



The Value of CONFUSION

by Mitchell Ditkoff

Are you confused about how to proceed with your hottest new idea or project? Puzzled? Baffled? Disoriented? If so, take heart! Confusion is not always a bad thing. In fact, it is often a natural and healthy part of the creative process. The weirdness enters when you start to judge yourself for being confused. Then, instead of benefitting from this normal stage of “not knowing” you end up in endless rounds of self-talk, procrastination, and wasted worry – none of which will serve you on your way to creating something new and wonderful.

What is confusion, really? Technically speaking, it's a state of mind in which the elements you are dealing with appear to be indiscriminately mixed, out of whack, or unable to be interpreted to your satisfaction. In other words – a state of not knowing. Everyone from Einstein to Mickey Mouse has



had this experience. It comes with the territory of exploring new horizons. Unfortunately, most of us have a hard time acknowledging it. “Not knowing” has somehow become a euphemism for “ignorance” or “being unprofessional.” And so begins our curious routine of “appearing to know” and giving bogus “answers” – to ourselves and others – in a pitiful attempt to mask our confusion and maintain a sense of control, brilliance, and selfhood.

Our fundamental discomfort with not knowing – much in the same way that a person who breaks up with their significant other often rushes too quickly into the next relationship – prevents us from mining the value of this potentially fertile time of dislocation. In the words of Pablo Picasso, “The act of creation is first of all an act of destruction.” Translation? Great breakthroughs emerge after times of dissolution, chaos, and confusion. Jump too quickly into the next “thing” or premature “solution” and

you may be short-circuiting a critical stage of the (yes, often uncomfortable) creative process.

Is it really so bad not to know? Wasn't the universe itself created out of chaos? Ilya Prigogine, a leading brain researcher, describes this phenomenon as the "Theory of Dissipative Structures". Simply put, it means that when things fall apart, they eventually *reorganize* themselves on a higher level (if they don't first become extinct). And while this transition stage certainly *looks and feels* like confusion, what's *really* happening is that the old structures are giving way to the new – **AN ESSENTIAL PART OF THE CREATIVE PROCESS.**

Lao Tzu, one of China's most revered sages, knew all about this phenomenon and was not at all shy about acknowledging it:

*I am a fool, oh yes, I am confused.
Other men are clear and bright.
But I alone am dim and weak.
Other men are sharp and clever,
But I alone am dull and stupid.
Oh, I drift like the waves of the sea,
Without direction, like the restless wind.*

Somehow, he knew that "things" needed to be a little mixed up occasionally for there to be sufficient space for something new to enter his life. He knew that sometimes it was wisest just to let life unfold – and that any knee-jerk attempt on his part to clear up what he perceived to be confusion would only leave him with his old habits, patterns, and routines.

There is no need to fight confusion. Let it be. It's a stage you must pass through on your road to creation. Fighting confusion only makes it worse – like trying to clean a dirty pond by poking at it with a stick. And, besides, even while your conscious mind is

telling you you're confused, your subconscious mind is processing a mile a minute to come up with some pretty amazing solutions. In the shower. While your exercising. Driving home from work. Even in your dreams.

Look at it this way: First, we **REFUSE** (to have our status quo threatened). Then, we get **CONFUSED** (trying to sort out all the new input). Next, we try to **DIFFUSE** the process (by regressing or denying.) Eventually, we get **INFUSED** (inundated by new insights). And, finally, we get **FUSED** (connecting with previously unrelated elements to form a new and unified whole).

Your next step? Allow confusion to be what it is – the catalyst for new and more elegant solutions in your life. And if you REALLY can't stand the confusion, know there ARE some simple things you can do to go beyond it:

1. Take a break from the problem at hand
2. Get real clear about what's confusing you
3. Talk about your confusion with trusted friends or co-workers
4. Seek out missing information
5. Redefine your problem or challenge
6. Pay attention to your dreams and other clues bubbling up from your subconscious

**“CONFUSION IS A WORD WE HAVE INVENTED
FOR AN ORDER WHICH IS NOT YET UNDERSTOOD.” – HENRY MILLER**

*This article is excerpted from **BANKING ON INNOVATION**, a 172-page workbook that accompanies Idea Champions' 2-day creative thinking training.
Log onto www.ideachampions.com/banking_on_innovation.shtml for more info.*