

Ten Best Practices for Successful Creative Teams

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The buzzword pervading Corporate America today is “innovation.” Through innovation, companies develop and increase their products and services, gain new customers, and improve the bottom line. But innovation is a product. Creativity is the engine driving innovation.

Every company is rich with creativity, because every person—every employee—has an inexhaustible well of creativity and a wealth of new ideas and fragments of ideas that can benefit the company. The company’s job is to create processes and programs that harness and use that creativity in the most beneficial manner.

Creativity within a firm is a social process and therein lies the challenge: most of the creative difficulties that arise as companies move from vision (new ideas) to implementation (translating ideas into value-generating processes and product/service innovations) are interpersonal in nature.

Motivation, for example, may be reduced by the behavior of others (e.g. too much control, manipulative tactics, etc.). People may express emotions irresponsibly, fostering a culture of blame and fear. People may have trouble tolerating creative tension, and be unable to allow conflict and ambiguity to exist even when it is appropriate. Politics, ambition, and power dynamics may guide decision-making instead of long-term thinking and a collaborative mindset.

Those are just a fraction of potential interpersonal problems that can wreak havoc for creative teams.

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The following 10 best practices can help to nip interpersonal problems in the bud, resolve any issues that may arise, and help any team succeed.

1. Build a Shared Vision for Success

Each creative team member will have an idea of what success looks like. Sometimes these ideas are in direct opposition to one another.

At one international consulting firm, a team leader saw success as teaching the client's top management concepts that they could apply in their work. The rest of the team believed success came from helping resolve specific problems the client was currently facing. These two fundamentally different approaches were never articulated or discussed within the consulting team, which led to constant arguments.

Avoid this impasse by building a shared vision for success within the creative team. Start by spending time talking about and clarifying the purpose for creative activity. Is the purpose linked to what team members care about, some intrinsic and valued goal like self-expression, making a difference, or self-satisfaction?

Get everyone's ideas about success out on the table. Together, question each team member's underlying assumptions about what success will look like. Work to understand the logic that drives these beliefs and assumptions and ask if this logic is appropriate for achieving the project goals. Find out where the "wobble room" is in peoples' perspectives and negotiate a shared understanding of the project, the purpose of the team's creative activity, and the methods and benchmarks the team will use.

2. Establish a Well-Balanced Collaborative Team With Clear Team Roles

A 2003 review of six years of research by the Hay Group, a Philadelphia-based international professional services firm, of some of the differences between "most admired" companies and others, found that those companies in the most admired group "encourage [d] teamwork and collaboration" and focused on teams not stars.

Everyone is creative. The biggest growth opportunities in a company will not come from star employees, but from creative collaboration among colleagues with clear team roles. Based on Meredith Belbin's classification, the five main roles on a creative team are: idea makers, a chairperson, idea shapers, idea explorers, and idea executors, all of whom will contribute to the team's creative performance in their own, unique ways.

Unfortunately, we tend to think of experts and idea makers as the stars, and we often miscast these people in authority roles on a team. This is a big mistake. Idea makers often don't know how to lead a team, nor are they usually interested in implementation. Thus, their team role should simply be to spark the generation of a high quantity and quality of ideas.

Teams should clarify at the outset of a project what is ideal, what is practical and realistic, and what is good enough, and decide together which of those criteria will direct the team's process and goals.

The chairperson is a team facilitator, motivating and inspiring others to do what they do best and guiding the vision and overall direction of the team with a bit of a hands-off approach. An idea shaper is often a leader who has a more hands-on approach to shaping the way things are done, influencing and controlling the process, and often molding the team process to his or her vision.

Idea explorers question things, gather information, evaluate ideas, find ways to make good use of people, and understand the broader impact and implications within the company of the team's work. Idea executors get things done, work through obstacles, and ensure that nothing is overlooked and that all plans have been completed.

The key is to clarify and respect all of the different roles that make up the creative team, to clarify and respect each member's individual strengths and how they contribute to the team process, and to learn how to bring out the best in each role to bring the team up to its optimum performance.

3. Develop Shared Criteria for What "Quality" and "Good Enough" Mean

People don't often talk about the difference between their view of what is ideal or the highest quality and what might be "good enough" to meet the project's goals. As teams progress in their work, each member will use their personal underlying (even subconscious) criteria to determine if the project is succeeding and when it has concluded. If one team member is overly focused on perfection, for example, while the rest are just trying to get something off the ground, there will be conflict. Generational differences between team members can also lead to very different ideas about what will work best or sell best to customers.

Conflicts often arise when underlying criteria aren't brought out in the open and discussed. A team leader, for example, who enforces his or her criteria without explaining it or listening to others' criteria can squash the motivation of team members trying to do something new, different, or unique. This is especially if it occurs early in the project. On the other hand, members who feel that their ideas and perspectives aren't being heard often have not done an effective job of explaining and even selling their criteria for a quality solution to the rest of the team. In either case, conflicts involving criteria for success can lead to subtle resistance, loss of leadership credibility, loss of the motivation, commitment, and engagement necessary for the team to go beyond standard solutions, and even open rebellion.

Teams should clarify at the outset of a project what is ideal, what is practical and realistic, and what is good enough, and decide together which of those criteria will direct the team's process and goals. In a September 2002 Fast Company article, Chris Albrecht, President of HBO Original Programming, described the creative philosophy that helps him and his team determine what programming is good, or good enough, to contribute to HBO's success. They apply a set of "ruling values" to each project: "Is it different? Is it distinctive? Is it

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good? Is it about something that is deeply relevant to the human experience? Is it the very best realization of that idea? Is it true to itself? It's not a recipe for hits," Albrecht continued. "It's a discipline for producing original work."

The creative team should also determine who is in charge of assessing progress toward their goals, and whether or not those assessments are open to discussion and modification down the line.

4. Manage the Ebb and Flow of Autonomy

Creative work requires varying degrees of autonomy. Too little autonomy limits the freedom to think differently, to deviate from the norm or the safest answers, to express points of view that may be at odds with key stakeholders, or to challenge methods chosen to reach project goals. For a creative project to succeed, people need autonomy.

But too much autonomy can be just as harmful as too little. When Royal Dutch Shell's energy group formed teams to investigate the possibilities of renewable energy alternatives to fossil fuels, too much autonomy allowed the German team to lose its focus as it branched out onto too many roads, wasting time, energy, and money. Eventually, the head of planning for the energy group had to reign in the team's enthusiasm by drawing some boundaries, reducing some of its autonomy, and helping the team re-focus its efforts.

Nokia, the world leader in mobile communications, eschews hierarchy in favor of in-house networking. Management steps back and lets the experts on each team make decisions about technology and product development. But the company does not run on anarchy. If a business unit or product cannot demonstrate an annual growth of 25 percent or better, or the possibility of such growth in the future, it gets the ax.

Employees in a wide variety of departments at La Jolla, California-based Advanced Tissue Sciences, Inc. are expected to spend 80 percent of their time and efforts working on the company's existing product lines. The rest of the time, however, they're free to work on anything and everything that excites them. That excitement, in turn, feeds the work they do on existing product lines.

Each project and team member will need different levels of autonomy at different phases. To best manage the ebb and flow of autonomy, team members need to explore their preferences for autonomy at the start of a project, and talk about how those preferences may change over the life and requirements of the project. Make agreements—an "autonomy framework"—based on these conversations about when more and less freedom is appropriate.

Talk about how much feedback should be given, how detailed it should be, and how often it should be given. Make it safe and acceptable to periodically ask how these agreements about autonomy and feedback are working.

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Be sure to also look at the big picture. Examine the company's history and culture to see if they reveal a lack of autonomy that could keep team members from going beyond the usual or safe answers and taking creative action. Several strategies can help shift that corporate roadblock and create more autonomy for the team. But don't try to get too much autonomy too fast. The key is to actively strengthen the team's credibility and build trust between the team and those company executives supervising the team.

First, build trust through frequent and straightforward communication with company executives and by hitting early targets. This will assure them that the team is on the right track and can be cut some slack. Second, demonstrate the team's "emotional intelligence" by developing successful decision-making processes and effectively managing conflicts, which will assure executives that they can take a more hands-off approach with the team.

Third, demonstrate to company executives through communication and performance that the team understands the duties and responsibilities that come with the increased autonomy the team wants.

These and other strategies will give the team a stronger platform from which to ask for more autonomy.

5. Balance Individual Needs With Collective Objectives

People have a sense of well being when their basic needs are met regularly. We have many basic needs, including exploration (the desire to discover new internal and external worlds and understand how things operate), territorial definition (claiming turf, which gives us a sense of power and control), play (juggling ideas, one's self-image and relationships, as well as humor), and the need to balance independence with social integration.

Meeting basic needs is a primary condition for collaboration, cooperation, mutual inspiration and motivation, the generation of new ideas, and the general effectiveness of a creative team process. The power of people to resist or undermine tasks or an entire project when their basic needs are not met—especially if people believe their needs will not be met in the future—is huge.

Project teams have collective needs that help meet the project's objectives. At times, basic needs will conflict with the team's collective needs. People may, for example, be asked to give up territory or control to improve team knowledge sharing, or they might have to work into the night or on weekends, despite personal concerns and needs outside of the company.

When team members believe there is a balance between their basic needs and the broader collective needs, and that everyone is in the same boat, they are much more willing to forego their individual needs for a period of time. But if they have been asked time and again to put aside basic needs without receiving in return recognition, appreciation, or reward, it is likely they will undermine the team's goals through resentment, a loss of commitment, covert resistance, and open rebellion.

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Several simple tools can help avoid this type of conflict, chief among them communication. Build an environment where everyone feels safe to express their concerns, voice dissent, and still be perceived as team players. Team leaders should openly acknowledge when members are asked to sacrifice a greater measure of their basic needs, and leaders should freely express their appreciation. To handle any conflicts that do arise between basic needs and collective objectives, create a process to quickly address any concerns or problems team members raise.

Almost 61 percent of respondents in a November 2002 Business Week survey said they don't believe their employer understands the extent to which stress affects them on the job. Clearly, communication is a vital strategy in managing basic and collective needs. Sometimes, a team leader showing his or her concern for members' needs and acknowledging the additional stress not meeting those needs is causing is all that is needed to calm the waters.

Another strategy to resolve problems when basic needs aren't being met is to help teams reconnect to the purpose of the work: to be re-inspired by the team's work, inspire and motivate others, and rekindle the passion for the work. If team members believe the leader and other key stakeholders are involved and care, they are more likely to be motivated to temporarily set aside personal needs.

Finally, some companies have simply shifted responsibility for balancing individual and collective needs to the team members themselves. General Electric's North Carolina aircraft engine assembly facility, for example, has successfully adopted this strategy. The plant has 170 employees divided into 9 teams, and one plant manager. She schedules the completion dates for each engine. Each team is responsible for deciding what it will take to get its engine loaded onto a truck on that date. Which team member does a particular job, and on which day, vacation schedules, what training is needed and when, balancing overtime with personal lives, the consequences to an employee who doesn't meet his or her responsibilities, how to make a task more efficient, and other work decisions are left up to the team. Thus, team members are responsible for balancing their basic needs with collective needs on a daily basis.

6. Spend Time Assessing and Talking About the Team's Working Process

In their rush to get things done, creative teams often put discussions of work process issues on the back burner and never get to them. A frequently heard complaint is "We should be working on what we are supposed to be doing, not wasting time talking about how we are working together."

But that belief system only leads to trouble. Fear of appearing "difficult" and losing their chances for promotion led several members of a consulting team working on a large Customer Relationship Management implementation project in the U.K. to feel that they could not raise issues they had with how decisions were

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being made and enforced. The team became increasingly polarized as people talked behind closed doors, formed alliances, and spent more time talking about problems in the team than on client issues. Eventually, at considerable cost to the team and the company, an outside facilitator was brought in.

Time spent building effective work processes is time well spent. When you start a project, set some work process ground rules for how decisions will be made, how conflict will be handled, what to do if people believe the team is on the wrong track, how acknowledgements will be shared, and how to make the best use of time together.

Be sure to also clarify each team member's creative work preferences. Are team members most effective coming up with new ideas on their own or through collaborating with others? Do people like it quiet, or noisy? Do they work best under pressure, or when there is ample time to explore different options? At Hydrogen Media, a provider of fully integrated e-business solutions based in St. Petersburg, Florida, employees have free rein in designing their workplaces to better meet their preferences—one work area, for example, has a shark tank, while some cubicles have been turned into a tropical jungle. This autonomy has led to higher productivity and strong employee recruitment and retention rates.

Once the ground rules and work preferences have been established, schedule time throughout the project to meet and check in with each other to discuss how the work process is or is not serving individual team members, the team as a whole, and the project. Is anyone or anything impeding clear and consistent communication? Are there problems with the way that hierarchy is being used to move individuals and the team toward the project goals? What patterns of interaction don't stimulate people to go beyond the usual answers? Adjust the team's work process accordingly.

7. Build Effective Conflict Management and Decision-Making Processes

Creativity is like a contact sport. Team members are bound to bump up against each other in dozens of ways, starting with differing ideas, perspectives, and comfort zones. Conflict is inevitable. First, there is the conflict at every step in the project between staying with tradition and breaking new ground. Next, there may be conflicts between people about which ideas to pursue and how, who should be responsible for certain tasks, and how to solve problems. Also, conflicts between materials, processes, systems, and schedules may arise during production and implementation. Finally, there may be disagreements about how to evaluate the quality, thoroughness, and viability of the completed project.

Conflict itself is not always a problem. In fact, it can be beneficial to a creative team. Used properly, conflict can raise the underlying differences of ideas, opinions, or actions in a team and create

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clarity about those differences, which can lead to new thinking and innovation. Conflict can also expose areas of confusion or misunderstanding that, left undetected, might lead team members to make inappropriate decisions. It can also, by requiring people to explain their point of view, uncover faulty assumptions or logic that might otherwise have damaged the creative process.

When there is a healthy diversity of opinions on a team, coupled with appropriate communication and respect for each individual member, the conflicts that arise will most likely be temporary, rather than chronic, and they will be resolved in ways that benefit the quality of the final team product.

Conflict only becomes a problem when it is managed poorly. When a multi-national document management company undertook a large-scale in-house organizational change program, some executives who wanted to maintain the status quo began to resist the changes. One of the quality managers responsible for initiating the program began to react poorly to that resistance. The conflict escalated into an “Us vs. Them” dynamic that included lots of scapegoating, accusations within each group of “taboo” behaviors (team members acting like the “others”), and each group actively trying to subvert the other’s efforts. In the end, the conflict between these two groups held the change program hostage.

Millions of dollars were poured into the organizational change program and much good was accomplished. But the conflict between the two groups led to a cut in the program’s budget, tainted the outcome of the change program, and prevented the realization of some of the key goals of the initiative.

Managed properly, however, conflict can lead to better understanding and success. Conflict resolution is basically a four step process:

(1) understand each other’s perspectives, (2) find common ground, (3) examine any remaining differences between team members, and (4) select strategies to resolve the conflict and monitor the resolution process.

When an international team of experts was established to design and deliver a series of training courses for a Big Five consulting firm, conflicts between team members arose. Two of the members—one Swiss and one Dutch—had very formal rules about how team members should perform and “share the stage” during presentations to the client. The other two team members—one American and one Italian—had much more informal rules. During the first client presentation, while the Dutch member was speaking, the American and Italian members jumped in and began adding thoughts and key points they felt she was missing. The Dutch and Swiss members considered these disrespectful interruptions. The American and Italian members didn’t think they had done anything wrong. The conflict could have torn the team apart and perhaps have killed the project.

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Instead, the team worked to understand each member's implicit rules, discussed how best to share leadership during a client presentation, and created a process to respectfully intervene when one member was speaking to the client. The team members learned how to better demonstrate their respect for each other, resolved the conflict, and created an effective presentation process that worked well in subsequent client interactions.

In creative work, conflict and decision-making are intimately intertwined. Decisions have to be made, often in the midst of uncertainty and conflicting points of view. Sometimes decisions resolve conflict, and other times they can inflame it. Problems can arise when uncertainty about how to proceed generates stress, frustration, and conflict—especially if the team has not clarified decision-making roles and the decision-making process.

Effective decision-making implies that both the choice itself and the process of making it fit the circumstances. A team might arrive at a good decision, for example, but alienate key members or stakeholders during the decision-making process.

Often in creative projects, different team members are responsible for decision-making on different parts of the project. Sometimes consensus is appropriate. At other times, it might be too time intensive to serve the team's objectives. As Patricia Russo, CEO of Lucent's Service Provider Networks Group, told Forbes magazine in 1999, a diversity of opinions and experiences generates better decision-making, yet someone has to be willing to pull the trigger. "It's a collaborative process," she said, "but the buck stops with me."

Trouble can arise when team leaders don't delegate decision-making appropriately, if the leader makes too many of the decisions for team members, or jumps in too many times to "help." That behavior can infantilize the team, kill motivation among team members, lead to slack work processes and habits, and make the team overly dependent on the leader for the most basic decisions before moving forward on even the simplest task.

Adventure racing—an extreme sport in which teams of four or five top athletes hike, bike, boat, climb, and run through wilderness ranging from the Sahara Desert to the Amazon jungle, without a pre-determined route, over eight or nine days—demands successful decision-making processes if a team is to succeed. One of the top teams in the world is EcoInternet, an international team with a rotating roster of 10 members.

Leadership during a race flows between each team member depending on who is feeling strongest at a particular moment in the grueling competition. Decision-making before and during a race is done by consensus. If a particular decision turns out to be a mistake, there are no recriminations, no guilt, and no shame. The mistake is simply regarded as one more challenge in the race that must be overcome. After the race, the team examines every decision that was made, what worked, what didn't work, personal motivations, and cause and effect, to learn from and build on that decision-making process in the next race.

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However decisions are made in the team, it is vital to close the gap between what the team and its leaders say about decision-making and what they actually do. In a landmark 1965 research study of decision-making among executives in six companies, Chris Argyris found that gaps between the leadership's words and actions created barriers to openness and trust, to the effective search for alternatives, to innovation, and to flexibility in the organization.

Today, things are very much the same. If people understand how decisions will be made, trust that their perspectives and potential objections are heard, and believe that decision-makers have credibility and integrity, decision-making is less likely to lead to conflict in the team.

8. Ensure That Leadership Has Credibility and Acts With Integrity

Charisma, strength, honesty, or even a leadership position do not automatically make a leader. Leadership is fundamentally a social contract between one or several people who step forward to provide vision and direction, and a larger group of people who give leadership authority to them and are motivated through positive or negative behavior to follow their direction. In order for true leadership to exist and be sustained, there has to be this mutual-often unspoken-agreement.

Trouble can come when team leaders assume (often incorrectly) that, because they have been given leadership authority from the company management, they also have leadership authority from the team as well. Or, they don't stop to question whether the negative tactics they may have used in the past to gain and sustain authority (e.g. subtle threats, anger, pressure, or guilt) will work when ingenuity, creativity and innovation are required for the team's success.

Before David S. Pottruck became the co-CEO of Charles Schwab & Co., he was an egomaniacal bull charging through the company china shop. He used to trample over other people's opinions and regularly used his position to over-rule any of their strategies that he didn't like. Teamwork was fine, as long as he was in charge. Any acceptable new ideas had to be his. He didn't even know he had a problem until his boss, COO Lawrence Stupski, told him his colleagues feared him, didn't trust him, and certainly didn't like working with him.

Thanks to that painful wake-up call, Pottruck worked with a coach to transform his leadership style. He now focuses on authenticity and ongoing, straight-forward communication with employees about the often difficult changes going on in the company, his personal mistakes and successes, what he values, and what his vision is for Schwab. He no longer avoids the inevitable problems that arise in teams—nor does he try to hide his own failings from others as well as himself—he now proactively tackles them head-on.

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team members. The combination of credibility and integrity builds trust and respect, both vital ingredients for inspiring and motivating people to go beyond the usual answers and for leading teams into uncertain and uncharted territory.

One of the ways leaders demonstrate both credibility and integrity is when they “walk their talk.” During the 1990s, the Japanese automaker Nissan was on its last legs, suffering under \$12.6 billion in debt and a string of unprofitable years. In 1999, the French automaker Renault bought the company and made one of its executives, Carlos Ghosn, Nissan’s new President and CEO. In Japan, Ghosn engineered a corporate miracle, cutting costs, slashing Nissan’s debt in half, and making the company profitable once again. Some of Ghosn’s strategies were painful: cutting employees, closing plants, removing unproductive managers. Through it all, Ghosn communicated the problems, his solutions, his reasons for those solutions, and his vision to the Nissan employees. One of his key strategies was to put himself on the line. He walked his talk: if his efforts didn’t improve measurably the company’s performance, he promised to resign.

Another key to building trust and demonstrating integrity is to balance the rights that come with a leadership position with the duties of that role. If team members believe that project or company leaders are abusing the rights of their position—particularly if it is at the expense of others’ needs, leaders will lose credibility, trust, commitment—and possibly their job.

At American Airlines, for example, executives pushed their employees to accept salary and benefit reductions to help save the financially troubled company. Most union members narrowly voted to approve \$1.62 billion worth of annual concessions. Then, American Airlines CEO Donald J. Carty revealed the details of executive retention bonuses and pension protections, exposing a major imbalance between the way executives and employees were bearing the duty to help the company remain solvent. Carty lost his job and American Airlines suffered a severe erosion of employee trust toward executives, which lowered morale, hampered productivity, made employees unwilling to do more than the bare minimum required, hurt customer service, and created a hostile atmosphere for future contract negotiations.

On the other end of the spectrum is Gordon Bethune. When he became CEO of Continental Airlines in 1994, the company was struggling just to survive. It had been losing an average of \$960 million per year. It had the worst performance ratings in the industry, from lost luggage to cancelled flights. Employee morale was virtually non-existent.

Then Bethune instituted his “Go Forward Plan” which has spearheaded a remarkable cultural and workplace transformation that has sent employee morale and performance soaring and made Continental profitable once again. In addition to improving technology, restructuring debt, selling off non-core assets, and

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streamlining costs, Bethune has focused much of his efforts on getting managers and employees to work together. He personally spends a great deal of his time communicating with and meeting with employees, from visiting hubs and reservation centers, to chatting with flight attendants as he flies from location to location.

He attends and speaks at Continental's flight attendant graduations, turns up at hub Halloween and birthday parties, and holds a monthly open house in his office that allows employees to speak to him individually about concerns, or problems, or successes. He established an 800 number that employees can call to get his weekly recorded update on the company. As a result, every employee knows Bethune on sight, trusts him, and feels comfortable coming up to speak to him, often just to say hello, or to tell him a joke, or to point out a potential problem.

9. Ensure Consistent and Reliable Communication

Communication is the lifeblood of every team and company. Communication exchanges the information that leads to creativity on, and it builds relationships. Consistent and reliable communication is vital to a team. It helps members think creatively and see new connections, planting the seeds that lead to insights, innovations, and actions that produce value today and tomorrow.

Ensure consistent and reliable communication on a creative team by first insuring that each member understands the different kinds of conversations in which they will be engaging, including "What If" conversations (exploring possibilities), planning conversations (e.g. planning how the team will function, planning a client presentation, etc.), appreciation conversations (expressing appreciation to a team member), a "Why Not?" conversation (e.g. critiquing ideas, exploring the obstacles and downsides of a solution), and difficult conversations (anything that is hard to talk about, such as a poor report).

Each of these conversations has different criteria for success. A successful "What If" conversation, for example, requires the suspension of judgment, open-minded curiosity, and imagination. A successful planning conversation requires the participants to align with a specific purpose or vision and to set tangible milestones.

Appreciation conversations require the expression of both a person's thoughts and feelings and the acknowledgement of specific qualities or actions that made a difference. "Why Not?" conversations require participants to see the bigger picture, including larger systems and the external environment, and to blend their critical thinking with respect for the other participants. A successful difficult conversation requires a constructive mindset and the separation of facts from interpretations.

Each of these different conversations can also be derailed. "What If?" conversations may fail if one or more of the participants critique possibilities too soon or put too much pressure or stress on the outcome of possibility thinking, which closes down imagination. Planning conversations may fail if each participant's "good enough"

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criteria are not first put on the table and if the conversations are too prescriptive, which doesn't give people enough freedom to self-organize how they reach their milestones.

Appreciation conversations can be derailed if someone is being insincere (everyone will know), or if it is used as a political tool, thus losing its meaning as a positive tool. "Why Not?" conversations often fail when one or more participants label other members' perspectives as wrong simply because they have flaws or are incomplete, or when people who naturally see obstacles are scapegoated as "negative." Difficult conversations can be derailed when participants avoid bringing their feelings into the conversation and instead argue about "what happened." The keys in any communication—whether it is designed to set direction, convey difficult information, gain commitment, or evaluate performance—are trust and authenticity. People have very keen instincts and subtle (often unconscious) sensitivities that pick up on non-verbal communication (e.g. gestures, posture, facial expressions) and can alert them to someone who is being dishonest. They are also sensitive to the gaps between what people say and how they act.

In general, a successful conversation requires a constructive mindset, clarification of the desired outcome of the conversation, building understanding, assessing progress, and reviewing next steps.

Formally establish processes at the beginning of a project that encourage team members to be straight-forward, constructive, and respectful when they speak to each other and to the team as a whole. Build trust and authenticity by articulating "communication agreements" that include processes to change an agreement when necessary, and processes to provide immediate and constructive feedback. Agree that there will be times when team members disagree with each other.

Too often, people focus on getting the content of messages right, without thinking about how the delivery of messages influences creative performance by either building or eroding trust, credibility, and commitment. One of the most effective ways to improve the way team leaders and members use communication is to work with a coach. Have team members watch themselves on videotape and ask: Do my words match the sound of my voice and my non-verbal gestures and behaviors? What behaviors might be generating "noise" in my communication? Are team members checking assumptions, listening, acknowledging emotions, and expressing appreciation? Use role-playing in different scenarios to practice and improve skills, particularly in difficult conversations.

10. Enhance Team Learning

Companies want their creative teams to find extraordinary solutions, often to problems no one has faced before, and to create new business opportunities. Learning—how team members and the team itself learn during a project—is a critical part of the team's process, the creative process, and meeting those company goals.

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Both teams and individual team members learn in a cyclical process that has four phases: (1) Identifying problems and developing a shared understanding of the project, (2) Planning and direction setting to organize and align the team's methods for achieving desired goals, (3) Acting to implement the plan in a coordinated way (each member executes their part of the plan while staying aware of what the whole team is doing), and (4) Reflecting to improve future performance (often forgotten or skipped in the company's rush to move people from one team to a new team and project).

To successfully navigate those four phases, creative teams must optimize the speed, depth, and breadth of how they learn, how they change their behavior in response to new learning, how they adapt that new learning to new situations, and how they share new learning throughout the company.

To optimize speed, a team may need to relax some of its rules and develop the ability to succeed fast, or fail fast, and move on. Sometimes speed comes from knowing when to wait, re-evaluate, and/or reflect. Speed also comes from utilizing the natural skills and working styles of each team member, addressing interpersonal obstacles before they inhibit collaboration, and opening channels of communication so team members can voice important perceptions, questions, and concerns, which enables actions, ideas, and resources to flow swiftly and seamlessly.

Polaroid delivered its new medical imaging system, called Helios, to the market twice as fast as anyone in the company had hoped. That speed was attributed directly to Polaroid's interdisciplinary team structure. Working together, the Helios researchers cross-referenced and shared their knowledge, received feedback, and built upon the experiences of others on the team on a daily basis.

To optimize depth, team members need to question the underlying assumptions and principles that guide the team's actions and to challenge the way things are done, even if that means going against cultural norms and accepted practices. When Dale Fuller took over as President and CEO of the virtually moribund Borland Software (now known as Inprise) in 1999, he inherited a company culture that had basically given up and didn't bother to question even the most ludicrous expenses. The company, for example, spent \$100,000 annually on chemicals to keep the campus pond safe for aquatic life, even though raccoons had eaten all the fish in the early 1990s. No one before Fuller arrived had examined the expense to see if it still made sense.

Deep learning requires trust and the kind of work environment where people tell the truth and speak up when questions or disagreements arise. Deep learning is essential if teams want to create something different from their company's competitors, or develop something unique.

Optimizing breadth is all about getting more bang for the buck by having the team and its individual members relax turf and boundary issues and look at their work through a wide-angle—rather than a

Formally establish processes at the beginning of a project that encourage team members to be straightforward, constructive, and respectful.

telephoto–lens. Where else in the company can the knowledge the team is developing be of value? Which other people, teams, and systems will be impacted by this work? How can the team bring key stakeholders onboard and keep them abreast of its progress, issues, and challenges?

When Monsanto began transforming its corporate culture to meet the demands of its emerging life sciences focus in the late 1990s, the company invested in team learning with online resources, intact team coaching, and face-to-face learning activities. These efforts have helped enhance the way employees share knowledge across the company, and they have identified synergies between agriculture, pharmaceuticals, and nutrition. As teams have learned how to accelerate the learning process, they are better able to share what is and is not working with the rest of the company.

In conclusion....

Harnessing and profiting from creativity is rarely easy for companies to achieve, consistently and over time. Any number of pitfalls can slow down—or actually derail—the all-important creative process that yields so many benefits. But such an unsuccessful outcome doesn't have to occur. By adopting these 10 best practices for creative teams, companies can strengthen and support the natural creativity of each team member, which will lead to greater innovation, and generate the better products and services the firm needs to better compete in the global economy.

Creative teams must optimize the speed, depth, and breadth of how they learn - and how they change their behavior in response to new learning.

As teams have learned how to accelerate the learning process, they are better able to share what is and is not working with the rest of the company.

