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## **Doing Creative Travel and Tourism Thinking**

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The twenty-first century is bringing about major changes in the tourism industry. Tourism and travel professionals are slowly learning to confront not only unprecedented issues of travel safety and security, but also issues such as travel conformity (the lack of unique products), poor service, and travel ennui. Furthermore, as the economy improves travel and tourism professionals will have to deal with employee turbulence, cross border opportunities and employees' unwillingness to take orders. To meet these challenges tourism and travel professionals will need to go beyond the standardized academic thought patterns and become "creative thinkers." Industry leaders will have to confront problems that have not yet been defined. The following essay is meant to stimulate your creative juices and help meet future challenges.

... *Remember you are part of the problem, solution, and product.* List where you are stifling creativity, then go over the list with a trusted friend. Ask subordinates how you can help them problems solve and try to look at your office and product as a customer would: from the outside in. Being defensive not only does not solve the problem but also blinds us to problems and creative problem solving.

... *Do not become too number oriented in your tourism and travel research.* There is certainly a place for statistics in travel and tourism policy decision making. Nevertheless all data reflect the past and not the future. Question your assumptions and ask yourself if past quantitative assumptions reflect future realities. Often the best way to accomplish the research task is to mix quantitative with qualitative analysis. The bottom line is that the more analytical tools you use, the better you will be able to stay ahead of future trends.

... *Do not fear employee turnover.* New people create new ideas. While there is always a need for experience, the best combination is new people and ideas tempered by long term employees who bring a wealth of experience. Combine new employees' visions with the wisdom of those who are more experienced.

... *Never forget that bad data lead to bad decisions.* There is nothing more dangerous than basing one's decisions on bad data. Before starting a research project, ask yourself if these data are really what you need. Are you asking questions out of habit or because they will lead your office to creative decision making?

... *Overcome office mind- sets.* The wisdom of the past may not be valid for the

future. Ask your employees probing questions such as “why do you perform your tasks in manner x”? “What other needs could you meet” or “how would a change in job description improve our locale's overall tourism picture?” The number one reason that people are afraid to suggest new ideas is fear of rejection. Make sure that these answers are heard in a non-judgmental way.

... *Have a day for outlandish ideas.* Some of the most outlandish ideas can be the most useful. Develop counter intuitive ideas sessions, then question why these ideas would not work. Never dismiss an idea simply because we have never done it, or it doesn't seem right. Instead either refute the idea based on evidence or try to modify it so that the idea may become doable either now or in the future.

... *Create and outlandish idea bank.* Often ideas that seem off-the-wall at a specific point in time are very appropriate at another point in time. Write down all ideas no matter how bizarre they may be then review these ideas on a yearly basis. *Do not be afraid to modify or change the idea to meet circumstances as they arise.*

... *Encourage not only employees but also top leadership to think outside of the office's framework.* Too many tourism and travel bureaucracies simply rule by fiat. Consider the advantages of a more democratic approach. Ask employees to help you make tough decisions. For example, faced with a budget cut, you may discover that a particular problem can be solved by changes in schedules or office hours rather than employee firings.

... *When thinking creatively, do not be afraid to upset the status quo.* Until you verbalize your thoughts, they are private. When doing creative thinking let go of such notions as “don't rock the boat.” Upon formulating an idea, you can determine if the idea is politically viable and “do-able.” Never reject an idea without at least thinking about it. Rejected ideas may generate viable ones.

... *Do not put every new idea through a formal channel procedure.* Formal channels are a great way to kill creativity and cut yourself off from innovative ideas. Instead, run a round-table discussion where everyone has a chance to brainstorm on equal footing. Although there are still pockets of formality the long-term trend is for greater informality not only in dress codes but also along the entire authority ladder.

... *Don't get stuck in specific categories.* Tourism leaders often are so busy that they forget that no matter what the task, everyone's number one job is to serve the visitor. Too many agencies classify their people as “customer service personnel, researchers, or numbers people (accountants etc.). In reality, tourism offices only have one category of employee: service providers. Begin to think how categories can overlap and everyone on your staff can be trained to put the visitor's' needs first.

... *Develop adaptive vision and mission statements.* Too many travel and tourism professionals forget what they hope to accomplish, if their goals are realizable, and how they intend to go about implementing these goals. Review your office's history: where

did it succeed and fail? What are its core values? Who are the office's heroes and heroines and what made them heroic?

... *Do not give orders from above.* Most workers will respond best to a sense of team planning, and most jobs are simply too complicated for top management to really know what's going on down in the trenches. Ask your subordinates for advice and information and let them know that you all are on the same team. Make sure you listen more than you speak.

*Dr. Peter E. Tarlow is the president of Tourism and More, Inc. He is the author of "Tourism Tidbits" and electronic newsletter for tourism and travel which is published both in English and Spanish language versions. For information on course and lectures or for a free subscription to "Tourism Tidbits," please contact him at <tourism@bihs.net>*