Random Pictures Technique

When we think hard about a problem, our mind often follows the same familiar paths. The Random Pictures Technique is a simple way to step off these paths. It is a variation of the random entry, or random word, technique, which Edward de Bono described as part of lateral thinking. Instead of a random word, we use a random picture as the starting point for new ideas. The picture has nothing to do with the problem, and that is exactly why it works.

1. Choose a Random Picture

First, we state the problem clearly, and then we choose a picture by chance. The picture can come from a magazine, a set of photo cards or an image bank opened at random. We should not pick a picture that looks useful, because a careful choice brings back our usual thinking. Everyday scenes and objects work well, such as a bridge, a market or a bicycle.

Example: a family planning a weekend trip opens a magazine at random and finds a picture of a beehive.

At work: Nabil, a customer service manager, wants fewer complaints about long waiting times. He shuffles a set of photo cards and draws a picture of a lighthouse.

2. List Features and Associations

Next, we look closely at the picture and write down everything we notice. We list its parts, shapes, colours and actions. Then we add associations, such as the feelings, uses and ideas that the picture brings to mind. At this stage, we do not think about the problem at all. A long and varied list gives us more material for the next step.

Example: the beehive suggests teamwork, sweet honey, clear roles and busy flights in and out.

At work: Nabil's team lists a strong light, signals at night, ships guided safely and a tower that is visible from far away.

3. Force Connections to the Problem

Now we take each item on the list and ask one question: what does this suggest for our problem? Many links will feel strange or even silly at first, and that is normal. We keep them for now, because a strange link can lead to a useful idea. The aim is to force the mind to travel from the picture back to the problem along a new path.

Example: the busy bees remind the family that everyone could have one clear task.

At work: the signals of the lighthouse make the team ask: what if customers could see how long they will wait?

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4. Turn Links into Practical Ideas

A connection is not yet an idea that we can use. In this step, we shape each promising link into a concrete action. We ask what exactly we would do, who would do it and what it would need. Sometimes two weak links combine into one strong idea.

Example: each family member gets one job, such as packing food, checking the route or choosing games.

At work: the team suggests showing the expected waiting time on the phone line. Another idea is a simple self-help guide that leads customers to quick answers, like a light that guides ships.

5. Evaluate and Choose

Creative ideas still need careful judgement. We compare them against simple criteria such as value, cost, time and risk. The best ideas are often improved during this discussion, not simply accepted or rejected. It helps to test one or two ideas on a small scale first. Keeping the creative step apart from the judging step makes both of them stronger.

Example: the family keeps the task idea, because it is easy and makes the trip calmer.

At work: Nabil tests the waiting time message for one month. Complaints about waiting go down, so the team adds the self-help guide next.

6. Tips for Groups and Workshops

The technique works very well in teams, because different people see different things in the same picture. A facilitator can give each small group a different picture and then let the groups share their best links. A short time limit for each step keeps the energy high. During the early steps, nobody should criticise ideas, because early judgement stops creativity.

At work: in a monthly workshop, Nabil gives three teams three different pictures. Each team presents its two best ideas in five minutes.

Conclusion

In summary, the Random Pictures Technique uses chance to open new paths in our thinking. We choose a random picture, list its features, force connections, turn them into practical ideas and then evaluate them. The picture does not give the answer; it gives the mind a new starting point. With practice, strange links become easier to find and to use. One simple picture can help a person or a team find ideas that logic alone would miss.

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