Creative, team-based, problem solving

- Can anyone be creative?
- Why does the team need to be involved in solving problems?
- By working together to solve problems the team can generate creative ideas

We think of artists and writers as creative. It seems to take a special kind of person to be creative. But we are all capable of creativity. Creativity is the “thinking of novel thoughts and undertaking novel actions”. Novel means new, so creativity means thinking of new things, new ideas or doing things that haven’t been done before. Everyone is capable of doing that, given some encouragement and the chance to be creative. This session will show you how you can help your team to think novel thoughts or do novel things.

Can everyone really be creative?

Think of your front door or the front door of a building you know. Just think of a short sentence to describe it. For example: “It’s painted black and has six glass panes, with a brass knocker and handle.” Now you try. Just say it to yourself.
Whatever you said, it’s probably different from what anyone else reading this session has said. Even if two people were describing the same door, they would probably use slightly different words or pick on different details. So, what does that tell us about creativity?

Nearly every sentence we use, every comment we make is likely to be unique. In fact, humans start making up new sentences at around the age of three from words that they have heard others use but not even used themselves before. We will not have heard anyone use a sentence before, we just create new sentences all by ourselves. They may not be the works of William Shakespeare or even Jeffrey Archer, but they have been created. We are so used to creating new sentences out of the words that we know that we take it for granted. Our creativity is so commonplace that it is not even noticed.

Here is another example, a completely invented word: merb. A merb is a quiet corner in a work area, where people can sit. What would you like to call it? Why not invent your own name for a quiet corner in a work area? Write it here: __________. If you use it at work it could become a new word in the English language! This shows just how inventive our brains are. It took early humans millions of years to invent the first few words, you can make one up in seconds, and do it again if you wanted to.

This creative ability is in us all, and we use it all the time. It takes a very special person to come up with some very new ideas or design very new products and services, but we can all think of new ways to do everyday things very easily.

**Exercise**

This is a further example of your ability to be creative. Write down six ways of squeezing the juice out of an orange - you don’t necessarily have to catch the juice, just squeeze it out. Try to think of the most unconventional ways that you can.

1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 
6. 
Creative, team-based, problem solving

Creativity and humour

What did you come up with? Some off-the-wall ideas include:
- Lay the orange in the path of a car
- Put it under the carpet
- Use a sledgehammer
- Use karate chops
- Sit on it
- Throw it in the air and hit it with two frying pans

If you think these are silly, you’re right. If some of them make you smile, then you will have learnt something else about creativity. It often makes people laugh, because creative ideas are often so unusual that nobody has ever thought of them before. Try asking your team to do the orange exercise, but instead of six ideas, ask them for fifty. Write yours on a piece of paper and ask them to add to the list. As the list gets passed round you will see more and more extreme ideas being added.

You will also see fifty ideas gradually emerge, although it may take several days and quite a lot of laughter! People respond to a challenge, and they will work hard to come up with the most unusual ways of squeezing the juice out of an orange.

Humour comes from seeing the unusual or unexpected. It is the ability to see things differently which makes most comics so funny. Creativity involves the same thing, thinking of the unusual or unexpected. Read this case study and you will see creativity at work.

Case Study

Marie leads a team responsible for security in a department store. They have cameras covering a lot of the store but there are many areas where they can’t see clearly, especially on busy days. As well as uniformed security guards, some of the security team wander round in plain clothes.

Shoplifters often wait until the uniformed guards have moved away to steal goods. Marie asks the team for ideas on how to warn shoplifters that there are plainclothes security guards and hidden cameras. She wants to put up notices but the store manager worries that shoppers will be put off by signs saying that plain clothes guards and hidden cameras are in use.

(Continued on page 4)
The team discusses ways of warning shoplifters, to deter them from coming to the store. Peter, a member of the team suggests putting up signs on the cameras that can be seen saying ‘These are not hidden cameras’ and everyone laughs because they think the idea is silly.

Shani says: “Why don't the uniformed guards wear badges saying ‘I'm not a plainclothes security guard’?

Some of the team laugh but Eric starts to think about the ideas. “You know, those aren't bad ideas. Honest customers will laugh, but won't be offended, and thieves will start to think ‘Hang on, where are the hidden cameras and plainclothes security guards?’.”

Marie nods her head. “You know, those aren't such bad ideas after all.”

Being creative isn’t so difficult. It just means thinking ‘outside the box’ or what we usually think and doing things in ways that haven't been done before. It doesn't have to be earth-shakingly new - the most creative ideas are often very simple.

For years personal computers (PCs) have been produced in a standard colour, beige. Then in the late 1990s Apple launched a range of brightly coloured computers, which caught everybody's attention. Is it unusual to make goods in different colours? No, of course not, but PCs were always beige, so we accepted it. What Apple did was to take a common practice in many other industries - offering a choice of colours - and apply it PCs. That's creativity. Often the most creative people are those who borrow ideas from one area and use them in another. For every one completely new idea there are probably a hundred which are 'borrowed'.

You can encourage creativity in problem-solving by getting your team to think beyond the usual range of ideas - the way things have always been done - and start looking for new ways of doing things. This can be done by generating new ideas and by borrowing them. The rest of this session will show you how.
There are several ways that you can get your team to think of novel ways of solving customer service problems, but they all depend on three conditions:

1. The team must **understand the problem**, its causes and the need to resolve the problem.
2. The team must **know the limits** that exist in resolving the problem.
3. The team must have some **time and freedom** from interruption to work on the solution.

The problem can’t be solved if the team doesn’t understand it. If you involve the team in finding out what caused the problem, using the *cause and effect diagram* you learnt about in *Finding the cause of problems*, perhaps, they will feel a sense of **ownership** of the problem. Ownership means that they recognise that the problem exists, that it needs to be resolved, and that they have some responsibility for resolving it.

However, if there are limits to what they can do, then they need to know those limits. It’s no use coming up with the perfect solution only to find that you aren’t allowed to put it into practice. Ask your manager what the limits are, and share them with your team. But be clear. If your manager says that a solution mustn’t cost any money, ask if that means that no money can be spent, or that money can be spent if it can be got back in savings during the course of the next few months.

Time and freedom from interruption means that you devote yourself to solving the problem. It could be in a one hour period set aside for the purpose, or two or three half hour periods at intervals. But try to get away from the workplace, with no ‘phones to disturb you and nobody watching or listening to you.

Once you have the opportunity to resolve the problem, you can use any of the following techniques to work creatively with your team:

- Brainstorming
- 3 by 3
- Borrowing
Brainstorming

Brainstorming means that the team are asked to call out their ideas at random which are written up on a whiteboard or flipchart. The emphasis is on quantity of ideas not their quality - in fact, the more the merrier! You should not let anyone criticise or discuss any of the ideas generated, unless they don’t understand them. What you will find is that ideas spark off other ideas, so you shouldn’t stop until it’s clear that everyone has run out of suggestions.

These six rules for using brainstorming are:

1. **Don’t discuss or criticise ideas** - in fact you should encourage the outrageous or bizarre ideas to stimulate creativity.
2. **Write up the ideas where they can be seen** - new ideas can be spun off old ideas.
3. **Encourage everyone to take part** - but don’t force them.
4. **Create a relaxed atmosphere** - avoid sitting round a table (in fact standing up round a flip chart or white board is quite a sensible way to work).
5. **Allow time** - good ideas emerge rather than appear on demand.
6. **Welcome humour** - laughter is one of the best signs of creativity at work.

These six rules apply to all three creative problem-solving techniques.

3-by-3

Sometimes your team may have members who are shy or reserved and don’t like having to call out their ideas in front of others. That’s when you can use the 3-by-3 technique. It is just like brainstorming, but done privately. Give each team member a sheet of paper and tell them to write three ideas for solving the problem, numbered 1, 2 and 3. Then pass all the sheets round clockwise to the next person. Write 4, 5 and 6 on the sheet and add three more ideas to the one’s listed. Pass the sheets round again, and write 7, 8 and 9. Keep going until nobody can add anything. The ideas on the sheets will encourage people to think up more ideas, building up long lists of ideas.

You should then work round the team, asking them to read out the first idea on their list. If it has already been suggested they take the next one. You continue with the remaining ideas, going round and round the team, allowing people to add ideas from their lists as you go.
The third way of generating ideas, **borrowing**, is slightly different from the other two. It uses *metaphors* to resolve problems. A metaphor is an idea or an image which is used to suggest another idea. For example, if someone describes the sea as being like “a millpond”, that’s a metaphor. So is “he was like a bull in a china shop”. You know that the sea had gentle waves, which a millpond doesn’t have, and that the person didn’t snort and bellow or wave his tail! However, a sea that is very still is a bit like a millpond. Someone who crashes around could do as much damage as a bull. Metaphors borrow ideas and images from one setting and use them in another.

The idea of using metaphor to solve problems is that you use solutions from a different setting to resolve your own problems. See how Priscilla uses a metaphor to resolve the problem at REbound:

**Case Study**

Priscilla has gathered her team together to solve the problem with the area available for packing. She tells them that there is no spare space in the factory and that there is no money to build on to the side of the factory. Yet they need to resolve the problem because customers are getting very angry at the number of mistakes in the packing of the trainers.

Priscilla asks them to think of other places where they know there is a shortage of space for all the activities which have to occur. The team members come up with the following list:

- A caravan
- A spaceship
- A sailing boat
- My kitchen
- A train buffet
- My twins’ bedroom

Using this list, they look at how the space problem is resolved, such as by having folding tables, bunk beds, putting storage units on walls and under work surfaces, putting in new floors, not keeping anything that you don’t need and having fold out extensions (to a caravan).

Their preferred solution is to have the packing materials placed on shelving above their packing area, so that it is easy to pull off and use, and to have a slow moving belt under the packing area to carry away the packed boxes to a pallet which is taken away to the warehouse when it’s full. That would enable them to have a larger area for packing because there would be less space being used for storing materials.
Priscilla’s team has resolved their problem by coming up with a solution which addresses the true causes and which doesn’t break any of the conditions set by their manager. They used the time that they had set aside to solve the problem creatively, by borrowing the solution from other settings, settings which they knew had had to solve a similar problem.

**Leading a team in creative problem solving**

Your job is not to resolve the problem, that’s what you are using your team for. Your job is to lead them through the process. You must believe that they are capable of being creative. If you don’t, they won’t believe it either. You must agree with your manager that you can have the time and space to resolve it, and what the limits are for your solution. Then choose a method to generate creative ideas. Don’t be afraid to experiment and get your team to join in as if it were a game. If there is plenty of laughter, then your team is being creative.

Using your team also means that you are likely to get more and better ideas. There is research to show that a group of people do come up with more, better ideas than individuals on their own. Modern organisations can’t afford to disappoint their customers, nor can they expect one person to solve all their problems. By getting your team to own the problem, and then to develop the solution, you can get better solutions and be confident that they will work.
Complete the following exercises. Refer to the session if necessary.

A. What are the three conditions which must be met if your team is to be able to generate creative ideas?
   1. __________
   2. __________
   3. __________

B. List three techniques that you can use to generate creative ideas:
   1. __________
   2. __________
   3. __________

C. Mark the following statements T (True) or F (False).
   ___ 1. Creativity means making things that very few people can make.
   ___ 2. We are all capable of being creative in some way or another.
   ___ 3. People who are being creative don’t laugh.
   ___ 4. People are more likely to resolve a problem if they feel some ownership of it.

D. Complete each sentence. Circle the letter in front of the correct answer.
   1. Creative problem-solving techniques emphasise:
      a. quality not quantity of ideas.
      b. quantity not quality of ideas.
      c. quality and quantity of ideas.

   2. Using metaphors in problem-solving means:
      a. borrowing solutions from one setting to use in another.
      b. lending solutions to other people.
      c. asking someone else to solve the problem.
Answer the questions following the case.

Cassie is the team leader in a small call centre. They deal with customers who want to order specialist food items from a mail order catalogue. The goods are all produced locally by the company she works for, and customers often want to buy the goods for special occasions like parties. They are always very busy at Christmas and Easter which causes problems for them. The company can’t afford to set up extra facilities just for these periods, and it doesn’t want to use an independent call centre because the team are all very familiar with the products and advise customers on portion sizes, which items to use for particular occasions, and even on recipes and presentation tips. This is part of the service which Cassie’s team prides itself on and which the company encourages.

They extend their hours at peak periods, work extra shifts and other staff help out as well, but that still doesn’t resolve the problem fully.

What would you say to Cassie to convince her that her team should try creative problem-solving to resolve the problem?
Think and Apply

How well do you use the skills in this session? Think about the customer service problems you face.

- Which of them do you think could be solved using team-based creative problem-solving?
- How would your team react to the idea?
- How do you feel about using the techniques described in this session?

1. Read the list of skills. Tick the boxes to show your strengths and weaknesses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>strengths &lt;-&gt; weaknesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I'm good at this</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- working with the whole team to solve problems
- using techniques to generate creative ideas
- welcoming creative solutions to problems
- agreeing the limits for problem solutions with your manager

2. Do you want to improve any of these skills?

3. How do you plan to improve the skills you listed in question 2?
   (You might want to discuss this with your line manager or your tutor/mentor/coach.)