

By Emer McPolin

**A better foundational knowledge of how creativity works can help your organization get more out of brainstorming and other attempts at innovation.**

# THE FUN-DAMENTALS OF CREAT

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**EVERYONE KNOWS THE EMAIL:**

It lands with a thud into your inbox. One and a half hours of your time is required at a scheduled brainstorm to come up with some ideas to address a challenge. The challenge is usually laid out in the email and, like any good employee, you start to “solutionize” ahead of time, so you have some ideas to bring to the table.

Cue the brainstorm—a group of suited and booted professionals looking at each other across a boardroom table and having what seems more like a discussion or debate than a session to generate ideas. Some bright spark will at some point suggest that the group go around the table and hear the ideas of the various attendees. However,

this effort stalls after the first or second person as people start critiquing ideas and pointing out their shortcomings. The debate continues. Finally, time is called on the brainstorm, and the problem-holder (usually the sender of the email) makes the decision about which (if any) ideas might get airtime.

This is the brainstorm scenario with which the majority of large organizations are familiar, and it is also the brainstorm scenario that is directly counter to the end goal of innovation: the holy grail toward which most companies strive.

The missing link in the scenario above is the absence of creativity or any trace of creative leadership. The website of the Amsterdam-based THINK School of Creative Leadership defines creative leadership as “a philosophy and an act: it develops and realizes innovative ideas through the shared ambition of improving the world through enterprise formation.” It continues, “Those who employ creative leadership do so by forging an environment that promotes innovative thinking and mission-driven entrepreneurship.” Indeed, according to an innovation survey conducted by

**Notes**

1. Gartner Financial Services  
Innovation Survey, July 2016,  
p. 167.

# CREATIVITY

Gartner in 2016, “the biggest threat to innovation is internal politics and an organizational culture which doesn’t accept failure and/or doesn’t accept ideas from outside and/or cannot change.”<sup>1</sup> In short, without creativity and the environment for creativity, meaningful innovation cannot exist. In the brainstorm scenario described above, there was little structure and no plan, and the environment was not optimal for meaningful ideation.

To understand creativity, one must first understand the creative process—and yes, there is a process. Does your company have the wherewithal to learn some new tricks? Let me introduce you to the Foursight Thinking Profile—a psychometric test that allows individuals and teams to gauge innovation levels and creative preferences within their organizations. However gauging innovation will only get you so far. For any brainstorm to be successful, both the facilitator and the attendees having a baseline foundation knowledge of creative theory will pay dividends and organizations will reap the rewards of effective brainstorm endeavors.

## Stages of creativity

The Foursight Thinking Profile is the brainchild of Dr. Gerard Puccio, department chair and professor at the International Center for Studies in Creativity at Buffalo State University in New York. Puccio posits four discrete stages to the creative process:

- **Clarify.** Identify the challenge.
- **Ideate.** Generate ideas to address the challenge.
- **Develop.** Bring ideas to life.
- **Implement.** Move ideas out of the boardroom and make them happen.

Of course, it’s a bit more complicated than that: There are effective exercises and techniques for each of the stages. In the clarify stage, for instance, a technique called “webbing” can be used to uncover the larger issues at play around the challenge. In ideate, techniques such as “sparking ideas,” “revolution,” and “related worlds” help to reframe and constrain the brief, unblock creativity, and enable groups to generate ideas in volume. Techniques such as POINt (which will be discussed later in this article) and SCAMPER aid in “rinsing through” the idea and gauging real-world feasibility during

## Creativity is what sets humans apart from most other animals; it was a factor in securing our position at the top of the food chain. We have evolved to be creative.

development; and activities such as road-mapping and coaching can meaningfully move progress forward in the implementation stage. Structuring your brainstorm around the framework of the four stages and moving through these stages in a timely and orderly fashion will help to effectively structure the session, enhance the time spent, and better orient the group toward the end goal.

My own outing with the four stages as a brainstorm framework came during my 10 years with the BBC, particularly with its Creative Leadership Program. It was during this time that we went all over the UK running brainstorms for brands such as Doctor Who, Top Gear, the London Olympics, the BBC Symphonies, and the network's Comedy and Entertainment division. After my time with the BBC, I transitioned over to consultancy and quickly realized that my creative process work could be used for more-strategic corporate problem solving and to meaningfully increase levels of creativity (and therefore innovation) across many sectors.

With the four stages as a framework, and using creativity techniques, I ran problem-solving, strategy, and change management brainstorms for clients within healthcare, life sciences, energy, financial services, and hospitality.

Brainstorm facilitation is, without a doubt, an art. The facilitator has a time-boxed period in which to create and realize innovation and foster clarity of purpose within any given team. Like any artist, the facilitator should have techniques and also be equipped with the necessary tools for success. Facilitators should also have a well-prepared and clear outline of the allocated brainstorm time and the activities therein which will move the group through the brainstorming process toward meaningful outcomes.

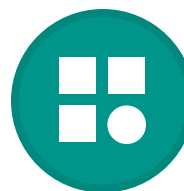
Most important, the facilitator should also have an awareness of a set of creative leadership principles and behaviors that, when woven into the fabric of any brainstorm, no matter what the length, will significantly increase the chances of success of the endeavor.

Creativity is what sets humans apart from most other animals; it was a factor in securing

our position at the top of the food chain. We have evolved to be creative. Jane Goodall, during her observational study of primates, witnessed chimpanzees fashioning tools from sticks—a creative means of extracting dinner from an ant-hill.

Creativity is like a muscle; it improves with continued exercise and with practice over time. We are all born with the ability to be creative, although our abilities vary, much as we vary in eye color, shoe size, and skin tone. Whatever your level of creativity, using creative tools and techniques will help you improve your own creativity and the creativity of those around you.

We must all, however, walk before we can run, since standing up in front of groups of people and running brainstorms using tools and techniques takes time, practice, knowledge of, and confidence in, the process. What I found to be hugely helpful was a good grasp of some fundamental principles of creative theory. Knowing these gives a deeper understanding of how creativity works, what we as humans tend to do, and how to facilitate people away from behaviors that can run counter to creativity. Knowing these creative fundamentals can massively help to raise the game in brainstorms and realize the full potential of creative tools and techniques. The following are the seven creative principles that, as a facilitator, I find to be the most relevant and insightful.



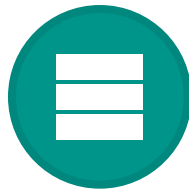
### 1. BREAK YOUR PATTERNS

We are creatures of habit, and we are all quite deeply engrained in our patterns. In our careers, we are generally rewarded for our patterns. We do something well, we are praised or rewarded for it, and the recognition of that achievement potentially moves us up the corporate ladder. As for any other animal, the cumulative effect of this process tells our brains that this is a winning formula. So we stick with it. We bring our patterns from rank to rank and role to role, never really changing our approach and becoming more and more entrenched and risk-averse to new methods and tactics.

**Notes**

2. R. Ackoff and E. Vergara, "Creativity in Problem Solving and Planning." In R.L. Kuhn (ed.), *Handbook for Creative and Innovative Managers* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1988), pp. 77-89.

Innovation, however, is more likely to happen when individuals are rebellious—when they break their patterns and ask themselves what they could do instead of what they should do. In 1988, Russell Ackoff and Elsa Vergara defined creativity as “the ability to modify self-imposed constraints”<sup>2</sup>—the capacity to break from your traditional hardwired *modus operandi* and try new ways of problem-solving, doing your job, and essentially living your day-to-day life. According to Harvard Business School’s Francesca Gino, who researches decision-making and creativity, this approach allows for the exploration of potential solutions and, while it may increase the time needed to make a decision and could lead to disagreements, it will ultimately help teams to be more creative and therefore more innovative. Organizations can help to incubate this innovation by creating an environment and culture for this type of rebellion or pattern breaking—an example, by the way, of creative leadership.

**2. THE RULE OF THREE THIRDS**

When running a brainstorm, get comfortable with the fact that for the most part, the first two thirds of any creative session is usually taken up by the most obvious solutions. That’s not where innovation happens. That magic usually takes place in the final third. It’s here that, using creativity techniques, the group will have moved through what is referred to as the area of familiarity into the area of discovery—past the typical and into a more interesting place where they no longer imitate but innovate instead. The obvious and hackneyed solutions to the challenges have already been verbalized and captured; now the group can begin to explore new territories and solutions. With mindful coaching, facilitation, and knowledge of creativity techniques, a good facilitator can guide a group into this space and maintain them there for as long as possible while they glean the greatest volume of imaginative ideas possible.

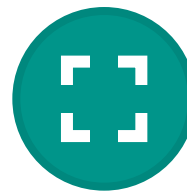
It’s actually quite easy to spot when a group has entered the area of discovery. The clue to this is the presence of “monkey noises.” If an idea is either met

with “ooooOOOoooo!” by the group or prefixed with an “Oh! Oh! Oh!,” then you can be sure that you have successfully navigated them into the area of discovery. Energy is high. Excitement is palpable. This is what usually happens in the third third.

**3. QUANTITY LEADS TO QUALITY**

As mentioned already, to get to the area of discovery, the facilitator must first help the group venture through the area of familiarity to get the obvious said, clear the decks, and be primed for entering the area of discovery. Throughout this process, ideas are being generated and captured in volume—and it’s this volume that will ultimately contain the gems. The more ideas you have, the more chance there is for the genesis of a game-changer in addressing the challenge. It’s up to the facilitator to push the group past what they think is the limit of their ideas to create this volume.

Increasing the options will ultimately only increase the power of the problem-holder to address the challenge. They’ll be equipped with more ideas for conversations with peers, leaders, or clients; they’ll have more ideas to present; they’ll have more ideas to combine to create new ideas. By having ideas in volume, the ability to get to the point of sign-off is greatly increased; providing a number of options will extend conversations with stakeholders, clients, and decision makers, and more ideas can be discussed.

**4. CREATIVITY LOVES CONSTRAINT**

Creativity has been mis-sold for years as a blank-canvas, world-is-your-oyster approach to generating ideas. This is not the case. In the scenario of a brainstorm, creativity does in fact love constraint. It loves a timebox; it loves competition; it loves a tight, single-ask unambiguous brief; and it loves timely facilitation through a process. Creativity loves stimulus, inspiration, and collaboration. It thrives in a group setting with excited and

animated participants who are all chasing a common vision and purpose.

Brainstorms have a much better chance of success when they're designed to account for every minute of the time available—and it is the facilitator who must keep those balloons in the air and the energy levels within the group as high as possible. This is made exponentially easier when there is a tight running order and time-boxed creativity techniques that will keep the group engaged, energetic, and driven.



#### 5. THERE ARE NO BAD IDEAS

In the development stage of the creative process, when a top idea is selected and put through the process of viability testing, there is a technique called POINT that is used to analyze the idea and sense-check its real-world potential. POINT is like a SWOT analysis for idea development. It stands for pluses, opportunities, issues, and new thinking. Note that the POINT technique positions potential issues third in line for consideration—and this is done deliberately.

When we are asked our opinion about an idea or a concept—to give feedback—our automatic first reaction is to critique or to verbalize the negatives. This instinctual rush to criticize can be counter to the goal of creativity and can, in the ideation phase of a brainstorming scenario, disenfranchise the individual or individuals who came up with the idea. Although it might sound trite, in brainstorming, no idea is a bad idea.

My former BBC colleague and creative leadership mentor, Linda Green, liked to use a car analogy. A car has an accelerator and brakes. One powers the car forward; one slows it down. The second and third stage of the creative process, ideation and development, can be compared to these two car functions. Ideation is all about acceleration—putting the pedal to the metal to drive the ideas forward and generate the volume required. This is divergent thinking. Convergent thinking is then undertaken to identify the best ideas and thereafter development occurs. This

is where the brakes are applied. The group slows down, and using development stage techniques, due consideration is given to the potential opportunities and pitfalls of the ideas.

With a car, if you press the accelerator and the brakes at the same time, the car stalls. The same concept applies to creativity. If you hit the brakes and critique too early in the acceleration (ideation) stage, creativity stalls. It is for this reason that brainstorm facilitators must set clear rules at this stage and call out any instances of premature critiquing.



#### 6. THE CREATIVE ADULT IS THE CHILD WHO SURVIVED

It is said that children make the best negotiators. That's because children are unconstrained in their approach. They ask for what they want; they think big; they suggest alternatives when met with refusal; they test assumptions; they persevere; they ask a lot of questions and are infinitely curious; and they leverage their stakeholders (usually Grandma and Grandpa) when their primary targets refuse to comply.

At five years old, we are leveraging approximately 80 percent of our creative potential. When we reach our early teens, our creative output has dropped to about 2 percent of our potential. We have learned to conform to the rules and boundaries set by society, and we have begun the process of establishing our patterns. In polarity management, which is a model and set of principles for problem solving, we learn that 95 to 99 percent of the problems we are asked to solve in formal education are problems with a single right answer. The remaining 1 to 5 percent are all problems with more than one right answer that are independent—multiple-option answers in which many options are valid. This approach of rewarding fact memorization and regurgitation, as opposed to creative and lateral thinking, can help to explain some of the rapid decline of creativity in children as young as 12.

The creative adult allows herself or himself room to play, room to have fun, room to consider the art of the possible without burdening themselves with the constraints of reality early on.

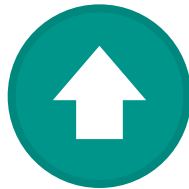


An Irish native, **Emer McPolin** has been living and working in the US for nearly three years. Previous to that, she worked with the Online team, as well as the Creative Leadership team, at the BBC in London for nearly a decade. During her time on the Creative Leadership team, she was tasked with raising the levels of creativity

in both program and content teams across the organization. She has worked in cross-disciplinary functions using Agile methodologies in public service broadcasting in the UK, digital design agencies in the UK, Ireland, and Japan, and most recently in consultancy in the US. During this time, she has led creativity and strategy initiatives

and training across numerous sectors, such as energy, life sciences, healthcare, and government. Emer lives in Virginia with her husband Al and now works in consultancy as a UX designer and creative facilitator.

When running a brainstorm, getting the participants as reacquainted as possible with their inner child will significantly improve both the creative environment and the brainstorm outcomes. There are simple ways to do this—for instance, allowing brainstorm attendees to wear casual clothing, organizing ideation games, generating competition, using emotive language, encouraging movement, and introducing comedy. Changing the environment is another powerful technique; taking users outside their usual work space is already breaking their patterns, which can only help unleash creativity.



### 7. HIPPOS AND OTHER ANIMALS

The HIPPO—by which I mean the highest paid person’s opinion—is a creature that needs to be managed carefully in a brainstorm scenario. More often than not, the HIPPO is also the problem-holder—the person who has identified the challenge and sought a means to solve it. Being the highest-paid person, he or she is also likely to hold the most senior rank within the group. When the HIPPO voices an opinion, there is a risk of groupthink occurring, since there is of course a tendency to follow the leader; not to mention that the other individuals don’t want to be seen as being in conflict with the boss. This is massively counter to creativity, and yes, there are techniques to alleviate it—for example:

- Request that the problem holder/HIPPO absent him- herself from the brainstorm to remove any potential anxiety or reluctance to speak.
- If the HIPPO is present and when voting needs to occur, the HIPPO goes last.
- If the HIPPO is present and the subject matter is particularly sensitive, use an anonymous form of voting, such as Post-it notes, which can be collected and counted by the facilitator.

The mindguard is another character to watch out for. Irving Janis, who originated the theory of groupthink, defined mindguard as a group member who filters and reframes information to steer the group and to control and direct the final outcome toward a narrow range of options.

Mindguards can be difficult to spot, and facilitators should be on alert when they suspect a mindguard at play. Watch for early critiquing of ideas, persuading the group toward a course of action, reframing situations to push the group toward or away from a specific outcome, and applying unnecessary time pressure for decision-making that is not in keeping with the schedule of the facilitator.

### Learning to facilitate

Facilitating is coaching, and part of coaching is asking open questions and allowing the respondents to solve their own problems by moving through a process. Creative leadership is built on a solid foundation of coaching, enabling, and empowering people and teams to address issues and challenges effectively while helping them toward fresh and innovative solutions. Knowing the principles that underpin effective creativity will help to break patterns, generate ideas in volume, and ultimately move the group closer to addressing the challenge in a more creative and therefore innovative way.

Brainstorms should be enjoyable. Creating a situation in which a brainstorm email no longer thuds will go a long way toward raising the energy, enthusiasm, and most important, the creativity of everyone involved. ■