

George Prince, consultant who sparked innovation, founded international firm



By Bryan Marquard

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Colored felt-tip markers and an expanse of blank paper, such as the large sketch pads that sit on easels at the front of conference rooms, were George M. Prince's tools of choice as he cultivated the reticent creativity of his clients.

A doodler par excellence, he taught business leaders to solve problems and be inventive by, among other things, collaborating, thinking visually, and being brave enough to blurt out ideas, no matter how outrageous. Kernels of what might become a breakthrough, he believed, could be found in the unleashed spontaneity.

"What I like is to take an accident and make it a process," Mr. Prince told Smithsonian magazine in 1985.

A founder of Synectics Inc., an international company based in Cambridge that changed its name this year to Synecticsworld, he retired in 1987 and remained more of a guru than a chairman emeritus in the field of innovation management consulting. Mr. Prince died June 9 in the Newton and Wellesley Alzheimer Center of complications from diabetes. He was 91 and had lived for many years in Weston.

"He was quiet-spoken, thoughtful, and his use of language was very eloquent," said Terry K. Gilliam, general managing partner of Synecticsworld. "Like Hemingway, his words weren't wasted, and you wanted to listen to every one of them."

Using metaphors and analogies as freely as he wielded paper and markers, Mr. Prince infused new energy into a much maligned part of each business day: the meeting.

“Life is a series of meetings,” he said for a 2006 article in New Zealand Management magazine. “The challenge is to manage them effectively.”

To do that, Mr. Prince and the consultants in his company nudged clients away from roles that were comfortable but not particularly creative.

“People are reluctant to think in a way that flies in the face of things that they are knowledgeable about,” he told the Globe in 1979. “They’re unwilling to take chances even when there’s no risk, but we give them permission to think speculatively in a way-out way.”

Companies that sought his expertise included NASA, Ford, and Union Carbide, but the size of the business and the complexity of the problem had no bearing on his technique. Creativity, Mr. Prince and his colleagues noted, is a skill to be honed, not a talent.

“He not only created this body of knowledge,” said Vincent Nolan, retired chairman of the Synectics Europe branch of the company, “but he also put it into practice in his own personal life. He was a model of what he was advocating. That’s why he was so much admired by the people who worked with him.”

Mr. Prince grew up in Rochester, N.Y., and graduated from Phillips Exeter Academy in Exeter, N.H., where he was recruited by Williams College for his football prowess.

“He was a huge guy,” said his wife, Kathleen Logan-Prince of Weston. “‘Jumbo’ was his nickname when he was younger.”

While he had the size to play on the line in college football, “he didn’t have the killer instinct,” his wife said, and he stopped playing football after a year.

“He didn’t like competition and thought it brought out the worst in humanity,” Gilliam said.

Graduating with a bachelor’s degree in geology, Mr. Prince served in the Navy during World War II, stationed in the North Atlantic.

For a few years after the war, he worked at an advertising company in Rochester, then joined the invention design group at Arthur D. Little Inc., the consulting firm in Cambridge known for its creativity and high profile clients.

While there, Mr. Prince and a colleague, Bill Gordon, began recording - first with audiotape, then with video cameras - the brainstorming sessions. They wanted to determine why teams solved some problems creatively and easily and came to a dead end with others.

Their study of group dynamics led them to form their own company, Synectics Inc., in 1960 and begin teaching companies and business executives how to break through the creative wall. Sometimes that meant encouraging a kind of controlled chaos in order to promote innovation.

“Groups, when being most effective in developing new lines of thought, tended to be disorderly and confused/uncertain,” Mr. Prince wrote in a 1982 monograph. “Members oscillated between ‘sensible,’ logical, precise thinking and impractical, error-filled ‘irresponsible’ speculation. If a chairperson attempted to impose more order and direction, the group would stop being productive.”

Mr. Prince also described his approach in “The Practice of Creativity,” a book published in 1970.

“It’s the process of invention,” Nolan said of Mr. Prince’s theories, “but at another level, it’s about the behaviors that are necessary to make the process of invention effective.”

For Mr. Prince, invention didn’t stop when the office closed each day.

“Dinner parties at George’s house were marvelous,” Gilliam said.

Kathleen Logan-Prince would set the table with fine china, “except that it was all on heavy paper, and in front of everyone’s place, where a place card might have been, would be a huge supply of markers - exotic ones, some with glitter, all manner of markers,” Gilliam said. “And throughout dinner, as we visited, everybody would doodle. Between courses, we would get up, walk around, and do a gallery review of all the doodles.”

Mr. Prince’s doodles, some of which can be seen at his website, www.georgemprince.com, “were very intricate,” Gilliam said, speaking from his office. “He was a world-class doodler. . . . I’m looking at a couple of them right now that I have framed.”

For about 35 years, Mr. Prince was married to Marjorie Morrison, with whom he had three children and lived in Winchester. She died in 1974, and he was married twice more, both ending in divorce, before marrying Kathleen Logan in 1989 and moving to Weston.

“He’s the most magnificent man I ever met in my life,” his wife said, “and the most fantastic husband I could ever imagine.”

In addition to his wife, Mr. Prince leaves a daughter, Victoria of Arlington; two sons, Jon of Ashland, Ore., and Winthrop of Berkeley, Calif.; a stepson, Joshua Logan of Newton; a stepdaughter, Victoria Logan-Harding of Houston; four grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren.

A memorial Mass will be said at St. Julia Church in Weston at 10 a.m. on July 14. Burial will be in Mount Wollaston Cemetery in Quincy. ■

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