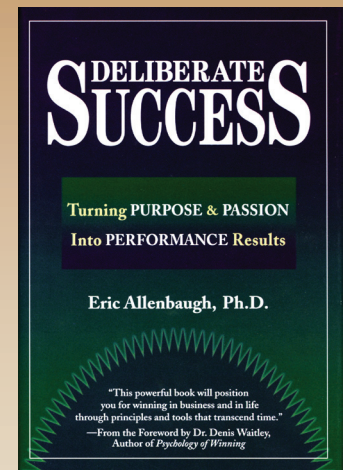# How To Enhance Team Creativity©

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ADAPTED FROM

DELIBERATE SUCCESS:
Turning PURPOSE and PASSION
Into PERFORMANCE Results©

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How To Enhance Team Creativity©

To what extent does your organizational culture bring out the creative best of others in addressing issues and challenges? Are creative ideas quickly opposed – or perhaps ignored? Do some of the best ideas seem to surface in "parking lot discussions" after the problem-solving meeting is over? All too often, the corporate culture stifles rather than encourages innovative, resourceful thinking.

> *"Most of what we call management consists of making it difficult for people to get their work done."*
> Peter Drucker

People tend to support that which they help to create, and this simple, yet profound, leadership principle provides the foundation for developing and reinforcing corporate creativity. I liken a corporate leader to the conductor of an orchestra. The conductor's job is to draw the music out of the musicians – not to play the instruments. Likewise, the leader's role, more often than not, is to create a culture that safely draws creative ideas from associates in support of the organization's mission, vision, and values. That collective experience, wisdom, insight, and talent can make a significant contribution to customer service, job fulfillment, and the bottom line.

> *"I believe the real difference between success and failure in a corporation can very often be traced to the question of how well the organization brings out the great energies and talents of its people."*
> Thomas J. Watson, Jr.
> Former IBM Chief Executive

Learning how to effectively engage management and staff in creative thinking and solution finding is a leadership skill that requires careful attention and development. In addition to mining the many creative ideas that your associates possess, one can foster understanding of and support for ideas that build teamwork, enhance productivity, delight customers, introduce new products, and contribute to a more fulfilling work environment. In my more than three decades of consulting with leaders of various industries, I have discovered or developed several pragmatic tools to enhance creative thinking. Sharing those ideas for your benefit is the purpose of this article. So, let's dig in.

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PART 1: TOOLS TO ENHANCE TEAM CREATIVITY

Clarify Outcomes & Expectations

In a safe, open environment, first clarify what outcomes and desirable results are expected without setting undue restrictions on how this is to be accomplished. As the late Stephen Covey used to say, *"Begin with the end in mind."* In so doing, appropriate focus can be provided without limiting the creative exploration. We are seeking unity of direction, not uniformity in thinking. We want the "wild geese to fly in formation" rather than to "get the ducks in a row." Getting the ducks in a row restricts the creative flow and ends up with "group think" where everybody thinks the same way. Getting the wild geese to fly in formation provides sufficient direction while expanding creative breadth and innovative options.

To assure that the creative process supports the desired strategic direction of your organization, consider reinforcing these four principles at the onset of your team's creative exploration. Later test emerging ideas against these key principles:

Is what we are doing right now or about to do achieving results that are:

1. **Consistent with our mission?**
2. **Bringing us closer to our vision?**
3. **Honoring our values?**
4. **Delighting our customers?**

If you can answer these questions affirmatively, then you are likely on the right track.

"Others have seen what is and asked why. I have seen what could be and asked why not."
Pablo Picasso

Postpone Critical Thinking

Both creative and critical thinking are essential in the development of fruitful ideas. A common creativity killer in most organizations occurs, however, when critical thinking occurs too early. Oftentimes, someone will share a creative idea only to have others pounce on its potential flaws. While working with an executive team client of mine, for example, a particularly bright senior vice president prided himself in his unique ability to find the flaws and shoot down the ideas of others. As soon as someone suggested an idea, he would launch his "Patriot missiles" to thoroughly discredit the proposal, then gloat in his superior intellect. He was clearly a smart and dysfunctional executive. To deal with this counterproductive environment, I facilitated the creation of a new ground rule: *"Before criticizing the idea of another, you must first find two valid reasons to support it."* This ratio of two supportive to one critical observation greatly enhanced safety and the creative flow.

As soon as critical thinking emerges, creativity declines. Given that, it is wise to consciously withhold critical thinking until after a number of creative ideas have emerged and the imaginative energy subsides. At that point, critical thinking can then be introduced to assess the efficacy and quality of ideas – and to potentially improve the proposals.

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Shift From a "Problem" to a "Success" Focus

Clearly, teams generate more creative energy when working *toward* what they are seeking to create rather than *away* from what they want to avoid. Instead of exploring and fixing the things that are not working well (the problems), research in the "Affirmative Inquiry" (AI) field demonstrates exceptional results by focusing on the things that are working (the successes) so that we can do more of those (Watkins & Mohr, 2001). At the risk of oversimplifying, AI generates momentum and sustainable change while promoting stronger connections and relationships between and among participants. By collectively visualizing what can be (the desired state), groups can generate hope, excitement, aggregative wisdom, and camaraderie as they work together in a spirit of partnership to co-create a shared future. Application of AI tools ranges from inventing day-to-day solutions to positively changing an entire corporate culture.

> *"You can never solve a problem on the level on which it was created."*
> Albert Einstein

Here are a few pragmatic examples of shifting from a "problem" to a "success" focus. One organization sought to deal with poor morale by conducting a survey to discover why things were going so poorly. By focusing on poor morale, interestingly enough, morale continued to decline. (What you focus on tends to expand.) Another organization suffering from similar issues, in contrast, applied the success focus by identifying high morale sections of the company, learning from those experiences, and applying those principles elsewhere. By converting the positive exception into a company norm, they made significant and sustainable progress in enhancing morale while simultaneously building camaraderie and teamwork.

An airline experiencing significant issues with luggage handling focused on "identifying and fixing the root causes of lost and damage luggage." While some progress was made in addressing this issue, luggage handlers felt intimidated and defensive. In contrast, British Airways adopted a success model to deal with luggage handling issues by focusing on "creating an exceptional arrival experience." By first visualizing a positive strategic outcome and safely engaging stakeholders, this success focus inspired creative and effective methods to enhance luggage handling as a means of engendering an exceptional arrival experience. Working toward a positive outcome rather than away from current problems tends to achieve desired results while simultaneously building teamwork.

Look for the 3rd Great Idea

When encouraging a team to generate creative ideas and solutions, one can typically count on several of the more vocal members to voice their proposals while some of the less assertive team members wait until after the meeting to share their thoughts – in the parking lot. Additionally, when a particularly influential person proposes a solution, other members of the team are likely to acquiesce rather than suggest additional options. These typical conditions can result in the team pursuing an "Edsel" while ignoring a "Mustang."

> *"I never made one of my discoveries through the process of rational thinking"*
> Albert Einstein

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In the Disney culture, known for its creativity, associates practice "plussing" ideas. Rather than merely accepting the first generation idea, they consciously "plus" the idea in an effort to make it even better. Disney World, for example, is Disneyland that has been plussed. Consistent with this concept, I encourage teams to integrate into their own culture the process of continuing the creative exploration until at *least* the 3rd Great Idea has been generated. After completion of this creative process, then ideas can be compared and contrasted in a critical thinking mode. This process also shifts ownership from the individual to the team, which creates more advocates for the final solution.

Introduce the Nominal Group Technique (NGT)

Team creativity and solution finding can be systematically expanded through what is often referred to as the Nominal Group Technique or NGT (Delbecq and VandeVen, 1971; Tague, 2004). Designed to facilitate full participation of the team and to minimize power differences, the NGT introduces a small degree of structure to maximize creative options. A simplified, yet effective, variation of NGT includes the following steps:

1. Introduce to the team a topic, challenge, or issue that requires creative exploration, and provide several minutes for clarifying questions to assure appropriate focus.

2. Have each individual team member then work alone in an atmosphere of silence for five minutes to generate and write down multiple ideas regarding the topic. The silence is important to not interrupt the creative flow. In addition, "creative stress" is introduced as team members notice others quickly writing ideas down; they are more likely to then generate even more ideas on their own.

3. In capturing ideas from the group, either of the following two options can be effective.

   a. For groups smaller than ten: A facilitator can record on a flip chart one idea from each person and continue this process until all the ideas are collected.

   b. For larger groups: After the individual generation of ideas is complete, larger groups can be divided up into groups of five. Within each group, individuals share their ideas with one another. Each small group then captures their top three ideas on flip chart paper to share with the larger group and all ideas are posted on a wall. Similar ideas from individual groups are synthesized only with permission of the idea generator so as to not lose their original intent.

4. Prioritize the ideas through collective list reduction or through a process of voting by individuals placing a red adhesive dot on the flip chart by their "red hot" choice and applying two blue dots next to their back-up choices. Encourage the entire group to go forward simultaneously to place dots on the selections of their choice. This simultaneous and intentionally "chaotic" voting process provides an important element of safety in the selection of priorities. A large group can then quickly see the results as red and blue dots concentrate on specific ideas. For tabulation purposes, red dots are assigned double the value of blue dots.

5. Once the priorities are established, identify who is going to do what by

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when, and build in appropriate follow-up mechanisms to assure timely progress.

> *"Effective change is not something*
> *you do to people.*
> *It's something you do with them."*
> Ken Blanchard

Reinforce "This - or Something Better"

When the boss or other authoritative individual proposes an idea, members of the team often have a tendency to agree with and enthusiastically endorse that idea. In many organizations, it is not prudent to challenge the boss, even if the idea is not particularly good. To avoid this dilemma, enlightened leaders make it easy for associates to disagree with them and to offer other options. In fact, associates increase their contribution by providing their very best thinking – not merely agreeing simply because he or she is the boss.

A simple, yet effective way to avoid this dilemma and engage associates in providing their creative best is for the boss to say: "My idea is to (fill in the blank.) We are going to do this or something better." Once the boss has set the minimum standard, the team is encouraged to "plus" the idea through the following creative process:

1. Divide the team up into small groups and have each team assess the idea on a scale of 0-10, with ten being high.

2. Challenge each of the small groups to plus the idea. If not a 10, what could be done differently to make it a 10? Notice that this step neither criticizes nor finds fault with the original idea. Instead, this step encourages each of the small groups to explore creative options to enhance the original idea.

3. Challenge each of the small groups to identify the merits of the original idea so that the benefits are not lost in the process.

4. In a round-robin fashion, have each of the small groups:

   a. First, share their 0-10 assessment;

   b. Second, identify what they would do differently to elevate the idea to a 10;

   c. Third, identify the merits of the original idea.

5. During Step 4 above, one or two particularly good ideas often emerge. When that happens, repeat Steps 2-4 in the context of those new variations, thus plussing even the second or third generation ideas.

Through this creative process, the minimum standard set by the boss is not only maintained but also typically enhanced by associates who now have greater understanding and ownership of the mutually developed solutions. Since people typically support that which they help to create, participants now become advocates rather than advisories of mutually developed, pragmatic solutions.

Implement an "After Action Review" (AAR)

After conducting a mission, the US military typically engages participants in an After Action Review (AAR) to both evaluate the results and explore options to enhance future missions. To assure safe, open discussions, the AAR process looks for the learning rather than finding faults and culprits. A similar approach can be applied in other organizations to produce even better future results.

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Many of my clients are now effectively using the following variation of the AAR to creatively enhance results. For increased safety and creative flow, divide the team up into small groups to address these three steps:

1. **Assess.** On a scale of 0-10, how did we do?

2. **Redirect.** What can we do differently next time to make it a 10? (Notice that this future orientation neither creates defensiveness nor finds fault.)

3. **Reinforce.** What did we do particularly well? (Even if the team experienced a poor overall result, reinforcing the things that went well provides positive energy and helps to raise the bar.)

PART 2: DEVELOP TEAM OPERATING AGREEMENTS TO ENHANCE TEAM CREATIVITY

Team creativity requires a safe, open environment to facilitate generation of ideas. Developing and supporting a mutually agreed upon set of Team Operating Agreements or ground rules can make a significant difference in the creative flow and how effectively the team works together. Team Operating Agreements become the guiding principles which impacts communication, creative flow, behavioral norms, and decision making. The following Team Operating Agreements have been successfully applied in a variety of industries.

1. **Commit to active listening** (Allenbaugh, 2009)

    Step 1: Pause before responding.
    Not just a time pause, this is a conscious intent to become quiet inside and to be fully present before responding (or reacting) to the thoughts and ideas of others.

Step 2: Say "Help me to understand."
At this point, you are encouraging others to voice their interests, perspectives, and concerns. You are not debating or offering another point of view, you are genuinely seeking to understand their point of view.

Step 3: Listen with every bone in your body. Rather than listening, we are often waiting to talk or preparing our rebuttal. Neither of these, of course, demonstrates listening. Listening with every bone in your body is one of the highest forms of respecting another human being.

Step 4: Seek to understand their facts, feelings, and perceptions. Typically, "Three Truths" exist: Your truth, My Truth, and The Truth. Issues often arise between individuals when each considers their own facts, feelings, and perceptions – "Their Truth" – to be "The Truth." By seeking first to understand the other person's "Truth," however, you have a greater chance of "hearing" and understanding what is really important to them. In this step, you are seeking understanding, not necessarily agreement. Once the other person feels understood, they are more likely to now listen to "Your Truth." By seeking to first understand then to be understood, we can often mutually discover "The Truth."

Step 5: Reward the feedback. Even if you may not agree with their perspective, genuinely thank others for sharing their feelings, facts, and perceptions directly with you. By acknowledging the feedback, you make it safer for interactive communication while encouraging others to talk directly with you rather than talking about you later in to so-called parking lot meetings.

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2. Introduce "Likes, Concerns, Suggestions" (LCS)

Have you noticed what happens when a team member offers "not-so-constructive criticism" or expresses why someone else's idea will not work? The creative flow tends to cease, relationship tension between individuals often increases, and a potentially good idea or variation of it evaporates. A communication tool, referred to as "LCS" or Likes, Concerns, & Suggestions, provides a productive mechanism for dealing with differing points of view while maintaining the creative flow (Bersbach, 2010). Here is how it works.

Step 1: Likes. If you are going to offer an alternative view, first share something that you genuinely like about the other person's idea. This demonstrates that you understand the potential merits and have respectfully listened.

Step 2: Concerns. Express what might be a concern about the idea only if you have an idea about "plussing" or improving the idea. (A word of caution: Do not offer constructive criticism during a creative brainstorming process. Use this later during the critical thinking phase or when open discussion is encouraged in a meeting.)

Step 3: Suggestions. If a team member states a concern, that same person must follow it with a suggestion. This is called creative piggybacking or plussing.

For example, team members of a paint manufacturing company were discussing how to deal with problems with their product when, years later after application on commercial buildings, the paint started chipping and cracking. One team member suggested putting gunpowder in the paint and blowing it off the building when problems occurred! Another member of the team shared: "I like the concept of integrating a substance directly into our product that can facilitate dealing with the chipping and cracking issues. My concern, however, is that we might damage the building. As a suggestion, what if we put an inert chemical into the paint and later spray painted another chemical on the eroding paint, causing it to slough off the building as a result of a chemical reaction?" Using creative piggybacking, a new product was developed by the company.

"Ask yourself this daily question: How would the person I want to be do the thing I'm about to do?"
Jim Cathcart

3. Reward risk taking.

Acknowledge and reward appropriate risk taking – even when the risks may not pay off. If the only risks we honor are those that succeed, we might as well say, "I want you to take risks – and you better not make any mistakes." This punitive philosophy quickly discourages creativity and risk taking. At Southwest Airlines, by contrast, celebration of risk taking is part of their culture and hilarious awards are provided for both great ideas and for those that flopped. People laugh, have fun, and are culturally encouraged to continue their creative risk taking. Appropriate risk taking needs, however, to be within the context of alignment with the mission, vision, and values of the organization.

"If you're not prepared to be wrong, you'll never come up with anything original."
Ken Robinson

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4. Look for the learning when mistakes are made. Mistakes happen. How mistakes are handled, however, can significantly impact the corporate culture and either stifle or encourage creativity. The president of a client organization, for example, has a bell in his office that associates ring when they make a mistake! In that culture, ringing the bell signals a time to pause to 1) laugh, and 2) learn. They support the individual by laughing at the mistake, then seeking the learning as a means of encouraging even higher levels of performance. On the other hand, failure to ring the bell will likely result in experiencing a career opportunity elsewhere! This culture supports growth and learning, not cover-up and non-accountability. How safe is it for people to "ring the bell" in your organization?

"No more mistakes—
and your through."
John Kleiss

5. Aim High and Celebrate Successes.
Celebrating successes and acknowledging the contributions of the team in general and individuals in particular significantly motivates people to both create and perform at their best. Honoring even movement toward the ultimate goal of a large project can inspire people to "keep on keeping on."

"The greatest danger for most of us
is not that our aim is too high and we miss it,
but that it is too low and we reach it."
Michelangelo

Typically, people can be enormously ingenious – especially when the corporate culture encourages the creative exploration of ideas. In so doing, the organization, the associates, and ultimately the customers all benefit from engaging associates in generating ideas to enhance products, services, and processes. Like the conductor of an orchestra draws the music out of the musicians, your job is to draw the creativity out of your associates in service to the mission and vision of your organization.

"You can't use up creativity.
The more you use, the more you have."
Maya Angelou

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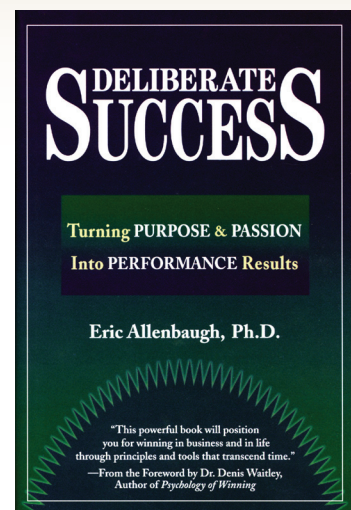
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