Creativity

IN THE {WORKPLACE

in search of CREATIVITY

IN SEARCH OF CREATIVITY

Albert Einstein said, "Imagination is more important than knowledge."

Imagination and the creative impulse have a way of alchemically transforming problems into new solutions and opportunities. No matter how ominous a problem appears to be, our innate creativity finds new doorways of infinite possibilities that allow us to tackle any challenge. Creativity is a powerful archetypal force that humans can access—when we start to have fun with a problem.

In James Webb Young's advertising classic *A Technique for Producing Ideas,* he calls upon the observation of the Italian sociologist Vilfredo Pareto: "An idea is nothing more nor less than a new combination of old elements." Change something old into something new by creating new combinations that haven't been used before.

> "The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct acting from inner necessity. The creative mind plays with the objects it loves."
>
> **—Carl Jung**

We love great stories of amazing innovation. Remember the Japanese Olympic pole vaulter who climbed up the pole and then jumped over the bar? Although the Olympic board made his method illegal, his innovative solution was brilliant. It's not often that you hear of someone finding amazing new strategies to jump over the business problems we face today. When was the last time the Ford Motor Company or GM re-invented the seat belt? We are often stifled when we attempt to look on the world with fresh eyes and to embrace new experiences, and we avoid the work involved in generating new ideas.

When Leon Battista Alberti declared, "A man can do all things if he will," he condensed the ideals of the Renaissance into the figure of the Renaissance man. Since then, knowledge became specialized and having the breadth of knowledge in the wide range of subjects embraced by Renaissance men now borders on impossibility.

The Renaissance man still walks among us, but we now call him groups. People in diverse fields are beginning to understand how solutions that limit them to the fields that produced the question are inadequate. To understand how humans interact, sociologists are drawing on the skills of mathematicians and physicists in the new field of network science pioneered by Duncan Watts and Steven Strogatz; at Neuroscience 2006, there was a discussion with the renowned architect Frank Gehry about how advances in the science of perception could aid architects in their designs; at IDEO, psychologists and engineers come together to design products. The benefits of a group of diverse individuals working together are quickly becoming indispensable.

The term *group* has many meanings, from a collection of individuals operating independently to managers working together to solve a tactical problem; each type of group has its own dynamics. The current literature on group decision-making reveals how different the dynamics of these groups really are: What impedes a group operating in one dynamic may increase the productivity of a group operating in another.

In *The Wisdom of Crowd*s, James Surowiecki describes situations where groups of individuals acting independently somehow arrive at the correct answer when all of their responses are considered collectively; the group as a whole seems more intelligent than any of the participants. These groups are able to guess things like the number of Jelly Beans in a jar—a logical analysis having more to do with statistics and spatial acuity than intelligence. A random group may have great success addressing similar problems that involve a correct and often mathematically-driven answer (counting jelly beans), but attempting

to use a similar procedure to solve problems that lack a single, correct solution (the best advertising campaign for a new product) is likely to yield limited benefits.

Brainstorming, invented by advertising executive Alex Osborn, was designed to maximize effective and creative problem solving. Research on brainstorming initially failed to show any increase in the number and quality of ideas when compared to individuals working alone; but in the last fifteen years, research has revealed that brainstorming can be productive if the procedures guard against impediments that naturally occur, like conversation being controlled by a limited number of individuals and shared beliefs being disproportionately represented. When small groups of individuals attempt to collectively arrive at a solution through discussion, productive solutions are uncovered.

Yet, most companies don't engage in a creative process because most of their prior "creative" meetings haven't produced significant results. Nothing new happens, the same people come up with the same line of thinking, and the same ideas keep recurring. The solutions generated are mostly dull and uninventive. In the aftermath of these "brainstorming" sessions, everyone goes back to their desks and does what they've always done.
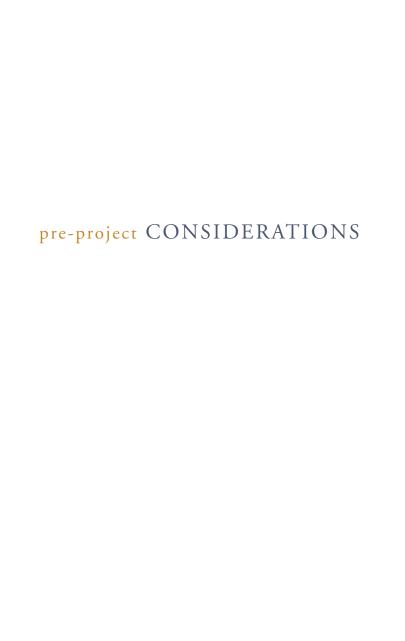
In this scenario, it's no wonder most companies quickly abandon creative engagements. But, if current research is to be believed, this unproductive scenario is exactly what would be expected to happen. A lack of productivity is the default tendency of a group—but, it can be prevented. These companies miss out on key insights that can move their business objectives forward. Plus, if you don't tap into the collective wisdom of your team, your business will lose momentum because key components to solving difficult problems are never uncovered.

In today's fast-moving business environment, we often structure teams around specific projects (as opposed to an overriding hierarchal command with cubicle-centric "business as usual"). Google.com employs a predominantly project-based environment where team leaders rotate and more resources are added to the team based on the viability and momentum of individual projects.

So how do you get more creative productivity from your team? Promoting individual creativity is hard; inspiring a group of individuals to be creative together seems insurmountable. As a "Consumer Insight Think Tank," Nonbox Consulting survives and thrives on creativity. But as a company—as a collective of individuals with unique qualities and models of viewing the world—we are faced with the challenge of how to maximize our diverse team's background and group dynamic to produce valuable ideas and insight for our clients. What follows is the result of our search for generating creativity in the workplace. It works brilliantly for us. We hope it serves you well, too.

QUICK TIP

Allow yourself an hour to create and imagine. Take a problem or situation you are working on, and think about other ways of taking on the same problems. What new solutions can you create today?

pre-project CONSIDERATIONS

PRE-PROJECT CONSIDERATIONS

The Team

You've got an important problem to solve. The team is assembled. You hold your breath because you know the inherent challenges – allowing conversation to flow freely, not forcing a pre-existing idea on the group, and not getting stuck on one idea – that arise in bringing a team of unique individuals together. How do you structure your team to increase productivity and solve problems more effectively?

Although it seems obvious, it is best to construct the team around the problem. What special skills will be required to complete the project? Think outside the immediate scope of the problem: what skills could be relevant that would constitute a non-standard approach? Don't select people solely based upon position in the company. Position doesn't determine one's desire or ability to create important changes. If people are more concerned with maintaining the status quo than driving the company forward, they will only hinder the progress of a team dedicated to making changes. Find the people with the broadest applicable knowledge base and the strongest drive, and make the team leader the person with the broadest knowledge base over all areas of the project. Make sure the leader is able to lead without being controlling.

The Environment

Environment plays a role in people's ability to complete a project. The space should allow for efficient communication—proximity is power. Having to constantly travel long distances (even within a building) to get things done can hinder or even cut off essential communication. If your workspace is large, can you minimize travel distance between individuals that need to communicate directly on a regular basis?

If possible, the brainstorming or meeting space should take people out of their normal working environments. A change in scenery is very effective for breaking people out of their standard routines and for facilitating creativity.

The Stone Soup Story
Author Unknown

Many years ago, three soldiers, hungry and weary of battle, came upon a small village. The villagers, suffering a meager harvest and the many years of war, quickly hid what little they had to eat and met the three at the village square, wringing their hands and bemoaning the lack of anything to eat.

The soldiers spoke quietly amongst themselves and the first soldier then turned to the village elders. "Your tired fields have left you nothing to share, so we will share what little we have: the secret of how to make soup from stones."

Naturally, the villagers were intrigued and soon a fire was put to the town's greatest kettle as the soldiers dropped in three smooth stones. "Now this will be a fine soup," said the second soldier; "but a pinch of salt and some parsley would make it wonderful!" Up jumped a villager, crying, "What luck! I've just remembered where some's been left!" And off she ran, returning with an apron full of parsley and a turnip. As the kettle boiled on, the memory of the village improved: soon barley, carrots, beef, and cream had found their way into the great pot, and a cask of wine was rolled into the square as all sat down to feast.

They ate and danced and sang well into the night, refreshed by the feast and their new-found friends. In the morning, the three soldiers awoke to find the entire village standing before them. At their feet lay a satchel of the village's best breads and cheese. "You have given us the greatest of gifts: the secret of how to make soup from stones," said an elder, "and we shall never forget." The third soldier turned to the crowd, and said: "There is no secret, but this is certain: it is only by sharing that we may make a feast." And off the soldiers wandered, down the road.

designing the PROJECT

DESIGNING THE PROJECT

Setting The Stage

The first two meetings are guided brainstorming sessions. These meetings should be facilitated by the person in the leadership position. The goal of the leader is not to force communication in any direction, but to ensure everyone stays on track with the process and to set the open, nonjudgmental tone for the meetings.

The leader must make it clear that no one will be criticized for his or her ideas. The goal is to get as much input, ideation, and data out of the group as possible—not to discuss a specific solution. This method is contrary to the way most people approach group brainstorming. The goal is not to come into the meeting with an idea in mind and then try to win people over to your way of thinking; it's not an essay contest or a debate. It is essential that the leader makes this distinction clear.

Although most people would assume an inverse relationship between quantity and quality (measured by usefulness and originality) of ideas, studies show there is a direct relationship: the more ideas you generate, the higher the quality of your final solution. Encourage people to say whatever comes to mind within the confines of each segment of the meetings.

MORE POINTS TO KEEP IN MIND:

- Push people to listen to others when they are speaking. The single most important factor in producing ideas in a group brainstorm (that outweigh those produced by an equal number of individuals working independently) is the attention paid to other people's ideas. Ideas propagate ideas, but only if people are paying attention.

- Make sure there are no distractions. Turn off the cell phones. No one should leave the meeting when everyone else is working. Too much rambling and too many tangents create a background noise that has been shown to impede the generation of ideas.

- Guard against heavy discussion among group members directed towards a solution; this is especially important early on. If information or opinions are shared among group members and this information dominates a discussion, the final solution often gets skewed toward this solution. It also makes it less likely that someone else will present unique information.

- Be wary of anyone who is "the expert." With difficult decision-making, there is a tendency for groups to come to a consensus that mirrors the solution suggested by "the expert," but this doesn't necessarily produce the best solution. Focus on the collective expertise of the group rather than the individual.

- Delegate a set amount of time to each segment of the session. If sessions have no clear ending time, they tend to end up with ramblings. There's no need for the same ideas to be stated more than once.

- Be flexible: if it seems like more time is genuinely needed, spend more time on it.

Session 1: Generating Ideas

The following meeting structure will help you set up a productive session:

1. Define the problem. This should be done before the meeting and brought to the meeting by the leader. The problem must be specific—the more specific the better. A clearly-defined problem and goal provides necessary focus for the meeting. You should be able to answer the following questions when the meeting begins:

> a. What is the problem?
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> b. What is the specific end goal? This should be measurable; defined by time, money, or quantity.
>
> c. When is the deadline?
>
> d. What is the budget (if applicable)?

2. Lay out the facts. Spend time listing and recording any background research to create as much context as possible for the team. This can include data collected specifically for the project or data that is the result of the knowledge of the participants. This is not the place for opinions or inferences, just facts.

3. Create an environment of openness. Underlying beliefs and opinions that people don't feel justified making openly, such as personal, emotionally-based opinions, can cloud almost any discussion. A gut reaction that certain ideas are out of line with the company's goals can also make someone hesitant, but that's all right. There's no need to provide support for someone's feelings now—because this part of brainstorming is the time for gut reactions. The sole purpose of the exercise is to allow the discussion to be carried out unimpeded by hidden motives or desires.

> "Creativity can solve almost any problem. The creative act, the defeat of habit by originality, overcomes everything."
>
> **—George Lois**

4. Look at the current situation. If the project is designed to re-examine and change a current situation, it's time to look at what's already in place. This step isn't necessary if it is a new project that is not designed to replace an existing situation. However, if there is a current situation, first look at what's going on now from a negative viewpoint: What's wrong with it? If it worked before, why does it no longer work optimally? Be as specific as possible. Once you look at it negatively, consider it positively: What about this procedure or situation still works? Could it be tweaked to work without major changes? Does it need a major overhaul? If something needs to be changed, like the predominant retail display in your industry, consider the characteristics of the current approach and preclude using solutions that stem from that approach in the discussions. Knowing what it shouldn't be helps with understanding what it should be.

5. List new solutions. Based upon current ways of doing things in the company, or procedures in the specific field, what solutions would effectively solve the problem? There's no need to justify these solutions at this point; just get them out there. This also isn't the time for wild solutions; instead, explore standard solutions that are not currently being employed.

6. End the session. After the solutions are listed, it is time to end the meeting. No conclusions should be reached. The ideal time for this first meeting is on a Friday. The mind has a way of coming up with ideas and solutions when direct focus is not placed on the problem. Almost everyone has experienced a situation where, after failing to try forcing a solution, they took a break and without any effort, suddenly a solution popped into their head. This step is sadly ignored in most decision-making processes. The best place for this step is after all the information has been gathered and looked at as described. During the weekend, everyone will be doing something unrelated to work, incubating their ideas without wasting valuable time during the week.

Session 2: Finding the Solution

The following steps for Session 2 will guide you to an optimal solution:

1. Start with a brain game. The best games are exercises that get people thinking critically about a problem in a new way. These exercises don't have to relate to business—research shows that when the critical-thinking mindset is activated by any task, the mindset carries over to the next task to produce results.

2. See if anyone has any new solutions. Referring to the first session, see if anything came to anyone over the weekend that uses standard solutions.

3. Get people to give wild solutions. Have the participants use their imagination and dream up wild solutions to the problem. It doesn't matter if they seem crazy at first—just get everything out there. Standard ideas from other disciplines that have never been applied to a problem like the one being tackled can be very useful.

4. Get everyone's gut reaction to the options presented. There's no need for any justification. This serves the same purpose as step three from the first session.

5. List the weaknesses. Go over each solution and have people come up with possible weaknesses of each approach.

6. List the strengths. Go over each solution again, this time listing their strengths.

> "Problems cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them."
>
> **—Albert Einstein**

7. Make a decision. By the time you get to this step, the solution will probably be obvious. If not, look at the solutions side-by-side. If consensus cannot be reached (and you have the resources), see if both solutions can be tested simultaneously for the next week by different people.

8. Articulate the decision as a concrete goal with a specific result. It is imperative that the goal is framed in terms of the specific desired result. A targeted result must be measurable including a definitive deadline. A result that says: "Design a new product packaging" doesn't offer sufficient clarity and direction. "Develop a new product prototype that communicates our new focus on the customer by January 15, 20XX" will do the job. This can be the single most important factor in getting a team to work effectively.

9. Delegate responsibilities. Assign tasks to everyone present that makes full use of their skills. It helps knowing who you're working with. People may have skills you're unfamiliar with that would benefit the project.

working TOGETHER

WORKING TOGETHER

This process should create a clear solution. As everyone plays a role in determining the solution, each team member is more likely to be motivated to follow the project through to completion.

No matter who came up with the final solution, the project is the property of the group. Everyone is accountable for the project's result. If anyone fails, everyone fails. This attitude creates a supportive system and encourages communication and responsibility.

Although it's important to have group consensus, it's equally important to focus on the contributions of the individual. Have specialists take leadership roles whenever possible. People with specialized knowledge are best equipped to run the related part of the project, allowing them to shine individually.

The leader should focus on maintaining the balance between the group project and individual expertise, ensuring that proper ideas and communication are being exchanged and making sure each person has what he or she needs from the group in order to operate at optimal capacity.

Schedule Meetings

Weekly meetings should be scheduled to monitor progress. They don't have to be long; they are simply to facilitate communication and follow-through (creating accountability), and to monitor the project's progress. If something isn't working, identify it, and have the group brainstorm fixes. Repeat the process of listing standard fixes, then wild fixes, examining the weaknesses, then strengths, and finally determining a useable solution.

These weekly meetings also establish benchmarks that will keep people focused and motivated to produce. These times are a showcase for highly-motivated people as well—they will force themselves to accomplish as much as possible so they can share their individual talents with the group. This perspective is contagious, as hard work propagates hard work.

play ALONG

PLAY ALONG

If you want to ignite your team's creative energy, learn to see this process through. It's easy to jump to the end and skip steps. We all have the urge to try to get to the better ideas faster. The creative process can't be rushed, however, and we must honor it.

If you can learn to foster an open environment and set up the optimal conditions for creativity to thrive with your group, the collective creative juices will begin to flow, transforming your business or division.

Viola Spolin, co-founder of the improvisational style of theatre, taught children to play games to solve problems; playing stimulates the mind to create solutions. How can you play? If you are selling a book, what if you were forced to use the book as another object in an activity or discussion? What associations would arise? You can check out Spolin's *Theatre Games for the Classroom* for exercises to jumpstart your mind for creativity.

Playing along will take you out of your comfort zone; that's part of its power. If you're having trouble playing along, try adopting the mind-set of a child. Children are happiest when they are allowed to play. Conversely, children's creativity helps them to have fun! Children have always used their imaginations to create new ways of play.

Commit to this creative process to generate new, exciting solutions. Having fun with this process will ensure its successful implementation.

ADDITIONAL READING

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PUBLICATIONS FROM NONBOX CONSULTING

current publications

The Power of Cult Branding (Crown, 2002)
How 9 Magnetic Brands Turned Customers Into Loyal Followers
Coauthored by B.J. Bueno

The groundbreaking book that received rave reviews from leading mavens like Jack Trout, Al Reis, Jay Conrad Levinson, and Jeffrey Fox.

Cult Branding Workbook (2007)
Seven Steps to Growing Your Business by Better Understanding Your Customer
B.J. Bueno

A marketer's practical step-by-step guide for building brand loyalty by understanding the basic human needs of their customer and developing a strategy around their "Brand Lovers."

Why We Talk (2007)
The Truth Behind Word-of-Mouth
B.J. Bueno

Explores the nature and mechanisms behind "word-of-mouth," pulling from anthropology, history, psychology, and common sense. Seven governing principles for understanding why customers communicate show you how to embrace the most powerful medium in the world.

up-coming publications

Enlightened Thinker (2008)
The Creative Impulse Revealed
Scott Jeffrey

Ever wonder what a thought actually is? Pulling from advanced theoretical science and consciousness research, this treatise explores the anatomy of thought, the art of creativity, and a superior way of solving problems.

web resources

Everything You Need to Know About Cult Branding: www.cultbranding.com
The Truth Behind Word-of-Mouth: www.whywetalk.com
More About Our Consulting Services: www.nonboxconsulting.com
Nonbox, the Advertising Agency: www.nonbox.com

ABOUT NONBOX CONSULTING

What do we know?

We know people want to feel free so they can dance. They hit the road all weekend long trying to live freely. We know people want to put on their Spock ears and leave this planet. They told us so. The experience of feeling alive—that's what they want. That's what we know. Our teachers speak to us through their work and invigorate us to search, to question, to dream. Our journey has only started. Ahead is a long path of unknown destination. It's outward in appearance, yet inward in experience. The more we try to understand our brothers and sisters, the more we come understand ourselves.

"[W]e have not even to risk the adventure alone, for the heroes of all time have gone before us. The labyrinth is thoroughly known. We have only to follow the thread of the hero's path, and where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god. And where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves. Where we had thought to travel outward, we will come to the center of our own existence. And where we had thought to be alone, we will be with all the world."

– Joseph Campbell

These words inspire us to chase our dreams. That's what we know.

What do we do?

Our job is to create an environment where your customers want to buy from you (on their terms)—not an environment where you have to sell something. When the customer wins, the business wins. It's that simple. We borrow from a wide range of disciplines to help you better understand your customers—psychology, neuroscience, quantum mechanics, consciousness research, philosophy, and mythology—anything that serves us in helping you move your adventure forward. Our teachers are many—including such legendary minds like Jung, Freud, Maslow, Hawkins, Sheldrake, Pavlov, Mamet, and Campbell.

Through their discoveries, we strive to provide new meaning to the term "consumer insight."

The answers are always different, but the perspective never changes: we must put the consumer first and speak about what is relevant to them. We help you connect with your customer. Although our process is highly organic and (at times) unconventional, our results speak for themselves.

Would you like us to think with you?

Visit us on the web at nonboxconsulting.com
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Call our Orlando office at 407.244.3449