

Activate Your **GENIUS MODE**



A Quick Guide to
Creative Practices
in the Workplace

by David Dubczak, M.Ed

Activate Your Genius Mode

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Introduction

I really have a “Genius Mode?”

Take a moment and think of a genius.

Who came to mind? Mozart? Elon Musk? Einstein? Picasso? What about Robin Williams? Or J.K. Rowling?

What about you?

If you didn't name yourself, why not? Is it because you look at people like Picasso or Robin Williams or J.K. Rowling and assume that, because you can't do what they can do, you're not a genius?

Never mind that Picasso and Williams and Rowling spent tens of thousands of hours perfecting their art. They were exceptionally good at their art form, but they also *learned* their genius.

You see, with a few exceptions, geniuses are *made*, not born. A few people – two or three – every hundred years or so are born geniuses. People like Mozart, and Stephen Hawking, and Albert Einstein – they were *born* geniuses. Somehow, they wound up being born with something the rest of us don't have.

The rest of us? We all have the same thing. Two or three people every hundred years isn't enough to invent airplanes, create vaccines, electrify the world, revolutionize home computing, and fly to the moon. Those achievements belong to regular people who *learned* to be geniuses.

Two or three people every hundred years won't be enough to solve climate change, end racial disparity, eliminate poverty, close the achievement gap, solve world hunger, or finally build a flying car! Those achievements will go to regular people who *learned* to be geniuses.

And what does it take to be a genius? It takes creative thinking.

Creative Thinking

The key to activating your “Genius Mode!”

Creativity is the engine that drives innovation. Creativity is responsible for art, music, and activities of fulfillment and enjoyment. Creativity solves problems, from the tiniest of everyday annoyances to huge, worldwide issues of poverty and pandemic.

As someone who runs a business, a creative workforce is one of your biggest assets. A creative workforce is independent, forward-thinking, and enthusiastic. A creative workforce is self-motivated and eager to solve the problems facing your business. *All departments and workplaces can benefit from more creative practices.*

A common myth persists in the business world: the notion that some people are creative, and some people are not (see our award-winning short documentary, “[The Myth of Creative People](https://youtu.be/lxkZEEtbdrl)” - <https://youtu.be/lxkZEEtbdrl>)

In reality, *all people* can be creative. Creativity is a skill that can be learned.

However, while most businesses acknowledge the value of creativity, their actual practices may stifle rather than promote it – usually unintentionally. This happens due to schedule pressure, efficiency goals, and pressure to meet growth targets.

I put together this book to give business owners, managers, and educators like you some ideas from which you can pick and choose in order to promote a more creative workforce.

What creativity isn't

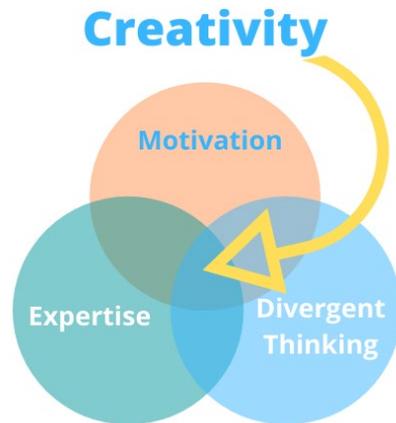
In order to identify what creativity is, we need to be clear about what creativity *isn't*. Creativity isn't *artistry*.

One more time: creativity is not artistry. Artists are creative, there is no doubt about it. But, too often, people see themselves as having no artistic skills, and assuming, then, that they are not creative. Artistry and creativity are two separate skillsets.

What creativity is

Most academic definitions agree that creativity is the “ability to generate ideas or solutions that are novel and appropriate.” *Novel* meaning new, and *appropriate* meaning relevant to the task at hand.

Creativity happens at the intersection of *Motivation*, *Expertise*, and *Divergent Thinking Skills*.



Motivation is the psychological factors that drive people to work. For more of an overview, again see “[The Myth of Creative People](https://youtu.be/lxkZEEtbdrl)” (<https://youtu.be/lxkZEEtbdrl>). *Expertise* is subject-matter knowledge or skillset. *Divergent Thinking Skills* are the ability to generate many possible ideas.

Why is creativity not artistry? Let’s look at a painter, for example. Painting is a specific *expertise* – it is a skill that some people learn. With time, practice, and education, you can increase your painting skill. Some people have the *motivation* to use their painting *expertise* to create a *novel* painting. *That* is creativity, not just the ability to paint in itself. In fact, if you became a skilled enough painter to create an exact replica of the Mona Lisa, that would not be a creative task.

Likewise, a mechanic could have the *motivation* to use his or her *expertise* as a mechanic to design a car that gets better fuel

mileage. Doing so would require several new ideas, requiring the use of *divergent thinking*. Though the mechanic may not consider him or herself to be an artist, this pursuit certainly demonstrates creativity.

Creativity is a habit and mindset that can be cultivated by increasing certain supporting habits. The purpose of this book is to learn how to do this.

The Creative Process

In general, most people follow a well-researched, four-step process when finding creative solutions to a problem. The purpose of this book is not to elaborate on each step, but having a basic overview is useful.

The first step is the **Preparation** stage, in which a person realizes he or she has a problem that needs a solution, and this solution may not yet exist.

The second step is the **Incubation** stage. Here, the person is thinking about the problem and imagining several different solutions (divergent thinking), thinking through all the possible ways to solve the problem. This can be conscious – actively sitting and working on the problem, or unconscious – in the back of the mind, until a connection is made and the solution presents itself.

The third stage is the **Illumination** stage, in which a likely solution becomes apparent. Think of this as being the “lightbulb” moment.

This is followed by the **Verification** stage, in which the person tests the solution to see if it is appropriate.

This is the general process most people follow when being creative. But what are the environmental factors that must be in place in order to make this possible? For that, we have the **Creativity Formula**.

The Creativity Formula

What are the elements? What does it take to make people creative?

There is a formula. Write this down. Put it in a big poster on your wall. The formula is this:

$$\begin{aligned} &\text{Creativity} \\ &= \\ &\text{Psychological Safety} \\ &+ \\ &\text{Curiosity} \\ &+ \\ &\text{Divergent Thinking} \end{aligned}$$

Once you are able to create an environment where all three of those elements are present, your creativity will explode. This creates the conditions best suited for people to go through the creative process.

Psychological Safety ensures your brain isn't in "fight or flight" mode. Research shows creativity is diminished when the brain feels threatened.

Curiosity is the ability to notice one's environment, pay attention to details, and use it to generate questions. Questioning is one of the key elements to creative output.

Divergent Thinking is the ability to generate many ideas, or the ability to make one's mind go in many different directions.

How to use this book

This book is organized into four sections:

- Creating psychological safety
- Cultivating curiosity
- Practicing divergent thinking
- Thinking exercises

Each section has just one idea per page. Don't implement everything all at once. Skim through it, pick an idea that looks doable and you're comfortable doing. Over time, try more.

Each of these ideas are research-backed. Some of them are easier to implement than others. Some take practice. All of them take overt effort. Fortunately, this book breaks them down into bite-sized pieces, perfect for the manager or business owner who is stretched for time and looking for ways to build a more creative workforce.

Always remember the formula:

$$\text{Creativity} = \text{Psychological Safety} + \text{Curiosity} + \text{Divergent Thinking}$$

And with the Creativity Formula, you can activate your Genius Mode!

Creating Psychological Safety

Creativity starts deep inside the brain

You may be familiar with the brain's "fight or flight response." Human brains have a deeply engrained "survival mode" that activates when threatened. Research shows that creative thinking in the workforce is hampered when it is not a psychologically safe environment.

Now, the purpose of this book isn't to say you shouldn't yell at or threaten your employees--of course you shouldn't. I'm just hoping, if you sought out this book, you already know that. We need to look at psychological safety from a creativity perspective.

From a creativity perspective, psychological safety means people should feel safe to give ideas, no matter how "outside the box," without fear of punishment or reprimand. People should also feel free to experiment while risking failure, also without fear of punishment or reprimand.

Creativity involves risk-taking, trying methods, techniques, and practices that are not proven, and can be unorthodox. Doing so requires a workplace that is accepting of this and doesn't punish failure.

And failure will happen. The key is creating an environment where failure can be tolerated and dealt with in a way that promotes learning.

To use the old adage from Thomas Edison, “I didn’t fail, I just discovered 1000 ways not to make a light bulb.” It was important that his workplace recognized the need for a thousand failures, and that Edison knew he could do that if needed, else the light bulb may never have been invented.

Failure can be a tough word, because, in reality, no one wants it. But, done properly, the right failures can elevate your business! *Creativity literature is filled with stories of companies that stopped embracing failure, and subsequently stopped being innovative.*

Obviously, there are places where failure is discouraged. Manufacturing, for example, is an area in which failure would have quite a negative impact. As would be law enforcement, or landing an airplane.

However, manufacturing is not a creative exercise, inventing a new product is; law enforcement is not a creative exercise, policy design is; landing an airplane is not a creative exercise, designing a new air-traffic control procedure is.

Creative and innovative tasks *require* room for failure and outside-the-box idea generation. Any sort of environment that discourages this will have a negative impact on creativity.

So now, one-page tips on creating psychological safety in your workforce.

Praise accomplishments, not natural abilities

Creativity requires personal growth. Growth is part of the *motivation* circle in our creativity diagram. Growth requires people believing that their accomplishments are due to their efforts. This is called an *Internal Locus of Control*.

When people are praised for their accomplishments, they learn *they* are in control of the results of their work.

When people are praised for their natural abilities (e.g., “You’re such a good leader,” “You’re really good at math,” “You learn really quickly”) they believe their skills and talents are innate and unchangeable.

You need your workforce to know that work leads to growth, and that growth can lead to creativity.

Praising accomplishments is so powerful it is, in fact, a key element in the 21st Century reformation of US Military Basic Training.

Instead of saying...

You’re so good at that.

You’re a great leader.

You’re a fast learner.

Say this instead...

I noticed how hard you worked at that.

I noticed how effectively you worked to earn your team’s trust.

That training wasn’t easy. Getting through it is a great accomplishment.

When giving feedback, focus on outcomes instead of shortcomings

Studies show focusing on someone else's shortcomings activates their fight or flight response and impairs learning, instead of enabling it. Studying information from fMRI scans shows that brains respond to critical information as a threat.

However, how *you* feel is an undeniably true source of information.

Take note of actions, or a colleague's actions, that produced a positive outcome. Point these out. This helps create a vision of what excellence looks like that people can strive to achieve, rather than activating their fight or flight response to avoid.

Likewise, when giving feedback, focus on helping the employee see the *outcome* from your point of view, instead of *themselves*.

***Instead of saying...**

Here's what you should do.

That didn't really work.

You need to improve your communication.

You lack strategic thinking.

You should do x [in response to a request for advice]

Say this instead...

Here's what I would do.

When you did x, I felt y or I didn't get that.

Here's exactly when you started to lose me.

I'm struggling to understand your plan.

What do you feel you're struggling with, and what have you done in the past that's worked in a similar situation?

**From "The Feedback Fallacy, Harvard Business Review, March-April 2019.*

Embrace failure

First, let's understand *when* to embrace failure: when you have asked your workforce to design a new solution to a problem, a new product, or solve a problem of some sort. The *Apollo 13*-esque, "Failure is not an option" response is inappropriate here. The better response is, "Failure is always an option; it is never a stopping point."

If you have employees working an assembly line, that is a bad place for failure. Asking them to make the assembly line more efficient is a good place for failure. Accurately computing tax information is a bad place for failure. Designing a better record keeping system is a good place for failure.

Keep your failures isolated. If you're testing a new assembly line, test it concurrently with the existing line. That way, if it fails, it doesn't jeopardize your manufacturing process. Try out your new record-keeping system alongside your existing system.

Encourage your employees to report failures early and often. In a 2015 interview I conducted with James Guyette, former CEO of Rolls Royce North America, he told me, "I welcome bad news, but I have to know about it *immediately*. If you try to hide it from me, you're done." When they do report failure, focus on learning and growth, and how to use that failure to move forward.

Edison supposedly needed 1000 attempts to make a lightbulb. If solving this problem is important to your business (it saves you time, money, or effort), encourage your employees to fail again and again. Encourage them to try for the 999th time.

Embracing failure teaches your workforce that, "reaching, even overreaching, is appreciated and desired," according, again, to Mr. Guyette.

Recover from failure

When failure happens, give employees the ability to disengage for a period of time. Failure researcher Jason Cope likens this to the “Five Stages of Grief,” and bigger failures take more recovery time.

Giving employees time to disengage prevents them from infecting other projects with negative energy, self-doubt, cynicism, and learned helplessness.

An interesting case study is Sun Microsystem’s “Sun Ray,” a 1999 product that was expected to revolutionize workplace computer workstations. At Sun Microsystems, the employees of another failed product were not given a proper disengagement time. They were all immediately transferred to the Sun Ray team, and their negative energy would end up sinking that product as well.

(Interestingly, the 1999 design concept of the Sun Ray is almost identical to Google’s ChromeBook architecture of 2020).

Demotivation is contagious, and it can impact those without direct ties to the trauma as well. Left untreated, “Innovation Trauma” can suppress further innovation.

Failure research has found no evidence that learning from failure occurs naturally. Learning from failure is a process that requires careful facilitation, with attention to the psychological impact of the failure on those involved.

Analyze the failure. Focus on “What happened?” instead of “Who did it?” Collaboratively take a detailed look at the problem.

Cope, J. (2011). Entrepreneurial learning from failure: An interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Journal of Business Venturing* 26, 604-623.
Välikangas, L., Hoegl, M., Gibbert, M. (2009). Why learning from failure isn’t easy (and what to do about it): Innovation trauma at Sun Microsystems. *European Management Journal* 27, 225-233.

Embrace dumb questions

“A lot of bad leadership comes from an inability or unwillingness to ask questions. I have watched talented people—people with much higher IQs than mine—who have failed as leaders. They can talk brilliantly, with a great breadth of knowledge, but they’re not very good at asking questions. So, while they know a lot at a high level, they don’t know what’s going on way down in the system. Sometimes they are afraid of asking questions, but what they don’t realize is that the dumbest questions can be very powerful. They can unlock a conversation.”

-Mike Parker, CEO of Dow Chemical

Studies of President John F. Kennedy’s leadership of the Bay of Pigs Invasion of Cuba have shown that Kennedy’s cabinet had an unwillingness to challenge the group consensus, and advisers with legitimate reservations hesitated to mention them. This led to a disastrous invasion of Cuba’s Bay of Pigs.

Kennedy learned from this situation, and ensured his cabinet had members who were willing – and expected – to challenge the group consensus. Experts have considered this a key reason the Cuban Missile Crisis, a few years after Bay of Pigs, did not lead to an actual nuclear military conflict.

The key takeaway: not only embrace dumb questions, but put people in place who are expected to ask dumb questions in important meetings. They can lead to important learning and important conversations.

Run experiments concurrently

It's easy to see why failures can be a risk, especially if they come while experimenting with systems you rely on.

Therefore, try your experiments separately from the systems you rely on. For example, if you are experimenting on a new accounting procedure, keep the old one in place until your experiment plays out.

If you are experimenting on a new food-preparation process, keep the old one in place at the same time.

Don't totally switch over to a new system, method, or product until you know how well it will work. Keep your old systems and new or experimental systems in place, side-by-side, until you know whether the new ones will be a benefit or a failure.

This creates psychological safety by allowing the people running the experiment to take more risk (think more creatively) without worrying about jeopardizing systems, processes, or products that are important to your business. The end result could be a better new system, process, or product.

“Just Like Me”

Confrontations, especially a “Who-did-what?” confrontation, are driven by a deeper psychological need, such as respect, competence, social status, or autonomy. Recognizing these needs promotes trust, positive language, and positive behaviors.

Before having what could be an uncomfortable conversation, consider the following about the people you are about to talk to:

- This person has beliefs, perspectives, and opinions, just like me.
- This person has hopes, anxieties, and vulnerabilities, just like me.
- This person has friends, family, and perhaps children who love them, just like me.
- This person wants to feel respected, appreciated, and competent, just like me.
- This person wishes for peace, joy, and happiness, just like me.

Banish perfectionism

There is a misconception that an idea has to be perfect in order to share it. Pixar Films operates on the notion that ideas should be shared early and often – don't wait until the idea is “perfect” or fully-formed and developed.

Trust your team, share ideas early and often, before they are perfect. This allows you to gain useful insights, find the idea's strengths and weaknesses, and allow building upon the idea, which strengthens the end result.

This is not saying the end result should not be perfect, or the product or experience your customers receive should not be perfect. The final product, assembly, process, or anything delivered to the customer – you have a right to expect that to be perfect.

However, creativity comes in the process of, well, *creating* – and innovating. The process of creating is not linear, not clean, and certainly not perfect. Don't expect early ideas to be perfect.

You can give up

Has an idea run its course? Have you investigated an innovation the furthest you can take it? Are you stuck and spinning your wheels?

You are allowed to give up. File the idea away until a later time.

When going through the creative process, it's important to remember the time span is not linear, and the brain doesn't always produce ideas on demand.

Sometimes, connection-making and idea generation happen in the unconscious mind, where a seemingly random experience can cause instant insight! But that may take time. Depending on what you're working on, this may take hours, days, months, and even years.

So, if it's gone far enough, that's OK. Put it away, and allow yourself to let it sit in the back of your mind, until such time as you feel ready to work on it again.

Cultivate Curiosity

It won't just happen naturally

Creative thought is often sparked with an element of curiosity. Most of the world's greatest innovations have had their genesis in the thought, "I wonder..."

Imagine if "I wonder..." was more of a central focus of your workforce. Imagine the exciting, invigorating place your workplace could be if "I wonder..." was an essential question driving your work.

"I wonder how we can delight our customers today."

"I wonder how I can brighten my coworkers' day today."

"I wonder if redecorating the front of our building will lead to more foot traffic."

"I wonder how we can turn more one-time customers into regulars."

"I wonder what a customer's first impression is when they walk in the doors."

When curiosity is triggered, employees think more deeply and rationally, leading to more creative solutions. Curiosity allows leaders to gain more respect from their teams. More curious employees are less susceptible to confirmation bias

(Read more: "Why Curiosity Matters," *Harvard Business Review*, September-October, 2018)

Creative ideas are often sparked with that term, "I wonder." But curiosity doesn't happen automatically. A manager or business owner can promote more curious thinking with a few simple ideas.

Frequently ask, “What have you been curious about?”

Make overt efforts to ask your workforce, “What have you been curious about today?” And this can be anything at all, including non-work-related items.

Humans are curious by nature. Asking this question encourages your employees to being curious in the workplace.

Bonus points for giving your employees time to find answers to their curiosity.

Just like muscles need a warmup period before physical activity, our creative brains need a warmup as well. Creativity runs on curiosity, and creating opportunities to stoke our curiosities warms up our creative brains.

I have seen some amazing things with this. When we share our curiosities, others’ curiosities spread, and more and more people become curious. Pretty soon, you have a whole room full of people asking questions, searching, and investigating. And now, you’re primed for creative thinking.

But, be prepared for wild answers, and ensure that it’s OK to be curious about things outside of work.

You might get anything from, “Will opening a roaming coffee cart draw more people into our central bakery?” to “If I hire someone to watch my chickens, does that make them chicken tenders?” Some pretty wild things might happen, and that’s part of the fun.

Just be overt about it. Sometimes, it just takes a little warmup. And when it’s done regularly, it becomes a sustained habit.

Cultivate Curiosity

Encourage and model frequent questioning

“The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality.” -Albert Einstein

Life is full of questions to ask. Pay attention. Live in the moment, and develop a childlike tendency to ask questions. Notice things that are fascinating, and explore them.

This is a habit that can be modeled by leadership. It's not enough to simply tell people to question more. Do it yourself! Do it out loud. Share your questions with others. Invite them to develop answers with you.

Ask questions about life. About your customers. About your employees. About your employees' lives. About your products. About your processes. About the country. About nature. About psychology.

Ask questions, out loud, frequently, and encourage others to do the same. Build a culture of curiosity.

Change your routine

Do you always listen to Jazz while you work? Change it to Native American flute music.

Do you always lead the meeting? Invite someone else to lead the meeting.

Do you always work the early shift on Monday? See if you can switch with someone for the day.

Do you always work with the same partner? Work with someone else for a day.

Changing routines forces us to see things from new perspectives. It gives us questions and new points of views. It gives us more things to talk about with our coworkers. It can give you new insight into customer behavior.

On a NASCAR team, the crew chief is the leader of the team. In 2013, team owner Rick Hendrick, the owner of four NASCAR teams and winner of multiple championships, needed to make some changes. His teams were performing well – and were considered, at the time, the top teams in the sport, but he wanted to elevate them just a little higher.

One team was consistently winning championships, the other three were just not quite there. Hendrick's answer was to take those three teams and swap their crew chiefs. Although the driver and crew chief combinations worked well, and the teams were comfortable with each other and worked well together, "the swap" caused enough change in routine to elevate their performance even higher.

As humans, we tend to like our routines, but changing our routines can often spark curiosity and creativity.

Seek out an expert in another field, and ask questions about their expertise

Sometimes answers lead to more questions, and that is the purpose of this exercise.

Encourage your employees to seek out an expert in a completely unrelated field, just for fun. Maybe the expert is a stranger, maybe someone they know just through social media, or maybe a coworker in a different department.

Maybe that coworker has a unique hobby, like astrophotography, outside of their day job.

Encourage your employees to ask that person five questions about their field of expertise. And then, should the answers make them want to ask follow-up questions, ask them! Start a dialogue of information sharing, just for fun.

This will start to build a habit of curiosity that will continue in work-related areas as well.

Visit a physical bookstore or library and browse the shelves

The great thing about bookstores or libraries is that they contain books on an enormously wide range of subject matter.

Encourage employees to take time to visit bookstores or libraries, browse the shelves, and when they see something that interests them, take a look at the book.

They don't need to buy the book or check it out, or even read it cover-to-cover. Skim the table of contents, read a page or two, find a small section that interests them.

This activity is not just sending the sports fan to the sports section. Encourage random, unguided browsing, through sections with which they may not be familiar.

Take your time, read the titles, walk slowly, and contemplate.

Anytime your brain thinks, "I wonder..." is a good cue to pick up the book, even if for a moment.

Pay attention to the times your mind is curious, and take action when that happens.

Have “Why?” “What if...” and “How might we...?” days

The biggest difference between a 4-year-old and a 14-year-old is the number of questions they ask on a daily basis. Several studies remark upon the drastic reduction in questions kids ask over time.

Anyone who has raised a 4-year-old can tell you, they are *always* asking questions. Many studies in the field of education tell us that, over time, most schools actually *discourage* asking questions. It’s not overt, and it’s certainly not intended, but by telling kids to “stay on topic” or “that’s not what we’re talking about right now,” schools wind up discouraging question-asking.

As a business, you may run into the same problem – asking questions is not always appropriate. But, by discouraging question-asking, you wind up making it more difficult to ask questions when the situation calls for it.

Solution: have days dedicated to asking the “Why?” “What if...” and “How might we...?” questions. And make sure it’s not just upper management asking and answering these questions, but your frontline employees as well.

Having dedicated days (or times, like Wednesdays in the first 15 minutes after closing) makes thinking of these questions (and solutions) a regular habit of employees, and that helps increase the creative thinking when you hold these sessions.

It also might be a good idea to start these days with the “What have you been curious about lately?” question!

Fly on the wall / AEIOU

Noticing and making connections is at the heart of creative thinking, but for some people, this takes practice.

Take an hour and go visit an environment you're not necessarily familiar with. It could be a new park, the lobby of a different office, a different cafeteria, a different coffee shop, or others.

Simply observe. What's happening? What kinds of interactions are happening – person to person, person to environment? Is there anything surprising?

Using the AEIOU system can help you focus your thoughts:

Activities

Environments

Interactions

Objects

Users

Be a fly on the wall in an area that isn't the most familiar to you. Be a part of it and observe what's happening in order to stimulate your curiosity.

Practice Divergent Thinking

Creative solutions require **many** ideas

The word “diverge” means “to go out or apart,” which is the opposite of the word “converge” meaning “to come together.”

Creativity requires the ability not just to come up with one idea, but many different ideas. This is called “Divergent Thinking.”

After coming up with many different ideas, you can then start discussing which ideas are the best. This is called “Convergent Thinking.”

Divergent thinking almost always begins with an open-ended question of some sort – “How do we increase our foot traffic?” “How do we increase our customer feedback scores?” “How do we decrease our turnover?” “How can we extend the battery life of our product?”

Divergent thinking is the second circle in the Creativity diagram. The ability to generate multiple different ideas before settling on a few is a key thought process in creativity. After all, Edison did need a thousand different ideas!

It is important to remember that divergent thinking is *not*, in itself, creativity. It is an important step in the creative thinking process, but divergent thinking is only the aspect of idea generation. Only a fully-realized idea is technically “creative.”

To increase the creativity of your workforce, take opportunities to practice divergent thinking.

Reserve judgement

When performing divergent thinking, the purpose is to generate many ideas. Some of the ideas will be strange, or even outlandish.

However, divergent thinking is not the time to be determining whether ideas are good or bad. Just come up with ideas! (The convergent phase is when each of the ideas will be analyzed, and then sorted as being worth pursuing or not).

The reason it is dangerous to judge ideas during divergent thinking is because it stifles divergent thinking. Employees who think their ideas are “shot down” then become reluctant to share more ideas.

Even if the outlandish ideas don't directly generate solutions, they spur discussion during later phases of problem solving. These discussions often lead to creative solutions and innovations.

Sometimes, it's hard to reserve judgement, so feel free to make it a game! Some companies have brought water pistols into meetings and given employees permission to squirt people who judge an idea!

As a middle school teacher, I would practice divergent thinking with my students. Early on in the term, I would ask, “You're on a field trip five hours away, and the bus breaks down. How do you get home?”

After a few minutes of brainstorming, I ask, “How many of you thought of ‘steal a car’ but were too afraid to say it?” About half of the students raised their hand. As soon as I let them know that we're not judging ideas right now and that they could, in fact, steal a car, the number of ideas increased dramatically.

Don't kill your own ideas

"That's not good enough."

"If that was a good idea, someone would have thought of it already."

"I'm sure someone's already tried that."

One of the biggest reasons divergent thinking fails is that people are afraid bad ideas will be implemented, and so they try to only share "good" ideas.

However, the purpose of divergent thinking is to generate far more ideas than could ever be implemented.

Also, divergent thinking is not the phase where you discuss implementing ideas – that comes later. The divergent thinking phase is simply about idea generation – lots and lots and lots of ideas.

So, don't be too quick to suppress ideas that aren't "good enough." Get the ideas out there, generate discussion, and then move forward later.

Just like deferring judgement, where we ask others not to judge ideas, now you're asking yourself not to judge your own ideas.

When you need ideas, the more ideas you have, the better.

Let bad ideas lead to good ones

The fear of people who struggle to reserve judgement during divergent thinking is that a bad idea is going to be implemented.

However, the purpose of divergent thinking is in part to generate ideas, but also to generate discussion that leads to more ideas.

So, if an idea is presented that you (or others) may instinctually think of as a “bad” idea, instead of judging it as “bad,” ask, “What other ideas can this lead us to?”

When this happens, you generate more discussion. The discussion, in turn, leads to more ideas that you may not have had otherwise.

Sometimes, the discussion is what is most valuable, and it’s the “bad” ideas that can spur the discussion.

Think of strange solutions

When searching for solutions and performing divergent thinking, make it known that even strange solutions are desired. Encourage employees to strive for the unusual and explore different perspectives.

Maybe these ideas won't ever be chosen as the actual solution, but they lead to discussion. Maybe *parts* of the strange idea could be developed. Maybe the strange idea could be modified.

The benefit of this is twofold: the obvious benefit being more ideas on the table. The second benefit is that it helps ensure no one is afraid to share their ideas. If wild and crazy ideas are being discussed, it's less likely someone will be afraid to present a more reasonable and actionable solution.

Recall my "steal a car" story from the Reserve Judgement page. Once people start presenting options like "steal a car," students who are afraid their answers aren't good enough start participating. It becomes fun. Sharing and creating becomes an enjoyable exercise!

And remember, the goal of divergent thinking is to generate many possible solutions. To do that, you don't want people withholding. Use the strange solutions as discussion-starters, and as an opportunity to keep people from holding their ideas back.

Individual thinking before group thinking

Despite popular belief, several studies have shown that group brainstorming actually *decreases* the variety of ideas. Fortunately, there are several ways to counter this, one being individual thinking before group thinking.

When asking people to come up with ideas during divergent thinking, give individual brainstorming time first. Maybe this can be five minutes or five days, but give time for individuals to use their own expertise and curiosity to generate solutions on their own first.

Not all people are comfortable in group settings. No matter how hard we try to reserve judgement, and make it known that we are reserving judgement, some people simply believe they're always being judged, and that leads them to withhold ideas (or worse, their fight or flight response kicks in, and they're unable to generate ideas in the first place).

Individual brainstorming beforehand helps eliminate this pressure.

Secondly, people have a natural tendency to want to be agreeable with each other (politics aside). Studies show that group collaboration leads to one line of thought earlier than individual efforts.

The purpose of divergent thinking is to generate many ideas. You will generate more ideas if you first give your participants time to generate ideas on their own, and then share out with the group.

Some ideas could be combined, and some could be expanded upon, but first give individual brainstorming time.

Random input associations

Choose a random object. Maybe find a random noun from the dictionary, a random picture from the Internet, an object from someone's desk. Associate that object with a problem they're thinking about? What are the connections?

These connections can be used to solve or expand on the problem.

Sometimes, in order to generate new ideas, we need to expand our points of view. By finding objects that have no apparent association with our subject and forcing ourselves to find an association – however arbitrary – we expand our point of view, and create new opportunities for discussion.

Before having a divergent thinking meeting, prepare 10 or so objects, words, pictures, etc. Use them in the meeting when you get stuck.

Your employees may find this silly. That's okay. Communicate to them that the purpose is to generate more discussion. The more discussion you have, the more ideas you generate.

Ask silly, open-ended questions

Sometimes, you simply need to *practice* divergent thinking. In that case, I've prepared for you a list of some silly, open-ended questions, all designed to allow participants to generate multiple ideas. Feel free to add your own!

- How might the world be different if the wheel had never been invented?
- What are all of the things a self-driving car needs to know and pay attention to?
- You are on a trip eight hours away from home and your car breaks down. How can you get home?
- You are flying a drone and you get it stuck in a tree? How can you get your drone back?
- List as many ways you can think of to clear snow off your driveway without a shovel or snowblower.
- When you get home, you need to mow the lawn and make dinner, but you don't have time to do both. How can you make sure both are done?
- You have been dropped off in a random town in a foreign country where they don't speak the same language as you. You have no money. How do you get home?
- How would the world be different if we didn't need sleep?

Random image associations

This is similar to the random input associations exercise, but takes it a step further. Using a set of many random images, pick an image and study the attributes – is it black and white? What are the colors? Shapes? Patterns?

Then, it's time to stretch your thinking:

- How do they relate to the problem you're trying to solve?
- What is a symbol or metaphor that comes to mind when thinking of the image and your problem?
- How does the image represent your view (or oppose your view) on the subject?
- How does it relate to what is important to the problem?

The purpose of this exercise is to generate discussion, which helps generate more ideas.

You can download a digital file of up to 100 random images from the website <http://unsample.net/>

Get to the third 1/3

When generating ideas (and let's say you're going for 100), the first 30 will be pretty typical ideas. A marketing idea-generating session might include social media, blogs, podcasts, etc. in the first 30 ideas. The first ideas you generate are the low-hanging fruit.

The next 30 might be more of a stretch, more "out-there," and less likely to be something you're currently doing.

But then we get to the next 30, or the "Third 1/3." Since you really have to stretch to generate these ideas, they're likely to be wild and outlandish, which is exactly what you want! When divergent thinking, the more ideas, the better.

In a large group brainstorming session, it's possible you may generate 300 ideas (I would even encourage pushing to get 300).

Now, let's say you get to 300 ideas, and only 10% of them are worth discussing further. That's still 30 great ideas you didn't have before!

So, go for the wild, go for the outlandish, get to the Third 1/3!

Keep a notebook

As a playwright, I have been assembling a notebook filled with ideas. These ideas include character traits, plot ideas, sources of conflict, quotes, themes, and workflow ideas.

I use this notebook when I feel “stuck.” When I don’t know what to do with a character, I’ll flip through the character traits section, look through my quotes, and elaborate on the themes. If what I find doesn’t outright give me an answer, it gets me thinking in a way that allows me to find an answer.

You can keep a notebook in a similar way. Let’s say you work in marketing: keep a notebook on imagery, slogans, pain points, etc. None of them need to be directly related to the campaign you’re currently working on, but having ideas written down can help lead you to ideas that work.

Organize your notebook in a way that makes sense to you, and make it something that evolves over time.

I have a small 8.5 x 5.5 leather-bound binder, so that if I need to add pages in the middle of a section, I can do so.

When you need to find more ideas, your notebook can provide just the stimulus you need to keep the divergent thinking going.

Thinking Exercises

Other ideas that generate creativity

Creative thinking requires a psychologically safe environment, a healthy amount of curiosity, and divergent thinking skills. However, we have a few more techniques that promote creative thought.

These ideas could be used when you are truly stuck, or they can just be a fun idea to try. The “Thinking Hats” idea could be a regular practice.

If you have time, research the Keith Jarrett story further. It’s fascinating!

Remove supports

Think of a key tool or practice you rely upon, and force yourself to work without it. Forcing yourself into new limitations stimulates creative thinking and problem-solving skills. Causing disruptions causes us to become more creative.

Take the case of the legendary “Köln Concert” by jazz pianist Keith Jarrett. The concert was organized by 17-year-old Vera Brandes, who persuaded the 1,400 seat Cologne Opera House to host Keith Jarrett.

But there was a problem: the piano was atrocious and Jarrett was a perfectionist. The piano had sticky keys, pedals that didn’t work, a worn-out upper register, and it wasn’t a grand piano so it wasn’t loud enough.

Initially, Jarrett stormed out and refused to play, but Brandes – with all her tenacity – convinced him to stay. He put on what jazz enthusiasts consider to be his best ever concert. He worked around the limitations of the piano and improvised some incredible Jazz music.

The album was only recorded for cautionary purposes – they wanted an example of the disaster it is to not give Keith Jarrett the right piano. The album they recorded became the best-selling jazz piano album of all time.

Removing or changing our tools causes us to slow down and think through things more. They cause us to see things from new perspectives. Sometimes, to think creatively, all you need is a new perspective.

Add constraints

Much like the previous example of Keith Jarrett's piano, adding constraints, limitations, or restrictions helps you focus on a specific problem and helps prevent your mind from wandering.

Constraints can often lead to your most creative ideas! In the classic film "Back to the Future," the iconic clock tower sequence at the film's climax was not in the original script. It was created when the producers insisted on cutting \$5 million from their budget, and the directors had to make this scene using sets they had already built. (The original plan was to have Doc and Marty take their time machine into the desert and have a nuclear bomb dropped on it).

Example constraints:

Problem: You are just about to depart on a two-week road trip with your family. Your boss calls with an urgent request for you to complete next week.

Constraint: You cannot cancel your trip or refuse your boss.

Problem: You need to throw a last-minute surprise birthday party for your coworker.

Constraint: You cannot spend any money.

Problem: Write a short story or play.

Constraint: It must include a hammer, a chef named Carl, and the phrase, "I never said I did."

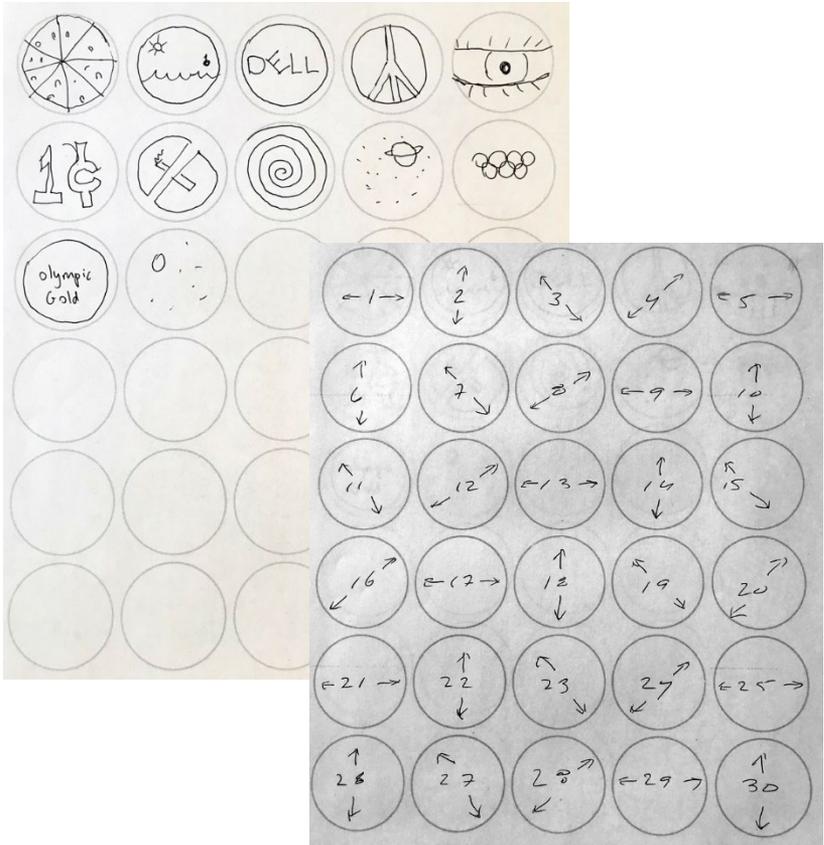
Thinking Exercises

Thirty circles

Given a sheet of paper with 30 blank circles, take three minutes and fill in as many circles as possible with little doodles. There need be no rhyme or reason (though there can be if the individual participant desires).

The reason for 30 circles is quantity over quality. Stop self-censoring and thinking about whether an idea is good or bad – you can always do that later.

See more: Tim Brown, TED 2008, “Tales of Creativity in Play.”



S.C.A.M.P.E.R

This technique asks you to take a product, problem, project, or process (but not limited to those), and adapt it into different contexts. This forces you to think about it from many different angles.

Substitute – what would happen if we swapped X for Y?

Combine – What would happen if we combined X and Y?

Adapt – What changes would need to be made if we used this product in a different context?

Modify – What could we change to add more value to this product?

Put to another use – What other uses or applications might this project have?

Eliminate – What could we remove from this project to simplify it?

Reverse – How could we reorganize this product to make it more effective?

Thinking hats

This is an exercise developed by Edward de Bono, and is often used in schools of education. Create six roles, or “hats,” and assign each team member one of the hats. During discussion, each team member must contribute to the discussion from the point of view of their hat.

| Hat | Role | Focus |
|--------|------------------|--|
| Blue | Logic | The facts |
| Yellow | Optimism | The value and benefits |
| Black | Devil’s Advocate | The dangers and difficulties |
| Red | Emotion | Feelings and intuitions |
| Green | Creativity | Possibilities and new ideas |
| Purple | Management | Making sure the rules of the hats are observed |

To a team member doing this for the first time, this may seem like a silly exercise. Approach it as just that – an *exercise* that allows us to expand the ways we think for a short period of time.

Roles can change by the day, by the hour, or by the project. Roles can be assigned arbitrarily or doled out according to members’ strengths. It may be interesting to assign team members a role based on their weakness.

The purpose with this exercise is to ensure team members include multiple points of view in discussions.

Naïve expert

When practicing creative thinking, your own expertise can be your worst enemy in generating new ideas. The more time you have spent always doing things the same way can make it harder to branch out and use divergent thinking.

Bring someone in to your brainstorming sessions that is not an expert in your subject. For example, if you run a restaurant, bring in an architect; if you run a marketing agency, bring in a homebuilder; if you run a software development company, bring in a teacher.

The naïve expert probably won't solve your problem for you, but they will ask questions true experts probably wouldn't think to ask.

Make sure the naïve expert isn't afraid to ask any question that comes to mind (psychological safety). You need these questions to help you expand your thinking! An automotive engineer probably won't ask why a car needs four tires, but a chef might.

The role of the naïve expert is to ask questions a true expert might not see to ask, which leads the true experts to expand their thinking, which leads to creative solutions.

Far analogies

Practicing making connections between dissimilar items helps your brain become used to making connections, which increases creativity. Our brains are designed to use the least amount of effort when thinking, which is what makes it hard to think differently. Repeated practice at forcing your brain to think “away from the path of least resistance” makes it easier for our brains to work that way consistently.

Far Analogies is an exercise where you take two dissimilar words or objects, and force yourself to make a connection between them by writing a chain of words.

For example – Rubber and Bread.

Make a chain of words that links them:

Rubber – Tire – Car – Road – Store – Grocery Store – Bread

Example: Outer Space and Bowling

Outer Space – Flying – Fly Ball – Baseball – Strike – Bowling

Example: Calendar and Couch

Calendar – Dates – Day and Night – Nap – Couch

What makes this exercise fun is, given the same two words, many different people will produce many different chains. Regular practice at exercises such as this help the group learn to make connections and think creatively on a regular basis.

Wild metaphors

Similar to Far Analogies, Wild Metaphors also force our brains to make connections between two dissimilar items, which makes it easier for our brains to make connections on a regular basis.

To make a wild metaphor, take two dissimilar items and connect them with the sentence:

_____ is like _____ because _____.

Examples:

White paint is like a deck of cards because I can make any pattern I want.

A clock is like a sponge because it changes over time.

Tea is like a nap because I can have some whenever I want.

These metaphors don't need to be particularly humorous or catchy, just a phrase that connects the two dissimilar items in some way. Regular practice makes it easier for our brains to make connections, leading to more creative output.

KWL

KWL stands for “Know, Want to Know, Learned.” Create a three-columned chart. When you begin working on a problem, fill out the first two columns – What do you know about the problem? What do you *want* to know about the problem?

Then, when after discussing the problem and possible solutions, fill in the “Learned” column.

This could be performed as an individual – each person in the group completes a chart before discussion; or, it could be performed as a large group, with a large KWL chart on a board or paper.

Alternatively, you could begin this as an individual activity, and then combine answers into a group chart.

| Know | Want to Know | Learned |
|--|--|---|
| <p>What do I/We know about the problem?</p> | <p>What do we want to know/need to know about the problem that we currently don't?</p> | <p>After discussion/working on the problem, what have we learned about the problem?</p> |

Five things in a category

This is a warmup technique favored by improv comedians. To them, this helps free up their minds and get them used to creating associations between things.

Name a category, and then name five things in that category. The key here is to be *fast*, not *right*.

For example: **Cats**

Some might limit their answers to: Siamese, Tabby, Persian, Bengal, Munchkin.

But, don't limit yourself. These five are equally good: Tabby, Garfield, Yellow, Fat, Big.

Also, there's no need to be right, just fast: Tabby, Garfield, Lalala, Dog-like, Angry.

Often times, improv comedians stand in a circle. One person gives the category, and the next person gives the five things – quickly, not accurately. Then, that person gives a different category to the next person.

Practicing this exercise, over time, can improve your ability to make connections and generate ideas while divergent thinking. Make it a fun game in the office!

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About the Author



David Dubczak, a.k.a Creative Dave, loves helping people be more creative. He believes everyone has their own secret “Genius Mode,” and creative thinking is the key to unlocking it.

As an educator, his passion is teaching kids to fail. In research and development industries, the ability to fail and learn from failure is incredibly important. Schools today don't share

that view, and he's trying to change it.

David is also an award-winning playwright, and his video productions have won several awards with organizations such as the Iowa Motion Picture Association, Broadway World, and the Festigious International Film Festival Los Angeles.

David earned his Bachelor of Science in Education at Drake University, and his Master of Education in Instructional Design and Technology at Iowa State University. He loves to speak and workshop on creativity and productive failure.

Book him at CreativeDave.net, and see his other productions at ConjunctionMedia.com