



# SOLVE ANY PROBLEM

Learn to make decisions more effectively

This document has the power to change your thinking...and your life. Included within is a proven method that can help you clarify any problem, challenge or opportunity and set you on the path toward solutions. Buckle up and enjoy the ride!

Nicole Colter  
Creativity Evangelist

# Introduction

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Welcome to the world of Creative Problem Solving! Before I get down to walking you through a process, let me share a little background. I have always been a person sought after for creative ideas and solution-focused advice. Some of what you are about to experience just came naturally to me; it might even come naturally to you. However, because I was untrained, my application of techniques was sporadic. This sometimes left people more confused and altogether was not very effective. But people still came back to me because, as deficient as it was, it was still better than what they were coming up with on their own.

It wasn't until I started as a graduate student at the [International Center for Studies in Creativity](#) that I was able to fill in the holes in my own process and learn how I could help anyone solve any problem! I was jacked!

On the first day of my graduate program my professor, [Dr. Roger Firestien](#), walked us through an exercise similar to what you are about to experience. This isn't only his individual creation though. This work was first pioneered by Alex Osborn and Sid Parnes over 50 years ago and has been developed by countless other creativity experts over the years. Your challenges are in good hands!

My first time through this process, I was so surprised at how quickly I could get to superior thinking on the challenge I first worked on. That very day I received a call after class from my 20 year old daughter and was able to help her gain clarity on a life-changing decision she was trying to make. I am excited to put this tool in your hands and would very much appreciate hearing from you to let me know what you thought of the results. There is a quick survey at the end, I would greatly appreciate your feedback.

So are you excited yet? Ready to get focused, energized and directed? Well then, read on.

May your arrows fly straight and your aim be true,



# What is Creative Problem Solving (CPS)?

**Creative Problem Solving (CPS) is a process** that can be used on countless challenges now and into your future. It provides a reliable structured way to get to answers. Some might call it a creative process for non-creative people, but since everyone is creative in their own way this isn't entirely true...but you get the point. It is really just a description of the stages people naturally go through to solve problems except it is supercharged with tools to help you actually find solutions and not get overwhelmed or lost in the process. In that way it is a little like a compass that you can use to orient yourself and ensure you arrive at your desired destination.

It isn't a linear process either; it is much more organic in nature meaning you don't have to enter at the first step or exit at the last and sometimes you can reassess or change directions in the middle. It works best on ambiguous, ill-defined situations where the "way we've always done things" isn't going to work anymore.

The graphic to the right is a representation of the Thinking Skills Model of Creative Problem Solving. The 3 stages – Clarification, Transformation and Implementation each have 2 steps – an exploring (diverging) and a formulating (converging) step. The explanation of diverging and converging is presented on the next pages so don't fret.

At the beginning and throughout the process it is important to continually be *Assessing the Situation* which includes gathering data and making decisions about the process.

This complicated process has been condensed into this easy to use, do-it-yourself tool for you.

Wishing you clarity, transformation and a workable plan to implement by the time you are done!



Puccio, G.J., Murdock, M.C., and Mance, M. (2007). *Creative leadership: Skills that drive change*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications

## Rules for Divergent Thinking

Throughout the Creative Problem Solving process, you alternate between divergent thinking and convergent thinking. Divergent thinking aims at producing a large amount and wide variety of unique, even off-the-wall ideas. This is not the time to think about whether the ideas are correct or even workable. It is the ability to “take an idea and spin out elaborate variants” rather than coming up with one correct answer. J.P. Guilford was the first to advocate that divergent thinking was every bit as important as being able to come up with correct answers. (Baer & Kaufman, 2012, p.19-20)

Below are the rules to keep in mind when you are diverging:

- **Defer Judgment** – creative ideas come to mind all the time, we are just really good at swallowing them up in judgment very quickly. This exercise is for your eyes only, unless you choose to share. Write down anything that comes to mind. The time to judge, affirmatively, is during converging. I will let you know when that is, otherwise remember that judgement is the killer of creativity.
- **Strive for Quantity** – The first ideas that come to mind are not the most creative and won't get you to the kinds of breakthrough you desire. Keep pushing yourself to meet the stated quota and surpass it. The more the better. In order to get quality, you must start with quantity.
- **Seek Wild and Unusual Ideas** – Stretch yourself to include ideas that at first seem crazy. Once you get thinking, if you are truly deferring judgment and striving for quantity, it's likely some very unusual ideas will bubble up. Write them down. The wilder the ideas the better, you can always develop them later to be more realistic; however, you may realize you don't even want to make them more realistic. This is your time to DREAM BIG!
- **Build on Other Ideas** – Sometimes one idea can spark a whole series of similar, yet different, ideas. Write them all down. The goal is a lot of wild and unusual ideas so take every idea captive and make it confess all its accomplices! Behind every idea is a whole posse of valuable knockoffs.

### The Principle of Extended Effort

It pays to keep pushing for more ideas!  
60% of preferred ideas come up after  
the first third of ideas generated

*"It's easier to tame a wild idea  
than to invigorate a weak one."*

*– Alex Osborne*

## Rules for Convergent Thinking

Once you have a bunch of ideas from your divergent thinking, you have to start to make choices using convergent thinking. Convergent thinking ensures change is not reckless. It seeks to find the best answer to the problem by **screening** (filtering-keeping some, discarding others), **sorting** (categorizing and grouping), **prioritizing** (ranking), **supporting** (examining positive attributes) and **developing** (improving/strengthening). (Puccio, G.J., Murdock, M.C., and Mance, M., 2007, 2012, p. 61)

Convergent thinking comes naturally to us and applied too heavily, it can kill all your creative ideas. That's why it is important to keep in mind these rules when converging:

- **Be Affirmative** – It's too easy to attack an idea and quickly find what is wrong with it. Start by thinking about what is good about it! What do you like about it? Maybe there is a way to develop it to get rid of what you don't like and still keep what you do like but you won't ever get there unless you challenge yourself to find the good stuff first.
- **Be Deliberate** – Try not to jump to conclusions. Don't make any harsh judgments. Watch out – your own prejudices and assumptions can skew your choices. Avoid premature closure or pushing for a decision too quickly. Give each alternative a fair chance.
- **Check Your Objectives** – Some ideas will get you really excited because they are interesting or cool. It is easy to get sidetracked by a "bright shiny idea" that really isn't helping you move toward the solution for your original vision or challenge. Maybe it is meant for a different place and time, that's OK. You can still use it for something else but just make sure that the choices you make for the challenge at hand are actually the best for the challenge at hand.
- **Improve Ideas** – Here's where you refine the ideas and make them workable. Be patient with the process. Find the diamonds in the rough and polish them!
- **Consider Novelty** – If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got! New and creative ideas can be scary at first. It takes courage to try things that might not work and that others may not understand or approve of. Challenge yourself to consider the wild and unusual ideas you came up with – they can be revised, toned down or expanded. Believe that they came to mind for a reason and give them a chance to see the light of day.

# Identifying Situations for Creative Problem Solving

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Not every challenge you face is a good fit for CPS. It is a comprehensive process which takes time so it is better for some situations than others. The good news is that if you start to internalize the thinking involved in the CPS process, it will likely make all of your situations easier to figure out. The following questions will help you clear your head of the challenges bouncing around in there so we can find one to test drive CPS on today! Let's get started!

**Remember to use the Rules for Divergent Thinking at this point.**

List things you've done lately that you would like to do better:

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What sorts of challenges might be on your mind?

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What do you wish worked better?

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# Identifying Situations for Creative Problem Solving

Many challenges are associated with other people. Who has been on your mind?

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What are the concerns or opportunities associated with the people on your mind lately?

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What are some objectives you would like to meet?

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# Identifying Situations for Creative Problem Solving

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When you scan the world, what opportunities might be on your mind?

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The nice thing about creativity is that it allows you to go through space and time. Imagine one year from today. What are your goals between now and then?

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You just got a magic wand that can accomplish anything! Write down what your ideal wish or goals would be?

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## Identifying Situations for Creative Problem Solving

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Take a couple more minutes and write down any other goals, challenges, opportunities, wishes and visions or just elaborate further on things that have already come to mind.

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Congratulations!!!

You just used divergent thinking to come up with a list of possible situations that could benefit from CPS. Now it is time to use a simple convergent tool called hits.

Using 3 different colored markers (or 3 different symbols if you don't have different colors) put a dot/symbol next to each item that you identified where **YOU have clear ownership**. Here are some things to consider whether you have ownership of the problem.

- Is this your problem to solve?
- Do others consider you accountable for the solution?
- Are you willing to be accountable for the solution, or lack thereof?

Using another color or symbol, mark the items that you **have motivation to accomplish** in the next 3 weeks to 3 months. If you have no motivation to see results soon, you likely won't continue and see the full benefit of CPS.

Last with another color or symbol, mark the items that would **require some imaginative thinking** to accomplish. Items that don't have only one right answer or are ill-defined are perfect for CPS.

Items that have all 3 colors or symbols are worthy of being explored using CPS. Now it is time to pick one of these items to explore using CPS and go to the next section.

If you have a lot of options with 3 colors or symbols and you aren't sure which one to choose first, consider these questions:

- Which one seems on track?
- Which sparkles?
- Which one, if solved, might give you more energy for the others?
- Is there one that is more important than all the others?
- Is there one that gives you a sense of peace when you imagine accomplishing it?

## Exploring a Challenge

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Now that you have a challenge you would like to explore. Start by writing it below:

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Please write below the first solution that comes to mind of how you could solve this:

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MOVE TO THE NEXT PAGE  
AND DON'T LOOK BACK  
TO THIS PAGE UNTIL YOU  
ARE INSTRUCTED TO DO SO

On the next few pages **do not** skip any questions or move ahead without answering each question.

# Exploring a Challenge

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Re-write your challenge here: \_\_\_\_\_

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What is the history of this challenge?

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Why is this a concern for you?

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What is the opportunity this challenge presents?

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What have you tried or thought of already?

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What is your ideal goal or outcome?

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## Exploring a Challenge

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Write 5-10 ways to restate the challenge using the statement starter "How to". For example if I chose "I want to start a business" it would be rewritten as "How to start a business?"

1. How to
2. How to
3. How to
4. How to
5. How to
6. How to
7. How to
8. How to
9. How to
10. How to

Choose one of the restated challenges above and circle it or rewrite it here:

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**"A problem well stated is a problem half solved." – Charles Kettering**

# Exploring Ideas & Formulating a Solution

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Now come up with at least 10-12 ideas that might solve this challenge

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.
- 11.
- 12.
- 13.
- 14.
- 15.
- 16.
- 17.
- 18.
- 19.
- 20.

Looking at those ideas, it is time to formulate a solution. You will be restating the idea or ideas that you find most promising. You can combine items and add to them. The statement starts as:

“What I see myself doing is... \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Take another minute to add more to the solution statement you created. Think about the magnitude of the proposed solution and stretch yourself to make it larger and more comprehensive.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



## Formulating a Plan

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Think about things that you can accomplish in 3 weeks to 3 months and write down any action steps that come to mind.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

You are done with an abbreviated CPS session!! The last step is to look at the end result solution statement and actions steps and compare it to the original challenge and first proposed solution. How much has your understanding of the challenge expanded? How much clearer is the solution statement than the original one you first thought of?

## Conclusion

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I hope you enjoyed this exercise and made some progress on your challenge. This do-it-yourself method has helped others and I hope it has helped you. Once you've tackled the first challenge you chose, go back and see if any of the other challenges still meet your ownership, motivation and imaginative thinking criteria and explore a new challenge. If you really try to make this type of thinking and process part of your life, you can start to get better at decision-making and problem-solving. This isn't just a document, its mental exercise and the more you do it, the stronger your thinking muscles will get!

I would appreciate your feedback. Please consider taking the survey to let us know what you thought of this process.

## About the Author

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Nicole Colter is a serial entrepreneur who is passionate about teaching and learning. After being self-employed for over 13 years she is currently reinventing herself.

Now pursuing her Graduate Certificate in Creativity and Change Leadership at the [International Center for Studies in Creativity](#), she is also exploring "What might be all the ways to [change the world](#)?"

She has been inspired by the conversations happening about the future of education. In 2009, The World Economic Forum's [Educating the Next Wave of Entrepreneurs](#) report called upon the education systems of the world to infuse entrepreneurship education at all grade levels and in 2016 their [Future of Jobs](#)

report identified Complex-Problem Solving, Critical Thinking, Judgment and Decision Making and Cognitive Flexibility as 4 of the top 10 skills needed by the year 2020. She hopes to one day help traditional K-12 schools move in this direction toward models that nurture the natural curiosity of children and protect and develop their creativity until graduation.

Nicole currently offers services to anyone looking to make significant changes through creative problem-solving facilitation, creativity training and/or dynamic change coaching. She helps clients clarify their vision or challenge and to work through the transformation and implementation stages as well.

## References

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