



5

traits of successful

CREATIVE TEAMS

By Liz Massey

INSTALLING THESE TRAITS IN YOUR EMPLOYEES CAN MEAN THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN INNOVATION AND MEDIOCRITY.

It doesn't matter what you do for a living—creativity and innovation are becoming job requirements for workers in more and more industries.

“We're in an idea economy. To stay competitive, companies have to be creative,” says business consultant Linda Naiman, who leads workshops on enhancing workplace creativity through her company, Creativity at Work. “It's the elegant solution that wins in the marketplace.”

Although artistic creativity may still happen in a solo environment, much of today's workplace creativity happens with others. Despite a burst of initiatives in the last decade devoted to enhancing creative workplace collaboration, many companies are still wondering how it's done. According to a 2007 IPSOS-Public Affairs survey commissioned by the Fairfax County (Va.) Economic Development Authority, 88 percent of the U.S. workers surveyed consider themselves creative. But when it comes to creativity in the workplace, just 63 percent said their positions were creative, and only 61 percent thought their company could be called creative or innovative.

How do you close this “creativity gap” and develop teams in your office that can out-innovate the competition? We've identified five traits common to creative teams. Cultivate these in your workgroup,

and your employees might just develop the next breakthrough idea for your office, your business, or even your industry.

TRAIT #1: CREATIVE TEAMS KNOW WHY THEY EXIST.

Great creative teams know *why* they've been gathered and have a clear challenge or vision around which their work centers.

Both Naiman and Jefferey Baumgartner, founder of the Belgian innovation software and consulting firm Bwiti bvba, note that such teams are clear on the difference between creativity—the generation of new, unique ideas—and innovation—the profitable implementation of creative ideas. Workplace teams must master both processes to succeed.

“Innovation is creativity's implementation,” says Naiman.

“Creativity is an end in itself in the arts. In business, it needs to lead to innovation,” adds Baumgartner. “Otherwise, it's nice, but doesn't help the bottom line.”

Often, the key to a creative team having a clear self-identity is whether it's been handed a problem to solve that has been framed correctly. Arthur VanGundy, author of *Getting to Innovation*, suggests that companies frame “innovation challenges” for their teams. These challenges should be questions that are relatively open-ended, yet

target an explicit objective, such as increasing product sales. Challenge statements, he adds, should also:

- start with the phrase, “How might we ... ?”
- have a single objective, not two or three
- be free of evaluative criteria or implied solutions
- define the scope of the ideal solution.

TRAIT #2: CREATIVE TEAMS THRIVE IN A CULTURE OF TRUST.

All the tips and techniques in the world won't elicit creativity from a team that knows its company won't reward a potentially risky new idea. Baumgartner, whose company produces Jenni, an idea-management software system, says that tools such as Jenni are only useful to teams with managers who truly support creative risk-taking.

“If employees see that their ideas will not be implemented or if they are reprimanded for sharing ideas, they will soon learn that the innovation thing is a facade and won't bother to use any creativity or innovation tools, or even bother to be innovative,” he notes.

Keith Sawyer, professor of psychology and education at Washington University in St. Louis and author of *Group Genius: The Creative Power of Collaboration*, contends that managerial aversion to allowing a culture supportive of creative endeavor often stems from training in M.B.A. programs emphasizing planning and control.

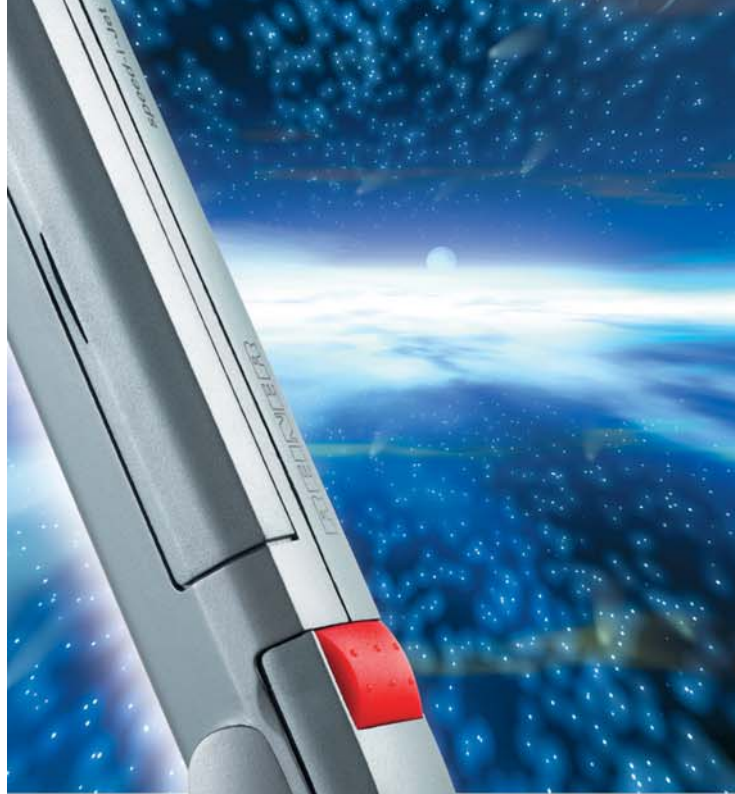
“A lot of managers don't want to be surprised,” he says. “It's hard for them to relinquish control and allow their team to devise an improvised solution ... they can be efficient, but their team won't be creative.”

Sawyer also believes that some of the trust necessary for creative team-building must be developed *within* the team, by individual team members listening intently to the contributions and perspectives of others.

“Most people focus on what to say next and are no longer listening (to each other),” says Sawyer. “Innovative team members listen closely ... and that trust is built up over time.”

TRAIT #3: CREATIVE TEAMS ARE WELL-LED.

Besides having support from above, innovative workplace groups also have good internal leadership. Sawyer's research into group creativity has focused on jazz ensembles and improvisational theater troupes—two groups possessing many of the same characteristics as innovative business teams, he says. In such groups, leaders are also participants, and the team has a very egalitarian, first-among-equals attitude toward their boss. Such groups also have an organic, fluid structure, which promotes adaptation and experimentation more readily than brittle, top-heavy hierarchies.



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Baumgartner echoes the need for flattening the hierarchy in creative groups. “Very creative ideas seem absurd at first,” he opines. “To suggest a potentially absurd idea to a group, risks ridicule. If that group includes a senior manager, the risk of ridicule and looking foolish is even more serious.”

Kevin Eikenberry, chief potential officer for a training and consulting group that bears his name, notes that in addition to providing clear goals for the group, a good creative team leader will also have “healthfully high” expectations of the group’s ability to generate great ideas and the ability to make the incentives for accomplishing the goal compelling. “People will live up or down to our expectations most of the time,” Eikenberry says.

TRAIT #4: CREATIVE TEAMS GENERATE AND EVALUATE IDEAS EFFECTIVELY.

When many managers hear the term “workplace creativity,” the first image that pops into their mind may be a

group of employees brainstorming a cute product name. Sawyer asserts that this scenario, while common, is actually one of the worst possible uses of a brainstorming session.

“[Managers] should use brainstorming groups for something more complex—a situation in which you don’t even know what the solution would look like,” Sawyer says.

Eikenberry pinpoints the “creativity on demand” expectation of most brainstorming gatherings as a barrier to generating great ideas. There’s an impatience to rush into evaluation after the first flurry of ideas are shared. Most great ideas come in the pause after that flurry, he says.

Naiman and Baumgartner advocate getting away from verbal brainstorming entirely. Baumgartner has clients do what he calls “visual” or nonverbal brainstorming sessions, in which they collaboratively build models, draw pictures, or act out scenarios to resolve the problem. This method, he says, circumvents the three major pitfalls specific to traditional brainstorming: production blocking (focusing on the ideas of others stops individuals from sharing their own), topic fixation (once an interesting idea has been voiced, other avenues get ignored) and social inhibition (shy people tend to let the verbally dominant run the show).

Naiman encourages symbolic art-making during her sessions with business groups. She said creating an artistic representation gets group members away from another major downside to traditional brainstorming, the all-too-human tendency to turn verbal brainstorming sessions into an argument.

“When we brainstorm an idea (verbally), people jump on one idea and debate the hell out of it,” Naiman says.

TRAIT #5: CREATIVE TEAMS CONSTANTLY SEEK TO BRING MORE TO THE TABLE.

Forget, for a moment, the very real social benefits of fostering diversity in your organization. In terms of business innovation, encouraging diversity can bring in alternative perspectives, spark unusual parallels between ideas, and refresh a creative team’s performance over time.

Sawyer mentions research that shows many good ideas come from exposure to “distant” analogies, that is, models of problems from other professions or industries. Learning from and mixing with people from other departments, divisions, or even other companies can allow creative team members to access solutions to problems more readily.

One trend that exemplifies this silo-busting approach is the “innovation lab” in which a cross-functional team of

specialists from marketing, product development, engineering, manufacturing, and so forth, work over a specified time period to develop new products or services. Sawyer says this approach has proved superior to ideas developed by R&D groups, which tend to have “hand-off” issues once it comes time to manufacture or market a product.

For those who don’t have the budget to form an innovation lab team, even simply including stakeholders beyond the usual suspects on a creative team can help diversify it. Naiman advises the inclusion of student interns, customers, vendors, or members of other departments to provide fresh perspectives on a problem.

“Create a ‘brain trust’ and engage in a dialogue with these people,” says Naiman.

Perhaps the key to cultivating all these traits in your team is the recognition that at work, creativity *is* the natural domain of groups, not the eccentric “lone genius” our culture identifies with groundbreaking innovation.

Sawyer adds that the most innovative companies expect every employee to participate in their culture of creativity. “The expectation in those places is *not* that only certain people are creative,” he says. “When systems are in place to allow people to contribute, it can help the company realize that everyone is capable of having good ideas.” S

Liz Massey is a freelance writer and editor who writes frequently about workplace learning and creativity. She lives in Peoria, Ariz.

No matter what you do for a living, creativity and innovation are becoming standard job requirements for everyone.