

Training for Project Management

Volume 3:
Innovation, Value
and Performance

IAN STOKES

GOWER

Creative Concepts

DESCRIPTION

For many people, creativity is an essential part of a project. After all, projects include something new that has never been done before and the skill in project management is about managing the new. However, for some people it depends on the project. Some projects call upon a great deal of creativity and others are more about research, planning or execution. Other people would say that the creative part of a project and the execution part of a project should be kept apart and that the project manager's role should be results-driven and focused on closure. This view would result in people working sequentially in order not to mix up the responsibilities. There would be no change during the project, because changes necessarily involve creative inspiration that requires analysis and the team would miss out on the creative adventure.

Not everyone appreciates that there is more to creativity than 'brainstorming'. In this exercise there are tried and tested, as well as novel, ways to stimulate creativity in a team.

Application

Use this exercise when your projects are getting into trouble, either because of late changes to the project scope as people realize what they have forgotten, or because the project fails to provide an adequate level of benefits and is rejected by potential customers or users. Alternatively, use the exercise simply because you have recognized that your process needs to get the ideas in early rather than at the end of the project or half-way through.

Aims

- To build on the recognition that creativity is vital for project success.
- To increase awareness of the existence of different approaches to creativity.
- To provide some ideas for creative approaches that can help on projects.

Trainer guidance

You can develop this theme generously, and do a remarkable amount of good to a project not just by finding ideas, but by starting a process and a free style of thinking that can lead to suppressed ideas coming out early rather than when it is too late.

Remember the principles of creativity. First seek ideas without censor. Then qualify the ideas, cluster them and select the ones that seem the most promising.

People can feel uncomfortable with the intimacy of a group brainstorming session. The alternative is to brainstorm individually, and this can be just as useful. It's almost as if we have to give ourselves permission to let the ideas run.

Setting up an environment that is conducive to letting the ideas flow is as effective as using a thinking tool. And, once the ideas start knocking on the door, it is important to define them in a way that may stimulate other ideas.

Combining words and using metaphors can provide some remarkable results, if people are prepared think abstractly.

Turning the problem on its head usually creates much fun and occasional hilarity.

'Idealizing' is about imagining that there are no obstacles, no brakes on performance, no limits to resources and that everything can be possible. It sounds dreamy, but that is the point. We often wrap ourselves in too many constraints. If we take away one or more constraints, while keeping some others, then the imagination can take over.

The key words for creativity (Handout A3.2) are an original way of engaging in creative thinking through the use of a semantic approach – by creating word associations that help the mind to probe and explore. It's a way of ensuring that nothing has been overlooked.

Method

1. Creative approaches work very well in pairs when you use more than one approach.
2. Distribute Handout A3.1, 'Creative thinking methods', Handout A3.2, 'Key words for creativity', and Handout A3.3. 'Creative activities', if you are going to use them.
3. When the team starts to slow down using one of the techniques, switch to another. However, allow no more than 20 to 30 minutes for each creative approach to prevent the process from becoming tedious. You can also divide the participants into groups and suggest that each group use a different method.
4. If short of practical subject-matter from the workplace, try using the creative activities (Handout A3.3), or else use the participants' own examples.

Learning messages

Although creativity is one of the most neglected areas of project management, creative thinking can yield huge benefits. Many people believe that creativity is analogous to brainstorming, but in fact there are many ways of generating creativity. It is an area in which a little practice can go a long way.

Timing

Total = 1 hour to 1 hour 30 minutes:

- 20 to 30 minutes for each creative approach.

Materials

- Handout A3.1: Creative thinking methods.
- Handout A3.2: Key words for creativity.
- Handout A3.3: Creative activities.
- Flipcharts, paper, Post-it notes or similar, coloured pens.

Creative Thinking Methods



Handout
A3.1

1 of 2

COMBINING WORDS

Separate the expression of the problem into its component words. Then generate new ideas based on these words – for example, a verb and a noun that can be explored.

COMBINING ATTRIBUTES

Make a list of all of the attributes (characteristics) of the thing that you wish to think about. Focus on each attribute in turn. Associate each attribute with a larger group of similar items. Combine items from the various groups to generate new combinations – for example, material, shape, power mechanism, type of movement and so on.

METAPHORS OR PROVERBS

Choose a metaphor and use it to stimulate ideas. See how many similarities and connections you can make between each comparison. Use proverbs to stimulate thinking about a problem. Select a word out of the dictionary, or open an encyclopedia. Or else slot a word into an image search engine. The juxtaposition of ideas and images can jog an idea related to the job in hand.

TURNING THE PROBLEM ON ITS HEAD

Tackle the problem upside down or back to front. Reverse the problem or do the opposite. Imagine that you have to make the problem worse, rather than better.

IDEALIZING

Thinking idealistically is a practical way of starting to design an effective solution. The point of beginning idealistically is not to actually try to reach the ideal, but to force yourself to more clearly understand what you really want.

Creating an ideal is not the same as creating a fantasy. There are obvious physical limits to the world in which we live. For instance, you cannot expect to jump into the air and not come down. On the other hand, some limitations can be overcome. A simple example is the thought 'I could never imagine something better'. This belief is a real limitation. However, unlike gravity, a limitation can be overcome. Try to distinguish between real limitations and mental limitations.



Be reserved about sharing an ideal too widely. Many people don't appreciate the value of ideals. In fact, they're often called 'useless dreams'.

Handout
A3.1

2 of 2

As you create the ideal solution, don't be afraid to think big. The purpose of thinking in ideal terms is to expand your awareness of your possibilities. The more ambitious the ideal, the broader will be your awareness. After all, the word 'ideal' implies an absence of limits.

Once you have created an ideal, pursue it – not with the goal of necessarily reaching the ideal, but with the goal of providing direction.

Key Words for Creativity



Handout
A3.2

1 of 2

Select from this list key words that stimulate ideas on how to make changes, improvements or correct problems. Use the key words as triggers to explore the ideas.

Product analysis	Process analysis	Product adaptation	Aesthetic criteria
Structural failure	Out of stock	Amplify, exaggerate	Form and proportion
Blocking or sticking	Product deterioration	Mask, disguise	Texture and material
Vibrations	Inadequate supplies	Grow, increase	Harmony and contrast
Loose fitting	Fire or burning	Diminish, reduce	Strength and sureness
Does not open	Overheating	Multiply, divide	Scale and scope
Does not close	Overcooling	Add, subtract	Power and energy
Internal leaking	Mishandling	Perfect, deteriorate	Balance and poise
External leaking	Too much water	Complicate, simplify	Charm and charisma
Too long	No enough water	Colour in, fade	Comfort and pleasure
Too short	Parasites	Clarify, darken	Dreams and fantasy
Works too abruptly	Fading	Separate, break down	Mystery and suspense
Works intermittently	Too much catalyst, fuel, lubricant, nutrient	Make bourgeois or democratic	Cuteness and sweetness
Works in an irregular fashion	Not enough catalyst, fuel, lubricant, nutrient	Make ecological or traditional	Affiliation and identification
Incorrect signal	Theft or fraud	Make rural or urban	Surprise and drama
Reduced flow	Wet or dry	Unite, connect	Sensual and sensuous
Flows too fast	Too fast	Push down, raise up	Audacity and courage
Does not stop	Too slow	Harden, solidify	Peace and goodwill
Does not start	Too little space	Weaken, liquefy	Transition and cycles
Does not transmit	Too much space	Round, sharpen	Truth and integrity
Functions too promptly	Inadequate storage	Displace, move	Naturalness and authenticity
Functions sluggishly	Insufficient demand	Display, conceal	Novelty and distinction
Input inadequate	Too much competition	Make distant or near	Freshness and cleanliness



Handout
A3.2

2 of 2

Input excessive	Poor access	Make mature or infantile	Purity and clearness
Output inadequate	Poor visibility	Make virile or feminine	Brightness and brilliance
Output excessive	Too much light	Make naïve or refined	Darkness and shadow
Lost input	Too little light	Make natural, artificial	Image and pride
Lost output	Too much dust and dirt	Make technical or sensual	Safety and security
Short circuit	Too much pollution		Simplicity and clarity
Full circuit	Too much noise		Ease of use and facility
Loose connection	Poor environment		
Power loss	Vandalism		
Sparks	Too old		
Smell	Too young		
Burning	Too rich		
Clicking	Too poor		
Grinding	Too hot		
Cracks, splitting	Too cold		
Holes	Damaged input		
Corrosion	Faulty machines		
Inadequate support	Inadequate communication		
Response time poor	Inadequate resources		
Inadequate access	Lack of partners		
Error message	Competition too tough		
Glistening or dampening	Poor financial climate		
Shaking or rattling	Staff behaviour or attitudes		
Tearing or cutting	Staff training		

Creative Activities



Handout
A3.3

Imagine a solution for:

1. chewing gum on the streets (take the perspective of the chewing gum company, the street cleaners, materials manufacturers and the town council);
2. an anti-theft system for mobile phones;
3. a revolutionary machine for ironing shirts;
4. informing customers about the nutritional value of foods;
5. an automated hand-held tourist guide;
6. intelligent clothing;
7. a new kitchen implement;
8. the bathroom of the future;
9. an in-house garden concept;
10. a carless urban transport system;
11. a new kind of computer game.