

A three-part framework to ignite team creativity

Very early on in my experience teaching and consulting to creative companies and arts organisations, I identified a three-part framework to invent and explore new ideas within a team dynamic: ideate, evaluate, select.

This structure does not imply that you accomplish everything in one conversation; it might require several. The approach outlined below can be facilitated with groups as small as three and as large as a hundred. But this is a structure that has served me well, and you will see as you read on how this may be applied implicitly in your own team meetings.

1. Ideate

Everyone proposes ideas. Nothing is shot down. You're going for quantity, not quality. So much research on creativity indicates that the best ideas emerge from many ideas, rather than one, proposed at the beginning. Ask the team to consider the answers to the 'exam question' well before you all meet in person. This will be helpful for the introverts in your team. Stress that you want a LOT of ideas rather than each person to bring 'their best idea'. You don't want the team to edit itself, as the group itself can pull out value and explore the hidden depths in an idea more than the individual owner of the idea could. When you get together, ask everyone to say or write down (writing it all down on a wall is

best) all their ideas without any feedback. Then ask, 'What else?' Ideas proposed may have sparked new ones that haven't yet been offered. Capture those topics too.

At this stage, think of yourself and your team as an oak tree. The oak wants to produce more little trees, but it doesn't know where the best combination of soil, moisture and sunlight will be. So its strategy is to drop thousands of acorns over as wide a space as possible. The tree maximises its chances that some of those acorns will land on the perfect plot of land.

On the other hand, most organisations when trying to produce new ideas behave more like pandas when they try to reproduce. Pandas may want to produce little pandas, but they seem to want to get it right in one go or not attempt the activity. So a panda couple will try once per year if they're lucky and frequently requiring the encouragement of their zoo keepers: mood music, aroma therapy, romantic dinners of bamboo canapes, you name it. It's such a rare occurrence that it becomes a global headline when a zoo announces a new baby panda. As a result of these divergent strategies from nature, we know that we have no shortage of oak trees in the world, while pandas are an endangered species. Here is the lesson: *be the oak tree, not the panda!*

2. Evaluate

Only when the team has a wheelbarrow full of ideas should it even begin to assess which ones to explore further. Only now do you formally close the 'ideate' stage, and move to 'evaluate' when you now want people to respond to the proposed ideas. The team should all play the role of optimists first, and only when that stage is complete should the leader ask for devil's advocates. In other words, encourage people to first only 'yes...and' rather than 'yes...but' the ideas, or at the very least nominate their favourite ideas and why. Try to solicit at least one 'yes...and' for every idea. Only at the end of this stage should you ask the team why they may have concerns about some of the ideas, why some ideas may not work, or why they don't excite.

As the leader, you should always contribute last in the 'evaluate' phase! If you state your opinion at this early stage, everyone else will assume that the decision has already been made. And if the leader judges every idea as soon as it's proposed, immediately playing devil's advocate, they find in short order that no one pitches any more ideas! Before deciding to kill a proposition, it's useful as well to consider the mood and energy of the room. In this way, the soil is fertilised for the next request for pitching new ideas, as everyone's egos

have been protected. After this exercise, then one can reasonably decide a short list of the best concepts.

3. Select

Based on the previous stage, what ideas excite us most, have the biggest upside, the smallest downside, the easiest to implement? Which ideas, though perhaps difficult to execute, would be worth the effort? You don't necessarily have to bring it down to the one idea and declare, 'OK. We're doing this!' The reality in corporate life is that you may now have to run this by other people who are not in the room. However, you now have a lot of reasons, perspectives and additional contexts to contribute to those conversations as a result of the team's brainstorming. The team leader needs the bigger picture perspective in making the selection of which idea or ideas to pursue from the shortlist. Make sure the team knows the criteria in advance of the exercise, and then apply those criteria with some rigour. In that manner, selection is not subjective, random or showing favouritism.

I cannot stress enough that, regardless of the size of the group, you must devote adequate time to this exercise. First, while you may reach the point where all ideas in the room are captured if you hurry, you will not have true buy-in from the group. Sure, everyone will have dutifully completed the exercises in the time allotted, but it will become about task completion rather than shared agreement that everyone can get behind these answers. Second and related point, the meeting is not only about capturing ideas. You will require at least as much time to discuss which ideas the group will willingly advocate as the time you spent generating those ideas in the first place. Third, you need time to draw out multiple views. If you rush, the extroverted personalities and/or the most senior people in the room will jump in with their ideas, and the introverts and junior colleagues will defer. But silence does not imply assent; it might simply mean that some people were not given adequate time or space to share their opinions. Fourth and finally, and perhaps it goes without saying, but the participants in this exercise should ideally include those with the authority and influence to align the company or department around the decisions made during the meeting(s), but these discussions should not solely involve these people.

Any manager in any industry will be confronted with challenges and opportunities that require leading a brainstorming session to identify an unobvious solution. The good news is that creative facilitation is a skill rather than a genetic trait, and therefore the technical skills and structure to lead that session effectively are the very same skills and techniques that any successful team in a creative arts organisation would employ.

Adam Kingl is author of *Sparkling Success: Why Every Leader Needs to Develop a Creative Mindset.*

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Article by ADAM KINGL