

I've discovered that innovative people share certain characteristics. For one thing, they feel a sense of urgency—a desire to make their ideas happen. And they want to do them now, not next week, not the day after tomorrow, but right now. I like to set difficult deadlines for myself. That's because I believe that the ultimate inspiration is the deadline. Most people allow their jobs to expand to the time that's allotted. I think that one of the things that has made American business successful in meeting deadlines is the "Trade Show" phenomenon. The fact that twice a year, the creative talent in this country is

working until midnight to get something ready for the trade shows is very good for the economy. Without this kind of pressure, things would turn to mashed potatoes.

I've also found that innovative people have a passion for what they do. I don't know if this passion is innate or not, but it can be snuffed out in a person. Think about it: how much passion will Johnny exhibit if after every time he runs around the house and displays passion, he gets hit on the head and is told to "Sit down"? You're right, not much. This is one of the things that makes being a parent such a challenge. I see characteristics in my kids that in an adult would be fantastic, and yet occasionally they drive me nuts. Sometimes, I have to catch myself and stop and listen to them. If I just say no, they will probably lose the inventiveness and imagination they will need to be creative when they grow up.

I agree with Roger's premise about "mental locks." Many times our own attitudes prevent us from being creative. While these "mental locks" are appropriate for most of what we do, they get in the way when we are trying to be innovative. I have tried to keep my thinking flexible and free from these fetters. Here are a few thoughts I have on how I keep some of these locks from affecting my thinking.

*Mental Lock #3: "Follow The Rules."* For years, a standard rule in pinball game design was the 26" wide playing field. Whenever designers tried to improve the game, they spent their time thinking of adding more bumpers, more flippers, and more targets. The problem was that they confined themselves to too narrow a field, and thus asked the wrong questions. I decided that I could make the game better by changing the width to 30". At that point, I increased its possibilities and its playability. I learned then not to be afraid to break the rules if it would lead to new ideas.

*Mental Lock #9: "Don't Be Foolish."* I give myself the license to play the fool. I think that playing the fool allows people not to take themselves too seriously, and when that happens, they loosen up their thinking and come up with more ideas.

*Mental Lock #7: "Play Is Frivolous."* I've found that a significant proportion of my "big-money" ideas happen when I'm offshore, when I'm out of the routine. That's because I'm away from the phone and my usual surroundings, and free to try different things. When I play, I think I allow a different part of my brain to be activated. For example, I invented the game "Breakout" when I was running my fingers through the sand on the beach. I find that my life oscillates between being a morning person and an evening person. When I'm an evening person, I'm very creative, and when I'm a morning person I get a lot done. But I like to vary it so that I'm not locked into any routine. And I think this is one of the main points in this book.

*Mental Lock #6: "To Err Is Wrong."* It's the old story of the guy who has a 100% record and does five things right versus the guy who does 100 things but gets only 60% right. If I can keep the mistakes from being dangerous, then I've done 60 right things and the other guy has only done five. If you're not failing occasionally, then you're not reaching out as far as you can. For example, I learned a lot about the restaurant business from the Brewery restaurant in San Jose. This was before Pizza Time Theatre. I lost a half a million dollars on that investment, but I learned all about the importance of location. You can't go to Stanford and get that kind of education.

*Mental Lock #10: "I'm Not Creative."* When Nietzsche said, "People will lay their freedoms on the doorstep of the Church," he was talking about religion, but he could have just as easily been talking about having the courage to try new things. Most people abandon the responsibility to be innovative, to be creative. They say, "I can't do it." This is crazy. If you really think you can do it, then you'll go out and do it. I know that my self-esteem has been vital to making my ideas happen—I see myself as a doer. I'm sure that

other people have had ideas that were similar to mine. The difference is that I have carried mine into action, and they have not.

It's important to assault your assumptions—as Roger puts it, to give yourself “a whack on the side of the head.” If you let your routines imprison your thinking, you're not going to come up with many new ideas. If you do 10% of what's recommended in this book, you'll be on your way to being more innovative. Good luck!

Nolan Bushnell, Founder  
Atari, Inc.  
Chuck E. Cheese's Pizza Time Theatre  
Catalyst Technologies

# Preface

Welcome to *A Whack on the Side of the Head*. It's a book about the ten mental locks that prevent you from being more innovative—and what you can do to open them. I hope you enjoy reading it.

Many of the ideas presented here come from my experiences as a creative thinking consultant in industry. During the past five years I've had the opportunity to work with many innovative and/or interesting companies including: Amdahl, American Electronics Association, Apple Computer, Applied Materials, ARCO, California CPA Foundation, Chuck E. Cheese's, Colgate-Palmolive, Cutter Labs, DuPont, Federal Reserve Bank, FMC, General Electric, GTE, Getty Oil, Hewlett-Packard, Hughes Aircraft, IBM, ITT, Kaiser, Lockheed, NASA, ROLM, Sears, Tandem Computers, Tektronix, Varian, Wells Fargo Bank, Westinghouse, and Xerox. I have worked with people in marketing, engineering, data processing, finance, research and development, television, and retail, exploring such provocative subjects as:

- ☞ How can the tax department of a major corporation be motivated to be more aggressive with the Federal government?
- ☞ What will the “kitchen of the future” look like?
- ☞ What can be done to increase the efficiency of solar photo-voltaic cells?
- ☞ What marketing strategy should a pharmaceutical company use to grow 70% in the next two years?
- ☞ What can the producers of a nightly television show do to come up with ideas?
- ☞ How can a company which has grown 5,000% in the last five years maintain a “fun and innovative” working environment?

This book contains stories, anecdotes, insights, and ideas that came out of these workshops as well as many of my own thoughts about what can make you more creative.



# Table of Contents

<b>Foreword by Nolan Bushnell</b>	xii
-----------------------------------	-----

---

<b>Preface</b>	xvi
----------------	-----

---

<b>Introduction</b>	3
---------------------	---

---

Mental Sex.....What Is Creative Thinking?.....Mental Locks  
.....Opening Mental Locks.....Getting Whacked.....  
Summary

<b>1. “The Right Answer”</b>	19
------------------------------	----

---

Learning How to Think.....The Chalk Dot.....The Sufi Judge  
.....Consequences.....The Second Right Answer.....  
Summary

<b>2. “That’s Not Logical”</b>	27
--------------------------------	----

---

Soft and Hard Association Quiz.....Soft and Hard Thinking  
.....The Creative Process.....That’s Not Logical.....The  
Computer Model of Mind.....Roger’s Favorite Soft Thinking Tool  
.....The Water Model of Finance.....Making the Strange  
Familiar.....The Meaning of Life.....Summary

<b>3. “Follow The Rules”</b>	43
------------------------------	----

---

Patterns: The Rules of the Game.....Challenging The Rules  
.....Follow The Rules.....The Aslan Phenomenon.....  
Summary

<b>4. “Be Practical”</b>	53
--------------------------	----

---

Our Germinal Seedbed.....What-If?.....The Stepping Stone  
.....Funny Trash.....Be Practical.....Summary

<b>Breaktime</b>	63
------------------	----

---

Reverse Living.....Diseducation.....Royal Poetry  
.....Twelve-Sided Fun.....A Portrait of My Company  
.....Generations.....The Man With The Smelly Mind  
.....Intellectual Popcorn.....High Productivity.....  
Color Concepts.....Four Advertising Ideas.....  
Jack Grimes’s Software Joke

**5. "Avoid Ambiguity" 75**

---

Thinking Ambiguously.....The Wooden Wall.....Humor  
.....Paradoxes.....Heraclitus.....Summary

**6. "To Err Is Wrong" 87**

---

Hits And Misses.....Playing It Safe.....A Different Logic  
.....Errors As Stepping Stones.....Negative Feedback  
.....Trying New Things.....Nature's Errors.....  
Summary

**7. "Play Is Frivolous" 95**

---

The Moment of Conception.....Play And Learning.....Play  
And Work.....A Fun Environment.....The Moebius Stepping  
Stone.....Flexibility of Thinking Problems.....Summary

**8. "That's Not My Area" 103**

---

The Solar Cell.....The Blue Capacitor.....Crossing the  
Boundaries.....Hunting Grounds.....Summary

**9. "Don't Be Foolish" 111**

---

Candid Camera Scenes.....Benefits of Conformity.....  
Groupthink.....The Fool.....The Fools and the Rules  
.....Summary

**10. "I'm Not Creative" 119**

---

The Toilet Paper Shortage.....Self-Esteem.....The Two Frogs  
.....Summary

**Examination 127**

---

**A Final Whack 132**

---

**About The Author 136**

---

**Recommended Reading 138**

---

**Index Of Proper Names 140**

---



# Introduction: Opening Mental Locks



## Mental Sex

In the Creative Think seminars I teach, I like to start the participants off with the following exercise. Take a minute to do it.

### **Exercise:**

1. When was the last time you came up with a creative idea?

- This morning
- Yesterday
- Last week
- Last month
- Last year

2. What was it?

3. What motivates you to be creative?

The answers I get usually run something like this: "I found a way to debug a program"; "I discovered a way to sell a new application to a hard-to-satisfy client"; "I motivated a cynical subordinate"; or, "I decorated the living room around a different color."

Recently, I met a man who told me that he got his last creative idea last year. I thought to myself, "This must have been *some* idea to have overshadowed everything else this year," and asked him what it was. He replied, "I found a quicker way home from work."



I guess this person wasn't very motivated. He seemed to be saying, "Everything is fine," and there's no reason to deviate from what's worked in the past. But he made me think: why be creative?

I can think of two important reasons. The first is change. When new information comes into existence and circumstances change, it's no longer possible to solve today's problems with yesterday's solutions. Over and over again, people are finding out that what worked two years ago won't work next week. This gives them a choice. They can either bemoan the fact that things aren't as easy as they used to be, or they can use their creative abilities to find new answers, new solutions, and new ideas.

A second reason for generating new ideas is that it's a lot of fun. As a matter of fact, I like to think of creative thinking as the "sex of our mental lives." Ideas, like organisms, have a life cycle. They are born, they develop, they reach maturity, and they die. So we need a way to generate new ideas. Creative thinking is that means, and like its biological counterpart, it is also pleasurable.

## **What Is Creative Thinking?**

I once asked Carl Ally (founder of Ally & Gargano, one of the more innovative advertising agencies on Madison Avenue) what "makes the creative person tick." Ally responded, "The creative person wants to be a know-it-all. He wants to know about all kinds of things: ancient history, nineteenth century mathematics, current manufacturing techniques, flower arranging, and hog futures. Because he never knows when these ideas might come together to form a new idea. It may happen six minutes later or six months or six years down the road. But he has faith that it will happen."

I agree whole-heartedly. Knowledge is the stuff from which new ideas are made. Nonetheless, knowledge alone won't make a person creative. I think that we've all known people who knew lots of stuff and nothing creative happened. Their knowledge just sat in their crania because they didn't think about what they knew in any new ways. Thus, the real key to being creative lies in what you do with your knowledge. Creative thinking requires an attitude or outlook which allows you to search for ideas and manipulate your knowledge and experience. With this outlook, you try various approaches, first one, then another, often not getting anywhere. You use crazy, foolish, and impractical ideas as stepping stones to practical new ideas. You break the rules occasionally, and hunt for ideas in unusual outside places. In short, by adopting a creative outlook you open yourself up to both new possibilities and to change.

A good example of a person who did this is Johann Gutenberg. What Gutenberg did was to combine two previously unconnected ideas, the wine press and the coin punch, to create a new idea. The purpose of the coin punch was to leave an image on a small area such as a gold coin. The function of a wine press was, and still is, to apply a force over a large area in order to squeeze the juice out of the grapes. One day Gutenberg, perhaps after he'd drunk a glass of wine or two, playfully asked himself, "What if I took a bunch of these coin punches and put them under the force of the wine press so that they left their images on paper?" The resulting combination was the printing press and movable type.

Another example is Nolan Bushnell. In 1971, Bushnell looked at his television and thought, "I'm not satisfied with

just *watching* my TV set. I want to play with it and have it respond to me." Soon after, he created "Pong," the interactive table tennis game which started the video game revolution.

Still another example of a person who did this is Picasso. One day, Picasso went outside his house and found an old bicycle. He looked at it for a little bit, and then took off the seat and the handle bars. He then welded them together to create the head of a bull.

Each of these examples illustrates the power the creative mind has to transform one thing into another. By changing perspective and playing with our knowledge and experience, we can make the ordinary extraordinary and the unusual commonplace. In this way, wine presses squeeze out information, TV sets turn into game machines, and bicycle seats become bull's heads. The Nobel Prize winning physician Albert Szent-Györgyi put it well when he said:

**Discovery consists of looking at the same thing as everyone else and thinking something different.**

Thus, if you'd like to be more creative, just look at the same thing as everyone else and "think something different."



## Mental Locks

Why don't we "think something different" more often? There are two main reasons. The first is that we don't need to be creative for most of what we do. For example, we don't need to be creative when we are driving on the freeway, or riding in an elevator, or waiting in line at a checkout station in a grocery store. To deal with the business of living, we have developed routines which guide us through our day-to-day encounters—everything from doing paperwork to tying our shoes to dealing with telephone solicitors.

For most of our activities, these routines are indispensable. Without them, our lives would be in chaos, and we wouldn't get much accomplished. For example, if you got up this morning and started contemplating the bristles on your toothbrush or questioning the meaning of toast, you probably wouldn't make it to work. Thus, staying on routine thought-paths enables us to do the many things we need to do without having to think about them.

There are times, however, when you need to be creative and generate new ways to accomplish your objectives. When this happens, sometimes your own belief systems can prevent you from doing so. Here we come to the second reason why we don't think something different more often. Most of us have certain attitudes which lock our thinking into the status quo and keep us thinking "more of the same." These attitudes are necessary for most of what we do, but they can get in the way when we're trying to be creative.

I call these attitudes *mental locks*. There are ten mental locks in particular which I have found to be especially hazardous to our thinking. They are listed on the next page.

As you can well imagine, it's difficult to get your creative juices flowing if you're always being practical, following rules, afraid to make mistakes, not looking into outside areas, or under the influence of any of the other mental locks.