

How to brainstorm using a Lotus Blossom map

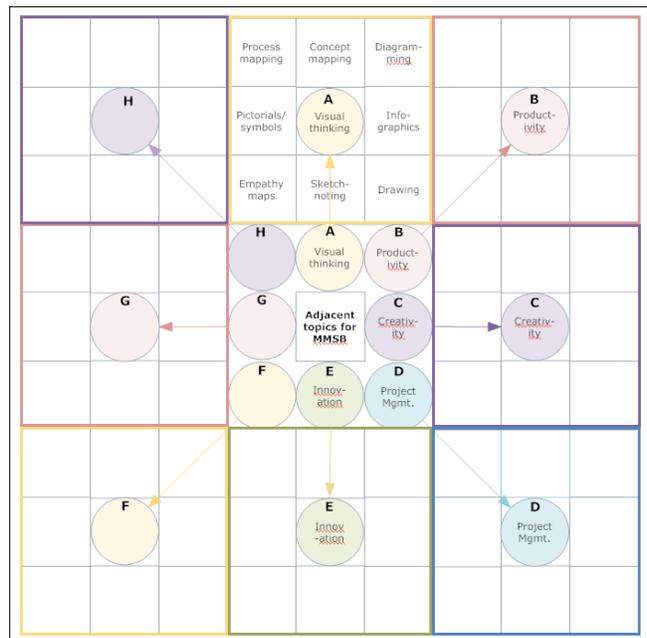
By Chuck Frey, *The Mind Mapping Software Blog*

One of the problems with the way we think is that it tends to be based heavily upon problems and challenges we have faced in the past. We tend to focus on something that has worked before for us, and settle on the first seemingly good idea that pops into our minds. As a result, we tend to grab at a narrow range of ideas, and stick with them until they're proven wrong – not a very good survival skill for today's climate of discontinuous, accelerating change.

We need to force ourselves to think out of our well-rutted paths of thinking into some fresh territory. Michael Michalko, writing in his seminal book of creativity techniques,

[*Thinkertoys: A Handbook of Creative-Thinking Techniques*](#), explains: “The creative genius will always look for a multiplicity of ways to approach a subject. It is this willingness to entertain different perspectives and alternative approaches that broadens their thinking and opens them up to new information and the new possibilities that the rest of us don't see. Einstein was once asked what the difference was between him and the average person. He said that if you asked the average person to find a needle in a haystack, the person would stop when he or she found a needle. He, on the other hand, would tear through the entire haystack looking for all possible needles.”

A Lotus Blossom map can help us to brainstorm and think about a much broader collection of ideas and potential solutions to our challenges. This ideation technique was originally developed

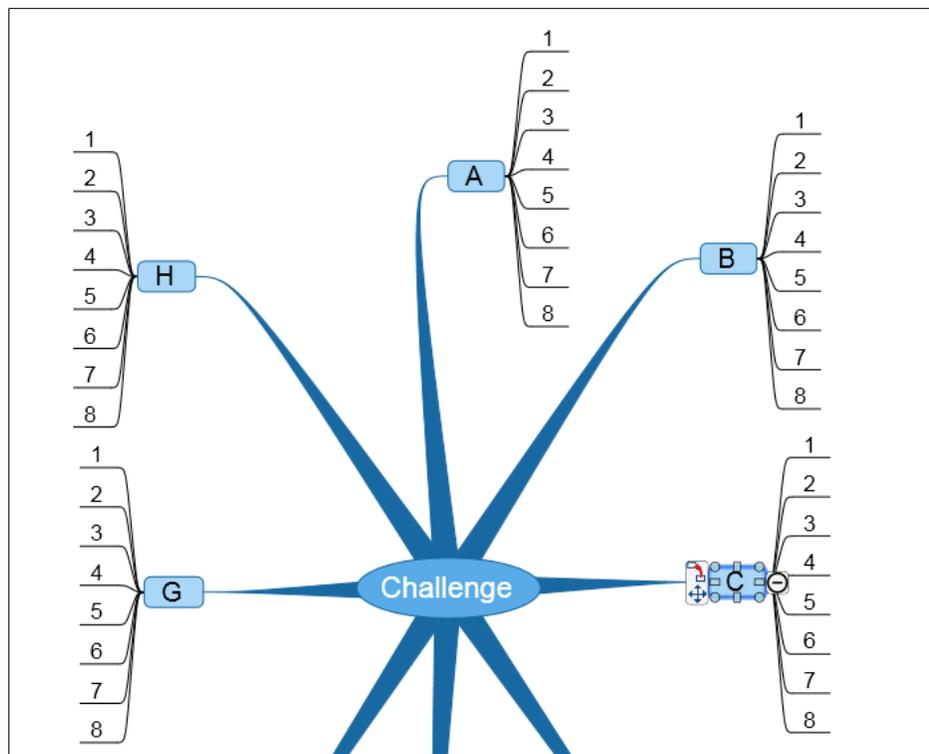


by Yasuo Matsumura of Clover Management Research in Chiba City, Japan, and is explained in Michalko’s book. Here, he explains what the connection is between brainstorming and this delicate, oriental flower:

“In Lotus Blossom, the petals around the core of the blossom are figuratively “peeled back” one at a time, revealing a key component or theme. This approach is pursued in ever-widening circles until the subject or opportunity is comprehensively explored. The cluster of themes and surrounding ideas and applications, which are developed in one way or another, provide several different alternative possibilities.”



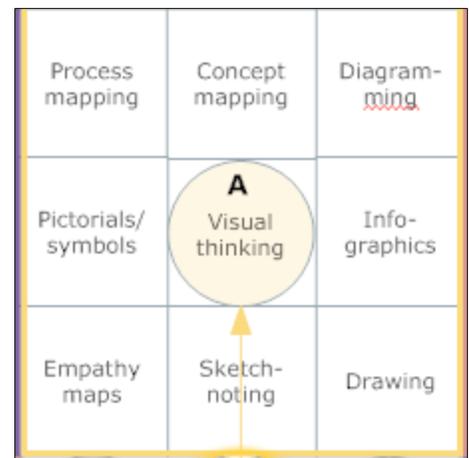
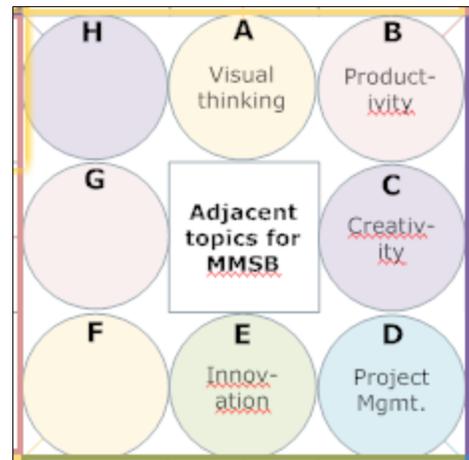
In a sense, this approach to developing ideas and then children of our ideas has much in common with mind mapping – which is the reason I’m sharing it with you. In fact, if you took the Lotus Blossom diagram (pictured at the top of page 1 and available as a downloadable template) and looked at it closely, you would notice that it resembles a radial mind map with 8 first-level topics, with each of them, in turn, having 8 sub-topics, similar to the mind map pictured below:



The process

So here's the step-by-step process to use the Lotus Blossom technique to create fresh ideas and insights for your own business and life:

1. [Download the template for this exercise here](#), if you haven't already done so. The only copy of this diagram I could find was a black-and-white one on Michalko's Thinkertoys book, so I created a new one especially to accompany this report, complete with coordinated colors and helpful arrows, to show you where to copy your ideas. You can print it out and use it over and over. Or, if you prefer, [download the SmartDraw \(SDR\) file I used to create it](#), so you can type rather than write in the boxes of the diagram (note: you must have a recent version of SmartDraw installed on your computer to open this file. This diagram was created using SmartDraw VP). If you choose this method, 8-point text fits best in its shapes.
2. Place your problem or challenge in the square in the center of the diagram.
3. Think about its key elements or components, and write those in the 8 circles that surround the square, lettered A through H. One element per circle, please. Think of these as the functional equivalent of first-level topics in a mind map.
4. Transfer each of those elements from its inner circle to the corresponding outer circle (it has the same background color and letter as the inner circle, with an arrow pointing to it). Each item now becomes the basis for generating 8 new ideas or solutions. Note how each of the central topics and their corresponding "blossoms" are color coded for ease of use. This makes it easier for you to see how ideas start at the center and flow outward.
5. Use the words written in each of these circles as the theme for each of its "blossom petals" or boxes. The example at right depicts how I used this concept to brainstorm topics related to

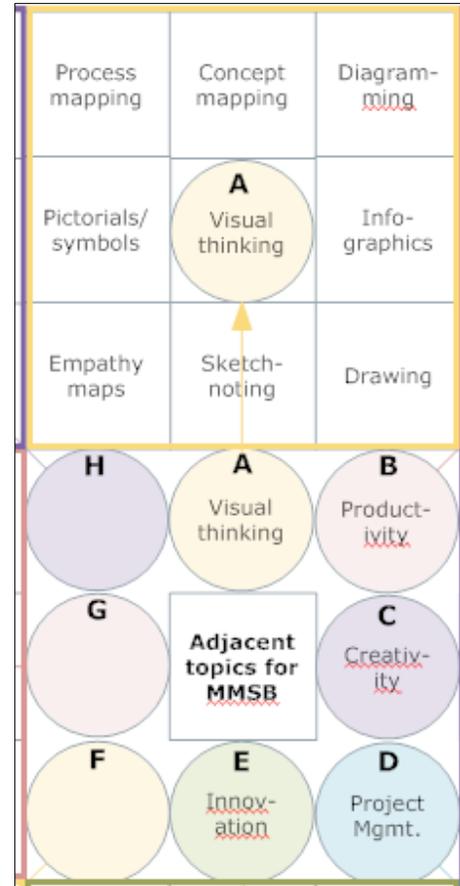


“visual thinking” for my blog. An expanded view (right) shows the starting point of the “visual thinking” topic at the center of the diagram, how it was transferred to the outer “flower” and how it was expanded to include 8 new ideas as “petals” radiating out from it.

- Continue the process until the Lotus Blossom diagram is complete. Chances are, you will have uncovered some potentially valuable ideas!

To help you understand how this brainstorming technique works, I created a second PDF that show how I partially filled out the template. [You can download it here.](#)

If your challenge has more than 8 elements or you want to brainstorm in even greater detail, you can print out additional copies of this document.



Why does this brainstorming technique work?

The Lotus Blossom brainstorming technique works because it gives you away to dig deeper into and explore ideas related to your problem or challenge, in much the same way that a mind map empowers you to dig deeper and deeper into it, with successive levels of topics, sub-topics and sub-sub-topics.

Once again, Michalko offers some additional insights: *“It shifts you from reacting to a “static” snapshot of the problem and will encourage you to examine the significant themes of the problem and the relationships and connections between them. Sometimes when you complete a diagram with ideas and applications for each theme, a property or feature not previously seen will emerge.*

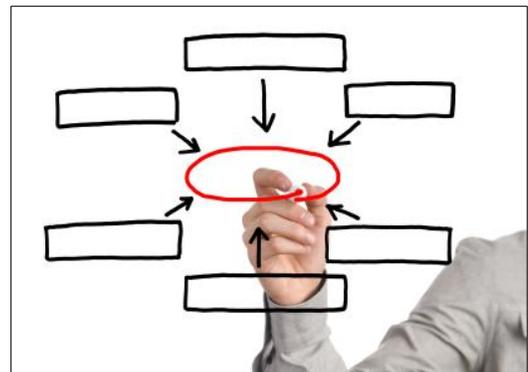
Generally, higher level properties are regarded as emergent – a car, for example, is an emergent property of the interconnected parts. If a car was disassembled and all the parts were thrown into a heap, the property disappears. If you placed the parts in piles according to function, you begin to see a pattern and make connections between the piles that may inspire you to imagine the emergent property – the car, which you can then build. Similarly, when you diagram your problem thematically with ideas and applications, it enhances your opportunity to see patterns and make connections. The connections you make between the themes and ideas and applications will sometimes create a emergent new property or feature not previously considered.”



A mind maps shares these emergent qualities, as [I explained in a blog post here](#).

Another reason the Lotus Blossom technique is so effective is because your subconscious mind doesn't like to see blank spaces. It will fill in empty spots in this diagram with ideas. In so doing, it forces your thinking into fresh territory, exploring possibilities you may not have previously considered.

Why not give this technique a try today on a creative challenge or problem you face? You may be pleasantly surprised by the results!



Questions?

Please contact Chuck Frey at chuck@innovationtools.com.

Please [visit the Mind Mapping Software Blog](#) for all of the latest news, trends and resources related to visual mapping.

You can also [follow Chuck Frey on Twitter](#) for even more insights and ideas.