Top Tips on Being Creative in Business

How to save up to 75% in Project Resources

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Top Tips on Being Creative in Business

All businesses have to deal with complex problems and come up with solutions. How to avoid implementing preferred solutions to the **wrong** problem is at the heart of Creative Problem Solving. Get the process right and you save a bucket of money or other resources. More to the point the results tend to work better and sooner so it takes a lot of stress out of the organisation.

Research* has shown that up to 75% of projects fail to deliver and the biggest reason is trying to solve the wrong problems. As a result the solutions that are designed don't work properly.

So we are going to look at some simple ideas that will save you a lot of hassle.

* Source - Royal Academy of Engineering

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How do you find a bright idea?

From time to time we all face some huge challenges. One of the biggest is how to get to the root of problems without wasting resources on the wrong solutions. Dealing with this requires leadership and new ways of doing things. There's no excuse – get creative.

At a time when nobody seems to have a clue about what to do about anything there's a simple solution. Reach for the Creative Problem Solving toolkit. But what's that I hear you say? *"I don't have a creative toolkit."* Well yes you do – although often people fail to recognise it. By following some simple processes anybody can be creative in their approach to problems. This is not the preserve of a creative elite (even if such exists).

Is it how you think?

Most people happily use tools of all sorts without questioning how they actually work. Think of your phone or tablet. It does what it does and enables you to communicate, play games, take photos or manage documents and much more. Being creative is not about how you think so much as how you use processes to deliver results. So with the right tools there's no excuse – get creative.

What tools?

Four simple steps will get you a very long way indeed. **First** creative people trust process to deliver – even when the answers seem crazy. **Second** they spend the time to really understand the problem they are dealing with, using investigative methods to get to the root cause(s). There's no magic to this but repeatedly asking *"Why?"* works pretty well most of the time. **Third**, they are playful in dealing with potential solutions – often going way out of the realm of received wisdom to gain insight. **Finally** they validate the solutions against resources and context – something that often is lacking when a defined solution is handed down for implementation.

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Trust the process

Experience shows that people distrust process yet they implicitly trust the technology in their pocket. That contradiction sets us up for failure and is easy to overcome. If you trust your mobile phone to do its stuff without understanding the inner workings – then why not trust some simple processes to deliver creative solutions to problems? Do you really need to know the neuro-science behind them? Of course not. And anyone in a position of authority who insists they haven't time is heading straight for the door marked failure. Simply put, being creative isn't a luxury, it's a necessity when dealing with complex problems.

There's no excuse – get creative. The alternative leads to the sorts of turmoil we now encounter. If the problems of addressing valid and conflicting concerns about immigration, living standards and our relationship with the EU had been subject to a creative approach we would be in a far better place. If we looked creatively at the interrelationship between political will and social consequences we might not have unsafe social housing. All these things have a massive impact on people and their lives.

Thinking local

Even at a local level in the workplace decisions are made based on emotion rather than truly getting to grips with the issues. Investing some time in getting to understand those issues better and then being creative in looking for solutions tends to deliver massive benefits. So how are you going to get a handle on your creative toolkit? What steps are you taking right now to correct this deficiency? If the answer is none then you really do have your head in the sand. And if you aren't an ostrich then start scanning the horizon to see what techniques you can actually use.

How can Executives get Creative?

In the book *101 Executive Uses for a Square Camel* there are lots of simple ideas that don't require resources you won't find lying around. Being creative is a natural thing – trusting that you can do it is the step change in mindset. But that's no different from learning anything – whether that's how to drive a car or how to text from a phone. A bit of practice and following simple rules works. And at no stage do you have to be able to take the engine to bits and fix it. There's no excuse – get creative.

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Finding the Right People to work on a Problem

1. **What areas of the business does it cover?** You need to build a team appropriately. Don't simply pick someone from every department but get a cross-section together.

2. **Is it refining something existing or completely new?** They need different skill sets. People with a great eye for detail (Adapters) can refine things and are great at incremental changes. Intuitive types who can make leaps of imagination are great for new ideas. Don't choose 100% of either type - you need a balance.

3. **Who is the sponsor for this piece of work?** They should have accountability for the outcome and it is likely to fall onto their budget. If you haven't got a sponsor - you don't start.

4. **How are you going to get them together?** Ideally they should work face to face but what about video conferencing?

5. **Let them know they have permission to be radical.** Sometimes groups can be quite timid if they are uncertain about their brief.

6. **The right people can be anyone** - but they need encouraging.

7. **Junior staff can be truly imaginative.** This isn't about senior people having all the right ideas.

8. **Show them how they are going to be trusted.** Set out the ground rules for the process and demonstrate how the outcomes are going to be taken forward. There's nothing worse for a group to begin by thinking that what they are about to do will simply be ignored.

9. **Run a pilot exercise and make it enjoyable.** Once the people understand how good it can be they will want to be part of it and you won't lack for volunteers. A box of donuts at the first workshop break can work wonders.

10. **Get more support by letting the group do some internal promotion.** They are your best ambassadors for change so let them communicate to the wider audience and tell their world how things have been going along.

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Finding the Right Problem

1. **Who owns the problem?** Find out who is accountable for things going wrong.

2. **What is the deadline for fixing it?** It's no use trying to fix something if there is no time available - instead you will need to take mitigating actions.

3. **Why is it a problem?** Get to the root of what the pain is about.

4. **When does it occur?** Is this a one-off or a recurrent issue?

5. **What does the problem owner think is causing it?** How do they know?

6. **Challenge the givens - ask repeated WHY?** to get to the bottom of things. Do this at least 5 times.

7. **Where is it happening?** Symptoms can be seen in a different place to the problem itself.

8. **What do other organisations or people do about this?** They may not get it right but knowing what the competition does can be useful insight.

9. **If this were fixed - what would be different?** Knowing what the end result might look like could give you a clue as to whether the problem really needs fixing or could just simply be avoided. Often people try and fix things when they could just do something different to begin with.

10. **How much is it worth to get this fixed?** You might be surprised at just how often great effort is put into fixing things of little value when there are bigger fish to fry.

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Choosing Creativity Techniques

1. **Is this to solve a simple problem or a complex one?** If it's the former you most likely can just get on with things without special techniques. Look for a ready made solution instead.

2. **Is this a group problem or an individual one?** If it's the former then you need a group of people to work on it. Sometimes you can also use a small group to help an individual out.

3. **What resources do your preferred techniques require?** Do you have them available? If not then what else might you do?

4. **How much time is available to do ideation (producing ideas)?** Most good creativity sessions only last a couple of hours. But you might want to run several sessions with different people to get a cross-section of insights. This is really good to do if the people involved are from widely different backgrounds or geography. What works well in San Francisco might be seen differently in Southampton.

5. **Next consider the style of the participants.** It is no good attempting really radical stuff with a bunch of folk who are not naturally adventurous. So try and get a good mix of people to work with. Both sides will temper the natural tendencies of the other and will make most techniques work better.

6. **Are you looking at problem analysis or solution generation?** Be clear what it is that you are doing - some techniques work better for one or the other.

7. **Don't just be creative for creativity's sake.** Use creativity to generate insight not just to be different. Really great problem solvers know the difference.

8. **Do you know how it works?** Surprisingly most folks don't even know how to run a proper Brainstorm Session. So read up on a few simple techniques and be sure you know the "do's and don'ts".

9. **Is what you propose appropriate to the scale of the problem and the people involved?** Very large scale techniques are seldom used unless the project itself is going to impact huge numbers of people or places.

10. **Have a fun introduction to try things out and get folk used to it.** Even just 15 minutes of doing something new on a fictional problem can pay huge dividends when they get down to the real thing. Break the ice and let people find out how easy it can be.

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Generating Ideas

1. **Have a very good problem definition to begin with.** If you haven't got that - then get that right first.

2. **Put in place a process that will get as many ideas as possible out into view and capture the output.** Whiteboards, Flip-Charts and Post-Its are great - but take pictures to capture the information and how it is laid out. If it is online - use a recording device to capture the discussion.

3. **Appoint a Facilitator to make sure all the voices are heard and the process is managed.**

4. **Get the Problem Owner to explain to everyone why it is an issue - then let them leave the room.** You don't want them around during the idea generation it is likely to stifle things.

5. **Start with a random stimulus - don't leap to conclusions.** The best ideas come when the brain is allowed to wander on flights of fancy.

6. **If energy is flagging, take a break.** Best of all keep the whole session to a manageable length with no element taking more than about 20 minutes.

7. **Produce lots of metaphors for how things might be by using a variety of techniques.** The mix of techniques will give different insights so you don't just reinvent the wheel

8. **Agree how you are going to rate these ideas against your real problem.** Are you going to rank them by Ease of Implementation? Cost? Timescales?

9. **Trust the process to deliver** - suddenly rejecting a stage in the process *"because that won't work"* is no way forward.

10. **Present the best ideas to the Problem Owner and discuss how they might be implemented.** They don't need to know how you got there but they do want your ideas as to how things can go forward.

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Evaluating Options

1. **Decide what criteria are important before you evaluate.** Keep the discussion on criteria separate from the ideas you have generated - that stops bias entering the equation.

2. **What resources are available to carry them out?** Sometimes what appear to be the very best options are simply not available due to lack of appropriate resource.

3. **Who gets to vote?** It's a good idea to use the same people who generated the ideas as a first pass. You can then select a couple of options to put forward to the Problem Owner.

4. **Give people several votes each.** Then they can spread them across the options they like. This gives a better weighting than one man one vote. Perhaps they may allocate several votes to one item.

5. **Kick out the obvious non-starters before voting on the rest.** But keep them in mind - they may have elements that might work in your final solutions.

6. **In your situation, is being radical more important than incremental change?** This may determine which options to prefer.

7. **How fast do you need to move? Time is a key resource.** Getting there before the competition or ahead of pending disaster will exert a different set of pressures.

8. **Is there a parallel to something you have done successfully in the past?** There's no harm in a bit of cut and paste that gets things moving more quickly and may make it easier for others to accept.

9. **If you have two or three competing options that appear good** - **look at the likely outcomes.** Fixing a problem in different ways can result in different outcomes. Spend some time working out what those might be to see which looks more favourable; don't just pick one with a pin!

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10. **Document the decision-making so that you can explain it to others who come late to the project.** You might be surprised at how often other people may try and impose their own ideas unless you can show that you have been rigorous in getting this far.

The outcome of the evaluation is a plan of action that you should follow with appropriate project controls - don't let the scope get out of hand. Experience tells us that all sorts of people will want to insert their pet ideas during the execution phases.

You will know what you are doing and why. Keep things tight.

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