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Creativity

3 Exercises to Boost Your Team's Creativity

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Summary. Organizations today spend great sums of money on creativity training, hoping that it will spur innovative and entrepreneurial thinking among the ranks. Unfortunately, most of this training just doesn't work. Why not? Because it puts too much faith in the powers of... **more**

Almost every business, of every size, across sectors, employs creativity training, from whiteboard brainstorming sessions to design thinking. It's a billion-dollar industry, and with good

reason: Creativity is the main engine of innovation and entrepreneurship, and a major driver of resilience.

But there's a problem: The training doesn't work. Instead, it perpetuates expert bias and pseudo-innovation, and although it can temporarily boost morale, it does little over the long haul to reduce burnout. On the whole, research has shown it to be at best inadequate and at worst counterproductive.

To understand what's broken, and how to fix it, my lab partnered with teams at a variety of organizations, among them Silicon Valley startups, U.S. Special Operations, the University of Chicago Booth School of Business, and Fortune 50 companies. What we discovered surprised us by overturning much of the conventional wisdom about how to foster creativity. We've just published our findings in the *New York Academy of Sciences*. In this article, I'll sum them up and explain what they mean for your business.

Beyond Brainstorming

Creativity gurus, from the Stanford d.school to Jordan Peterson, agree: Creativity training begins with "divergent thinking," a concept devised at the end of World War 2 by J. P. Guilford, a retired Air Force colonel. Guilford believed that the brain was like a computer, which led him to conclude that everything the brain did could be reduced to logic. Logic includes randomness (which is why computers can manufacture cryptocurrency), so Guilford developed a method for systematically generating random ideas. That method has become the basis of what we now call brainstorming, which has become a standard practice in the business world when organizations are searching for new ideas.

But computer AI has recently exposed the limits of brainstorming. AI can run divergent thinking, so it can brainstorm. In fact, it can brainstorm much better than humans, because it can think more randomly and target that randomness more effectively.

That should make AI much more creative than we are, right?

Wrong. AI can't imagine new technologies, business plans, or corporate strategies. Which means that those creative activities — and, by extension, many others — require something more than divergent thinking. That "something," it turns out, occurs in nonlogical, motor regions of the human brain. And there's a method to what happens there — one that overturns the three most common creativity practices employed by modern businesses.

If you'd like a full rundown of the method, you can read this public-domain workbook that I recently prepared for the U.S. Army's Command and General Staff College. But here are a few pointers to get you started.

Train your existing workforce to leverage anomalies.

Hiring is the standard quick-fix for businesses that want to boost creativity. Yet when organizations try to headhunt creatives, they fall into a host of traps, from assessing creativity via past performance (a surefire recipe for backward thinking) to confusing creativity with ideas that seem creative to current leadership (a classic perpetuator of stasis).

Hiring for creativity does more than fail. Typically, it backfires. When companies assume that creativity is a special gift, they promote workplaces in which certain employees are viewed as more creative, which in turn puts creative work into silos and renders it vulnerable to groupthink. That's why organizations that value lone visionaries are so often out-innovated by cultures that treat everyone as creative, reaping the full potential of their existing workforce.

Here's the paradox: Culture is not just creativity's most potent source but also its biggest killer. Culture kills creativity by promoting conformity. Even businesses that pride themselves on their creative culture are generally characterized by a dominant ideology, personality, or method.

To nurture a culture that fosters originality, try this team exercise: Have everyone anonymously write down something they like but are afraid to admit to the group. Then share the answers, maintaining anonymity. When each answer is shared, ask everyone to take two minutes to imagine that they like the same thing and silently plan a way to incorporate it into the workspace.

This exercise has three benefits. One, it empowers subjective bias, which is a logical weakness but a creative strength. (Think where we'd be if van Gogh hadn't been partial to yellow. Innovative organizations don't eliminate bias; they diversify it and render it transparent.) Two, the exercise stimulates teams to actively appreciate nonconformity. And three, it primes the brain to value anomalies: the most potent biological source of creative inspiration. Our increasingly logic-based corporate culture trains us to look past, criticize, laugh at, or rationalize away anomalies and outliers. Four-year-olds are vastly more sensitive to anomalies and outliers than successful business executives — which is one reason they're also vastly more imaginative.

Odds are that only one or two brave souls will admit to something truly countercultural the first time you run this exercise. But if you run it again a month later, you're likely to get bolder answers. If you do, you'll know the exercise is working.

Instead of brainstorming, think counterfactually.

Everybody knows the drill: You gather the team, wheel out a whiteboard, and brainstorm possible responses to current challenges and opportunities. But the moment we start thinking about those challenges and opportunities, we activate our fears and hopes, both of which radically constrain our creativity. We focus on plausible short-term fixes but mute the likelihood of big insights.

A more effective approach is to have team members actively eliminate their hopes and fears. In U.S. Special Operations, this is done via exercises that prompt teams to make peace with their

own death. In organizational settings, it can be done with a different kind of exercise: Think of a new competitor in your market — an existing startup, maybe, or an established company that might enter your lane, or some kind of organization that you anticipate might emerge in the future. Identify one highly anomalous feature of the competitor — and *now imagine that you are that competitor.* What does your anomalous feature enable you to do in the market? Stretch your horizon as long-term as you can.

This is counterfactual thinking. Unlike brainstorming, it activates motor regions in the brain that are nonlogical and mostly nonconscious, which is why most of your biggest insights seem to pop into your head from nowhere. The more you practice counterfactual thinking, the more your team will experience epiphanies that help address current problems and opportunities they weren't consciously mulling.

Meet the originality of the moment.

Most brainstorming sessions wrap by attempting to select the best ideas on the whiteboard. When you do that, what you're actually doing is attempting to eliminate the worst ideas via logical techniques such as convergent and critical thinking.

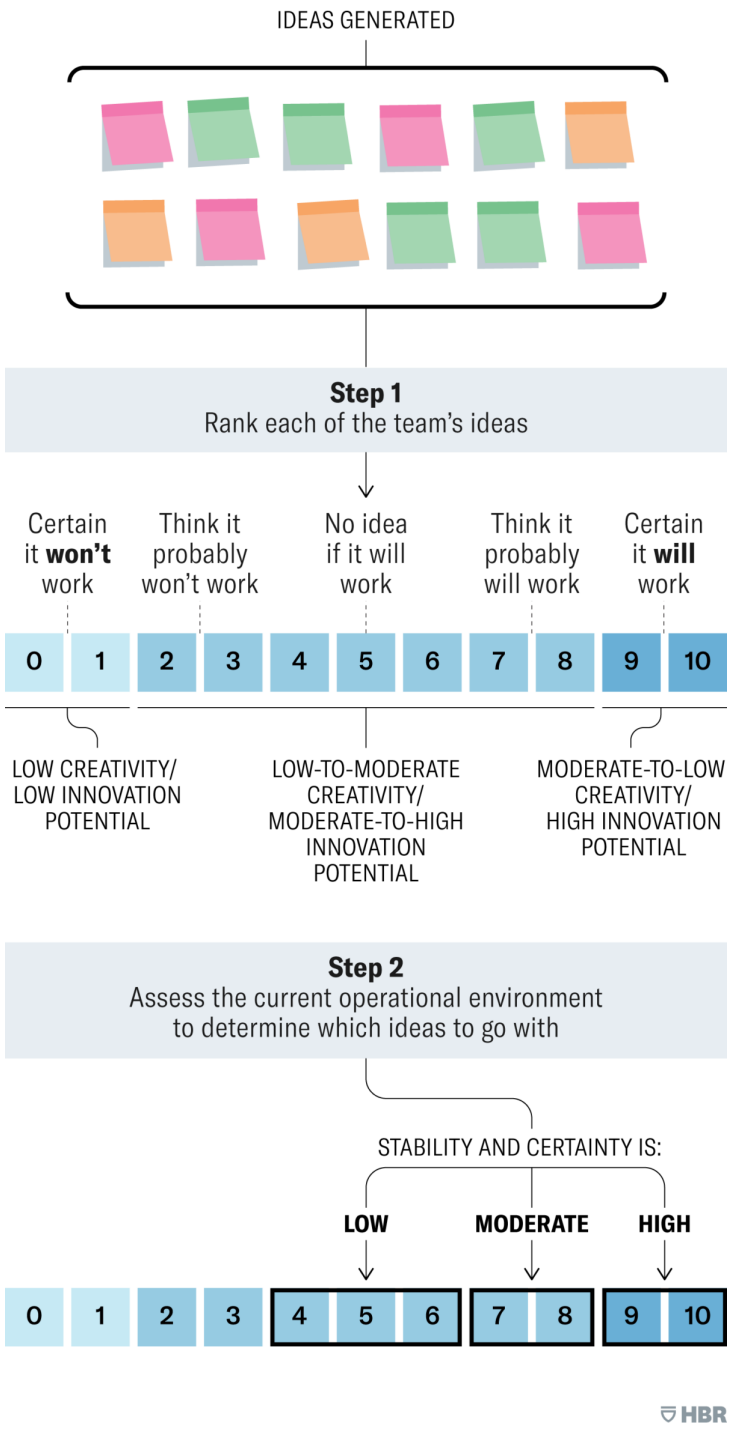
That's counterproductive. It reinstates whatever biases you managed to escape during the brainstorm, and it kills your most promising creations. Those creations, like newborns, will be less developed than old standbys and so often will get crossed off the whiteboard as imperfect or impractical. What these nascent intuitions need instead is further development, via counterfactual thinking.

A more effective approach is to use this two-step, "meet the moment" process.

For step one, take each of your team's newly imagined options and rank it on this scale:

Creativity in the Moment

As an alternative to "brainstorming" sessions for idea generation, use this two-step "storythinking" process to help identify and develop ideas.



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Options ranked at the bottom (0–2) are low in creativity and low in innovation potential. Options at the top (8–10) are moderate-to-low in creativity but high in innovation potential. Options in

the middle (3–7) are low-to-moderate in innovation potential but moderate-to-high in creativity.

For step two, assess your current operational environment. Is it stable? Or volatile? Certain? Or uncertain? If it's high in stability and certainty, go with an option ranked 9 or 10. If it's moderate, go with a 7 or 8. If it's low, go with a 6 or 4. (That's not a typo. Go with a 4, an option you think might not work.) If it has no stability or certainty, go with a 5.

This method matches your originality to the moment. In stable and certain environments, highly creative options are less likely to work, so there's no need to try them. In unstable and uncertain environments, less-creative options are doomed, so the value proposition lies in gambling on a long shot.

These new methods for increasing creativity might seem weird, implausible, and even flatly wrong. But that's exactly how it should be. These methods may not be logical, but they work. Experts I've worked with in business, Special Operations, and engineering have described them to me as "potent," "mission critical," and "revolutionary" — and faculty at the Command and General Staff College have estimated their value at billions of dollars per year. So why not suspend your inner AI and give them a try?

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Angus Fletcher is Professor of Story Science at Ohio State's Project Narrative. More of his research can be found here.