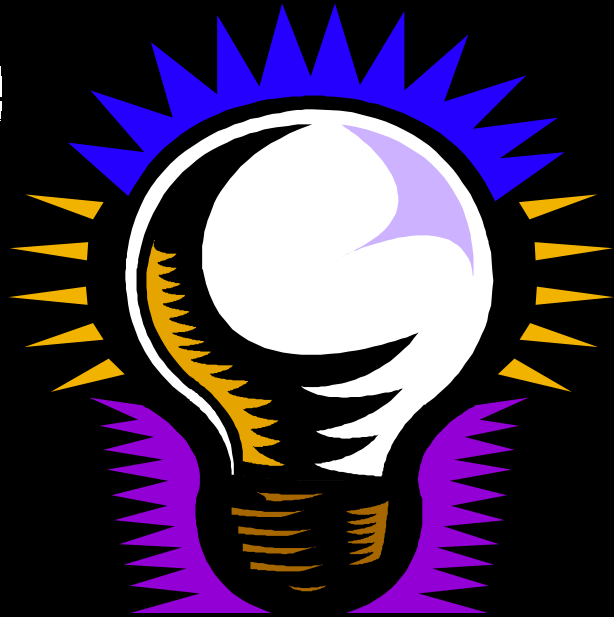


Turn On the Creativity in Your Company



Organizations need to be creative for a variety of reasons: developing new products; creating new processes; adapting to change; promoting employee self-reliance; even solving day-to-day problems. Managers and executives often rely on brainstorming sessions to tap the creative potential of their employees. While brainstorming is an important business tool to generate ideas and solve problems, traditional sessions can be a real brain drain. Individuals may start out enthusiastic, but quickly run out of ideas and steam.

Most companies realize that their creative potential greatly exceeds their actual performance. The problem is, they don't know what to do about it. So what do you do when you're in a creative slump? This article should help. It contains some techniques to try that will generate enthusiasm, energy and a lot of great ideas. Additionally, it highlights the keys to organizational creativity, and provides suggestions for fostering a more creative work environment.

Mind Mapping

Mind mapping is a simple technique used to get ideas down on paper. The process consists of three main elements: key words, diagramming and symbols.

To mind map, pick a subject, write it in the center of a piece of paper, and then "mind dump" - spend some time free associating, writing down the key words, terms and symbols you associate with the subject. Write down everything that your brain generates related to the topic, creating a visual schematic of everything in your mind.

Once you're finished with the "mind dump," take a step back and analyze the ideas you wrote down. During this organizational stage, ask critical questions of the words and symbols in front of you. What potential problems might they lead you to? What new relationships can you identify? What connections can you make which may not have been apparent before?

The Wish Technique

The next time you're faced with a problem, jot it down on a piece of paper. Then, pretend a genie has granted you an infinite number of wishes to help solve the problem. What would you wish for? Record each of your ideas as they're generated. For example, consider the problem of not being able to deliver products on time to customers. Possible wishes could be:

- I wish we always had enough inventory to meet demand
- I wish my customers could come in to operate our machinery and make the products themselves
- I wish I could read my customers' minds

Encourage outrageous wishes. The simple act of seeing beyond the problem will help open your eyes to possible solutions. Focus on translating unrealistic wishes into something you could really accomplish. Using the example above, perhaps you could do more to anticipate customer demand. Or maybe the key to solving your problem lies in a better inventory system.

Brainwalking

This is a group brainstorming exercise that helps individuals build upon one another's creativity. To start, hang large sheets of paper on the walls of your meeting room. Give each participant a marker. Start by stating the problem to be solved, then have each participant write down one idea relating to the problem on one of the sheets of paper. Once the first set of ideas have been written, have everyone shift in a clockwise pattern around the room and either add to the previous idea or generate a new idea based on the first one. Repeat three to five times.

Worst Idea

Brainstorm a list of bad ideas or solutions to a problem. For example, instead of generating a list of the best ways to recruit applicants for an available position, think of some of the worst ways:

- Put a sign up outside of your building saying that no positions are available
- Go on the local news and announce that your organization is going out of business
- Drive around and abduct people, hold them at gun point and force them to apply

Like the Wish Technique, the ideas initially generated by this exercise are unlikely to be solutions to your problem. Yet by helping you think "out of the box," the worst ideas may get you started on the right track. Examine each idea individually, and see if the opposite of the idea would be a good solution, or if you could some way modify the bad idea to make it a good one. In the case of this recruiting problem, applicant abduction would probably land you in jail. But a mobile recruiting unit might not be a bad idea!

Mindstorming

Divide your group into smaller groups of three or four participants. Set a goal as to how many ideas or solutions each group will generate (e.g., 20). Assign one person in each group to be the note keeper. Start generating ideas. You'll find that the first five ideas will be fairly easy to come up with; the sixth through 15th will probably be even more creative; and the 16th through the 20th will be a combination of both brilliant and ridiculous solutions.

Image Streaming

Image streaming is a good technique to try if you're completely entrenched in a problem you can't seem to solve. It is nothing more than free-associating with your visual mind. Used properly, this technique will create a completely different way of looking at a problem.

Start by posing a problem to yourself, then forget the problem and start image streaming. To image stream just close your eyes and describe any visuals that begin to appear - no matter how strange or irrelevant they may seem.

If you're having trouble getting started, use existing visuals as tools. For example, open a magazine and try to relate the illustrations and pictures to the problem at hand. Keep the process up for about 60 seconds. Use the concepts generated to spark new ideas, and provide fresh perspective on your problem.

Fostering a Creative Environment

While the techniques listed above can be quite useful in generating new ideas, creativity cannot be forced or predicted. It is nearly impossible to anticipate who in an organization will be creative, what he will do, and when and how he will do it.

Despite the fact that creative acts can occur anywhere at any time, most organizations still buy into stereotypes about creative people and the creative process. When they think of a creative individual, they typically picture someone eccentric who makes huge discoveries independently. Preconceptions like these needlessly limit a company's potential.

Given the random nature of individual creative acts, the key to managing and maximizing creativity is all about raising probabilities. To increase your odds, you must understand the true nature of creativity, then take action to make sure these critical elements are present:

- **Alignment.** You must ensure that the actions and interests of your employees are directed toward your organization's primary goals. Strong alignment requires three things: clear communication and understanding of the organization's key goals; commitment of money and time to initiatives promoting those goals; and, accountability for actions affecting their attainment. If these three criteria are present, any employee will recognize and respond positively to a potentially beneficial idea.
- **Self-initiated activity.** The desire to be creative is already present in most people; you just need to know how to unleash it. The key is to create an efficient system for responding to employees' creative initiative. An effective system will: reach all your employees; be easy to use; and have strong follow-through and accountability.

To encourage and exploit self-initiated creativity, encourage your employees to tackle problems they're interested in and feel capable of solving - for whatever reason. Then use a system similar to the one described above to follow-up on their ideas. This will increase their intrinsic motivation and the likelihood they'll explore their creative impulses through the duration of the project.

- **Unofficial activity.** This is all the useful activity occurring within your organization in the absence of direct official support. It includes all the work and ideas your employees generate which you don't know about.

Unofficial activity affords creative ideas safe haven in their earliest and most fragile state of development. It protects inventiveness from being quashed by management and systems. Logically, the more unofficial activity going on, the greater the potential for new ideas coming to fruition.

- **Serendipity.** Serendipity is more than just good luck. By definition, a serendipitous discovery is one made by fortunate accident in the presence of sagacity (keenness of insight). Creativity often involves serendipity - an individual bridges the distance between seemingly unconnected information and discovers a new idea. Although it's impossible to manufacture serendipity in your organization, you can still brainstorm to make abstruse connections that may yield new solutions.
- **Diverse stimuli.** As the techniques describes in this article demonstrate, a stimulus may provide fresh perspective on an issue. To encourage creativity in your organization, provide opportunities for your employees to tell others about the stimuli they receive, and discuss the possibilities these stimuli suggest to them.
- **Within-company communication.** If you work in a large organization, chances are you have well-established lines of communication to carry out your planned activities. This is great for getting work done, but does little to foster creativity. In fact, while large companies are *more* likely to have the necessary components of creative acts already present in them, they're *less* likely than small companies to bring those components together without some help. To maximize innovation, you must have the systems in place to promote unanticipated exchanges of information.

As you can see, the bulk of a company's potential creativity lies in acts that cannot be specifically asked for and that no amount of planning can directly cause. Not surprisingly, an abundance of creativity goes untapped with the usual plan-and-control style of management.

To unlock the potential within your organization, you must abandon your preconceptions about the process of creativity. Only when you accept creativity's true nature can you begin to foster an environment where employees can truly "get out of the box."

Sources:

Bryan Mattimore, The Mattimore Group. "*Managing Einsteins: Building a 'Breakthrough Thinking' Organization,*" November 1996.

Alan G. Robinson & Sam Stern. Corporate Creativity: How Innovation and Improvement Actually Happen. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc. San Francisco. 1997.