

BRAVE NEW WORK

A Brave New Prescription for Creative Management: Perhaps the best prescription for boosting corporate creativity would be a prescription.

By Michael Schrage (schrage@media.mit.edu), *Fortune*

Editor's Note: The following article is about the possible use of psychedelics and other psychoactive drugs to stimulate business-oriented creativity. MAPS purchased the rights to reprint this article for \$100 from Fortune magazine, where the article originally appeared on April 30, 2001. MAPS is interested in funding the design and sponsoring a pilot study into psychedelics and creativity. Jeremy Tarcher has already donated \$2,500 to MAPS to help with the design process of such a study. We need to complete the work on the MDMA/PTSD protocol and get it submitted and approved by the FDA, then complete the work on the MDMA/cancer patient study and get it submitted to FDA. Then...perhaps in the fall, we can start in earnest on the design of a creativity study. This article from Fortune suggests that before long, this sort of research will become more socially accepted, at least by the titans of business who read Fortune.

Inspiration is elusive. Innovation is hard. Demand for technical and conceptual breakthroughs in global business is intensifying. Organizations are looking everywhere for the transforming insight. Perhaps the best prescription for boosting corporate creativity would be a prescription.

Think about it. Work-hard, play-hard executives seldom hesitate to go out for a few drinks to mull over a clever idea. In the right dose and in the right company, alcohol can reduce inhibitions and encourage unfettered debate. Even some teetotaling managers occasionally pop a Prozac to put themselves in a better mood to consider a business proposal. More conventionally, Fortune 1,000 companies commonly organize manager retreats and Outward Bound-like excursions explicitly designed to pump up the endorphins and promote an intensity of interaction that ordinarily wouldn't occur. It's a well-established business principle that changes of venue and changes in body chemistry frequently lead to refreshing changes in corporate perspective.

Why not the next logical step? Turn these everyday experiments in self-medication into more rigorously designed and disciplined initiatives for innovation. Think of such mediated medicated creativity as a form of creative managerial therapy best done under professional supervision.

Picture the Leary-Huxley Institute for Creative Business Visualization on one of the sunnier islands near Crete. Psychopharmacologists and board-certified neuropsychologists dispense small, precise dosages of psychoactive materials to visiting executive teams that want to push themselves beyond the boundaries of conventional business perception. The purpose would not be to get "high" but to enhance creativity. Skilled facilitators would ensure that the interactions focus on the business tasks at hand. At minimal medical risk, managers could discover what--if any--impact chemical stimulation might have on their creative acumen.

Perhaps a team of hedge fund managers might find investment inspiration in a myco-managed conversation in the hypothetical institute's Coleridge Room. Off in the Lennon Wing, fashion buyers and designers at a global clothing merchant could brainstorm in profoundly different ways. At the newly refurbished De Quincey Pavilion, computational chemistry researchers from--ironically--one of the world's largest pharmaceuticals companies could play with the asymmetrical geometries of a potentially therapeutic protein.

As outrageous as such a scenario might sound, the reality is that drugs like Rogaine and Viagra have become billion-dollar blockbusters even though their longer-term medicinal benefits remain in dispute. "Dysfunctions" of all kinds--physical, mental, emotional--have been medicalized. We don't think twice about prescribing statins for a man with a family history of early arteriosclerosis; we wouldn't think twice about prescribing a drug to prevent the early onset of Alzheimer's disease. The low-risk chemical enhancement of creativity seems at least as worthy a medical objective as the chemical preservation of a head of hair.

To the extent that market imperatives insist that individuals and institutions become ever more creative or fail, there will be growing societal pressure to view psychoactive drugs as a kind of value-added Prozac--a pill to enhance creativity rather than mood. No one is shocked to hear of an "artist"--a pop musician, a painter, a photographer, a film director, a writer--who credits experimentation with "consciousness-expanding" drugs as essential to her creative development. Indeed, global media conglomerates knowingly hire such people even as they disapprove of and disavow illegal drug use.

Consider the public reception if a world-class hedge fund manager or software developer or derivatives designer openly proclaimed that some of his best ideas came when he had had a little too much to drink, or when he had ingested a mushroom-laden meal in the Amazon, or when he had undertaken a therapy that required psychoactive drugs. Would we think less of such an innovator? If the art world is any indicator, the answer is an unambiguous no. And if that fund manager's peyote-driven portfolio consistently outperformed the market, even the most conservative investors would surely find a place in their hearts (and wallets) for the same answer.

As long as the debate around such drugs revolves around indulgence, addiction, illegality, and excess, their use will be concealed and constrained. But in a global economy, where different cultures have radically different standards about the medicinal and economic rationale for drug use, the odds are excellent that chemistry-driven creativity will cease to be a managerial taboo. Why? Because as long as it's legal and safe, managers will seek whatever creative competitive edge they can find. Even if they have to find it in a pill.