



A shortened English version of Kirstine Vinderskov's work paper 'NABC – metoden' (www.plan09.dk)

The NABC Method

The following is a short presentation of the NABC method, its concept, and some ground rules for the process of ideation.

NABC is a tool used for the development, assessment and presentation of ideas. Anyone can use it both in everyday situations whether at home or at work, whenever there is a need for original thinking.

Background

The developers of NABC feel that a great number of good ideas are sometimes lost because so-called 'idea-makers' are often specialists deeply involved in their field of interest, who find it sometimes difficult to explain their ideas to the world. Consequently, the world rejects their propositions simply because they do not understand them.

NABC has been developed in order to acquire a more systematic approach to the understanding of value propositions, in other words, the value of original thinking. This method enables the idea-makers to present their ideas while at the same time it assesses their value using a range of central parameters.

The NABC method was developed in the USA by the Stanford Research Institute (www.sri.com). It was originally conceived for the business world, but was later adapted to several other sectors.

Concept

The fact that the method was originally devised for business purposes should not present a problem with regard to its application in a non-commercial context such as, for example, local district planning.

NABC is a method which helps present ideas in an easily accessible and captivating way but, most importantly, it helps develop and assess them. Compared to so many other methods, the fact that it can be used in all phases of a development process makes NABC especially effective. In order to draw the utmost advantage, it is crucial for both the idea-makers and for the users to use NABC throughout all the stages of development, namely, from when an idea is conceived to its final presentation as a full-fledged concept. One can supplement NABC with other methods, if required.

Using NABC to introduce one's idea is called 'to pitch.' To pitch means to try and sell, so to speak, an idea in a precise and concise way. It is important to have thorough knowledge of the value proposition. It is preferable, however, to elaborate or go into depth only when answering questions, while the presentation itself should always remain short and concise. It is part of the method itself to generate relevant and specific questions. The development process can take place in many different ways. The following are some suggestions on how to use the various techniques.

Citizen involvement

When NABC assesses an idea, it introduces specific questions which have to be answered. It is, as mentioned before, possible to supplement NABC with other methods, during the assessment phase, for instance. At this stage, citizens can also be involved. This is an important point because an idea should be developed while keeping in mind the need of the citizen/client/user, in other



words whoever is at the receiving end. An idea is seldom a good idea unless it relates to its user. With NABC users are part of the process in all stages of its development.

NABC can also be used as a tool in a daily work situation to help think and act in innovative ways. Its advantage is to make one tackle a daily work routine from another angle than one is used to through habit or inclination.

How to get started

It is not possible to decide on becoming innovative or creative overnight. NABC helps develop and refine an idea gradually. Ideas do not just materialise out of the blue. Many myths are attached to the idea-development process. One of them is that ideas surface by themselves, and that systematic or structured thinking does not help in their development. Another myth is that some people are good at developing ideas – the more creative ones – while others simply do not have it in them. NABC enables everyone who so desires to work systematically and creatively with the development of ideas.

“None of us is as clever as all of us” goes a Japanese proverb which clearly illustrates the point made in this presentation as to the importance of using various techniques in the idea-development process, exchanging ideas being one of the most important technique. In fact, we know perfectly well that ideas do not always come by themselves. Some initiative is necessary in order to maximise the probability of having good ideas develop into functional concepts. It involves first and foremost setting up an operational framework for idea-development and thereafter adopting some of the techniques or systems agreed upon by the parties concerned.

What Does NABC Stand For?

N for Need. N is the most important factor in the method. An idea without a practical need for it remains just what it is: a good idea and nothing more.

A for Approach. A is usually a point of departure for most activities, but with the NABC method, A always comes after N.

B for Benefit. B stands for the innovative elements of an idea, in other words that which constitutes its uniqueness.

C for Competition. C stands for a study of the competition existing in the area concerned. C is often mistaken for N. C, however, focuses on the reality within which a concept has to function.

Relevant Ideas

Not all ideas are equally relevant. NABC focuses on the importance of an idea rather than on whether it is interesting. An interesting idea is good, but not good enough. The method operates in terms of whether the idea to be developed is sufficiently important. An example would be that of the involvement of citizens which is, in itself, an interesting idea, but it becomes an important idea the moment the involvement influences the end result.

Methods for the Development Phase

The basic rule in all development processes, regardless of the tools used, is the need to separate development from assessment. Much too often good ideas do not get properly developed because they are often assessed and discarded at an early a stage. However, the opposite also occurs. Ideas that are of lesser value can easily pass through the eye of the needle when not properly assessed during the process. One has to keep in mind the importance of knowing exactly in which phase one is operating. Is it development or is it assessment?



The following are four concrete methods and suggestions:

Repetition
Water-holes
The need of the user
Thinking hats (Edward de Bono)

(a) Repetition

The process of ideation can easily become a walk in the wilderness. It is therefore important to split up the process in various phases. It would also be a good idea to repeat the individual phases several times instead of just holding on to one phase for a long period. This makes for a more dynamic process where several development and assessment rounds are followed by a final round of assessment.

(b) Water-holes

A water hole is one of the techniques in the NABC method which can be used in the development process. Stopping at a water-hole can actually make it possible to continue. The water-hole helps develop an idea further and can be used during and at the end of the development process. Formulating and articulating an idea and sharing it with others makes the good and bad points become apparent. We all know the feeling when an idea may seem clear in our thoughts, but becomes muddled up the minute we try putting it into words. Although at an early stage one tends to keep an idea to oneself, it is far better to share it with others. In so doing, it becomes possible to work further on it. It is, of course, important that the feedback be always constructive. In short, a water-hole is a way of structuring feedback.

Who stops at a water hole? People with different backgrounds who take on various roles. Determine the roles beforehand. Negative criticism is banned at water-hole meetings. There are three typical roles at a water hole:

1. those who concentrate on everything that makes an idea seem good
2. those who concentrate on everything that can improve an idea
3. those who take on the user perspective

A water hole can be organised in many different ways and can be used as many times as necessary. The idea with the water hole is to share your idea/proposition with others, thus encouraging the development process to continue. Spending time concentrating on an idea hinders possibilities for the development it would otherwise have when seen from different perspectives.

Establish a water hole where persons from different walks of life are introduced to the proposition. One could, for example, invite:

- Professionals
- Colleagues
- Outsiders
- Representatives for potential users
- Others

(c) The need of users

How can one involve citizens in the NABC method?



The method starts off by assessing the need of the user, thus making the user a central element in both the development and assessment phases. During the development of an idea one may need, at one point, to check whether the idea corresponds to the user's need. One could, for example, invite the user to the water hole, or make sure that some of the participants continuously bear in mind what the idea would mean/give to the user.

(d) The thinking hats (Edward de Bono)

Another method for structuring the idea-development process are the thinking hats of Edward De Bono, a Maltese professor. The idea behind the thinking hats is to split up the development, assessment and structuring phases. Each hat stands for a phase or step in the process. It is not always necessary to use all the hats. It is, however, crucial to use only one hat at a time. Each hat has a colour and a value:

White hat	facts and data
Red hat	feelings and intuition
Black hat	difficulties
Yellow hat	success and optimism
Green hat	innovation and creativity
Blue hat	Overview and summing up

Or, in other words,

White	is everything we know on the subject we are developing
Red	is everything we feel but cannot explain regarding the subject
Black	are all the things at stake, which can go wrong
Yellow	is the advantage to be gained by developing a proposition
Green	is the creative energy and everything we wish and hope to develop
Blue	is the beginning and end of the process

The thinking hats are a way of splitting up an idea-development process into various phases. In doing so, everyone gets a chance to focus only on one issue at a time. This method is quite efficient and need not take a long time. Make some rounds lasting no more than 20 minutes, where the different hats are run through. Repeat the process if necessary shortening the duration time. In order to keep a dynamic pace going, it is preferable to have several rounds of shorter duration than an excruciatingly long and boring one. The hats are 'worn' one at a time. The order in which this happens depends on the nature of the task. If the task involves a great deal of emotion, it would be best to start with the red hat, disclosing from the start all the feelings that may 'block' the idea. To contrast, the white hat would be the best choice if the task is more 'neutral' and there is a need for comprehensive knowledge. It is crucial that the hats be used one at a time so that feelings and rational thinking do not clash. It is also important not to wear the black hat constantly, but to wait with criticism until the discussion group finds itself in the black hat phase. De Bono stresses the fact that there is a tendency, particularly in the Western world, to wear the critical black hat too often. It can become a strong impediment to the idea-development process and should therefore be worn with caution.

The hats also help visualising at which stage of the development phase one finds oneself. This can make the process clearer to the participants. One can actually wear a real hat, otherwise drawing a hat with the appropriate colour on a flip-over will do.



The Assessment Phase

If you are able to put forward an idea in one sentence and in such a way as to be clearly understood by your interlocutor, then you are well on your way. It is therefore important that an idea be presented concisely. One can always elaborate later. Check yourself, limiting the duration time to max. five minutes to explain the idea preferably to an outsider who knows nothing about it. It can be a spouse who is not in the same line of occupation, but who can later become a potential user of your concept.

You should pitch, receive feedback, develop the idea further. Pitch again, once again receive feedback, further develop the idea, and so on. Your idea will consequently become the object of increasing focus with every pitch you make. This technique is known as the 'elevator pitch'

The Presentation Phase

This phase deals with the way one introduces the idea after it has been developed and assessed. There are eight points to follow as described below. When you have developed your idea with the help of NABC and possibly other idea-developing techniques, you are then ready to present it to the people concerned. It could be a potential user; it could also be your boss or a colleague.

Your pitch should last no longer than 8 minutes in the presentation phase (the chairman should cut through and stop you). You can use flip-over or power point to illustrate important points. It is a good idea to use no more than 5 dias. They should be kept simple and illustrative.

You could use the following guidelines for your pitch:

Hook	you need to grab your listener's attention – like storytelling	24 secs
Need	A description of the need you are covering and for whom	1 min 36 secs
Approach	Description of your proposition. Explain the relevance of your idea. What is innovative or unique about your project?	4 min
Benefit	What are the benefits gained by using your concept?	48 secs
Competition	How does your project stand out compared to other similar projects? Are there risk factors involved? Does your project take them into account is taking into account?	48 secs
Rounding off	A summing up of all the important points	24 secs

1. Your proposition should be embedded in a concrete need which has not been met as yet. Discover who your main users are and pay them a visit. If, for example, your idea is an ecologic playground, it would make sense to visit some



of your city's playgrounds and discuss your proposition with both the children and their parents.

2. You should mention what is unique about your proposition. Instead of comparing your project to other similar projects, you should concentrate on describing how your project actually differs from the others. For example, how is an ecologic playground different from other playgrounds?
3. You should describe the value of your proposition. Focus on all the advantages of your proposition, and not on its setbacks.
4. You should consider the risk factors and the advantages. It is important to convince the listeners that your approach is comprehensive and has taken into consideration potential problems. At this point one could undertake a swot-analysis. If the weaknesses of your proposition outnumber the advantages, you should then scrap the idea and find another one.
5. Clarity and precision are important both in the pitch and the development phase. Do not use too much time on the various phases. Make sure the presentation is dynamic. You can always go back to a phase.
6. You may use pictures, draw on a flip-over or use power point. Make sure not to use more than 5 slides. Pictures often say more than words especially in a time-limited situation. It also breaks the monotony of a presentation and (re)captures the attention of the listeners.
7. You should practise. Use colleagues, spouses, or the dog (!) – anyone who will listen for 8 minutes.
8. You should consider your target audience.

Feedback

After the pitch, it is time for the feedback to your proposition. One could structure the feedback by designating appropriate 'role colours' giving no more than 2 minutes for each to present the relevant feedback, after which one could sum up for another minute, and finally give the word to anyone who wishes to comment. It would be a good idea to have someone take down notes.