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November 10, 2011 By [Harvey Mackay](#)

Art imitates life. That statement is so true in what I consider to be one of the best movies of the year, “Moneyball,” based on the true story of Oakland A’s general manager Billy Beane. You don’t have to be a baseball fan to learn monumental lessons from this film.

Billy Beane (Brad Pitt) meets a nerdy Ivy League economics graduate, Peter Brand (Jonah Hill), who rates players through analytics and statistical probabilities. Do they get on base? Yes. Then it doesn’t matter if they can’t hit. Brand’s charts and graphs confuse and confound the team’s scouts and coaches, but Beane buys into the system.

He’s frustrated by always losing his best players to clubs with big payrolls, knowing he can’t compete with big contracts. He takes a giant leap of faith and follows Brand’s formula, making hiring decisions in a totally unorthodox manner. Rather than follow the scouts’ assessments, he approaches the players’ potential in a more statistical and objective fashion. That allows him to look at players who the scouts deemed washed up or headed to the minor leagues.

When the team of no-names and has-beens has a rough start, the coaches and scouts feel vindicated. But then the team goes on a record-breaking 20-game winning streak. Who’s laughing now?

Billy Beane and Peter Brand demonstrated remarkably creative thinking in solving a problem that seemed not to have any likely positive outcome.

Which strategy usually wins: “We’ve always done it this way” or “Think outside the box”?

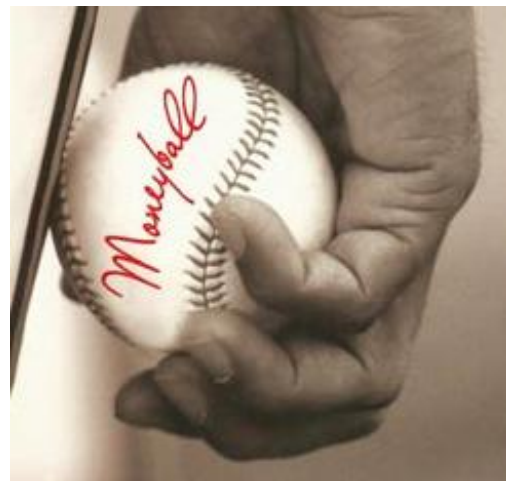
Gerhard Gschwandter, publisher of “Selling Power” magazine, wrote: “I can easily see Brad Pitt in the role of a sales manager who has lost three of his top producers to the competition. It is not a big stretch to imagine Peter Brand as the new sales operations manager who teaches his boss how to match salespeople’s talents to their specific job requirements. The sales operations manager is the science nerd who knows which tools can fix the sales manager’s problems.

“Once the sales manager shifts the focus from chasing superstars to creating [an] organization that aligns people, process and technology, the outcome can be as spectacular as the Oakland A’s record-breaking winning streak.”

When an organization has spectacular challenges, like an inadequate budget, creative thinking and bold actions are frightening and daunting to the most unflappable managers. But you can’t afford to do things the ways you’ve always done them. If that had worked, you wouldn’t have all those challenges, would you?

Great ideas don’t always arrive like a bolt of lightning. Creative thinking thrives in the proper environment. When you think you are out of ideas, you have to find a way to manufacture creativity. It’s not as difficult as it sounds. Ask yourself – or your committee – these questions:

- What would happen if we tried (fill in the blank)? Would the company fall apart? Or would that open new paths?
- Is there another way to do what we’ve always done? Are our competitors/friends/other businesses doing something that we could adapt to our needs?
- Why have we always done it this way? Has anyone tried anything else?



- What's the craziest way we could proceed? Might that be worth considering?
- What's the worst way we could proceed? Are we sure it wouldn't work?
- If solving this problem were a matter of life and death, what would we do?
- What three changes would make this idea better? Or worse?
- Can we re-examine all our brainstorming notions and find a reasonable yet novel way to move forward?

Bear in mind that idea people are not always execution pros. Let everyone have a chance to contribute. Use every resource you have available.

Big problems need big solutions. Big solutions involve big risks. Remember too, that not addressing big problems involves even bigger risks. If you're meeting resistance in taking a risk, rename it: meeting a challenge, changing course or new strategy. But find a way to tackle the problem.

Billy Beane understood that his options were not well served by conventional wisdom. How often have we seen extraordinarily talented athletes perform less extraordinarily than we expected – and then watched the minor leaguers knock it out of the park?

Mackay's Moral: *If you hit enough singles, sooner or later you are going to win big.*