

ALEX IS DEAD



The Death of Brainstorming
and the Birth of Real Creativity
by Michael Wience

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Real Creativity

By Michael Wienke

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my family, particularly my lovely wife Jordan, who have been so supportive throughout this entire process. This book, and the years of school beforehand, wouldn't have been possible without their support.

I love you.

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A Eulogy

Alex Osborn died in 1966. A man of great accomplishment and acclaim. He was an outstanding businessman and a driving force behind the formation of the advertising agency BBDO (Barton, Batten, Durstine, and Osborn). He served as the Executive Vice President of the company, and is generally credited with saving BBDO in the late 1930s. He built the agency into an industry behemoth that would become one of the most recognized and successful agencies in the world, with a roster of clients that included Chrysler, General Electric, and DuPont. He was also a good family man. Alex was married to his wife Helen for 50 years, and they raised five children together.

However, it was in the area of creative theory where Alex made his most lasting contribution to the world. In the late 1930s, Alex sought a way to differentiate his agency and maximize its most precious resource: the people. He knew that if he could reliably deliver more and better ideas to his clients, his agency would reap tremendous benefits. His solution was brilliantly simple. It changed the entire course of his career and, quite possibly, his life. He transitioned from an executive at an ad agency to a creative theorist. He wrote no fewer than four books on creativity, and he used the royalties from

those books to establish the Creative Education Foundation in partnership with Sidney Parnes. Together, they developed the “Osborn-Parnes Creative Problem Solving Process” and trained thousands of people all over the world in the application of his great advancement in the field of creative thinking. Today, his invention has become synonymous with creativity and innovation in the business environment. It’s a word everyone has certainly heard and most likely said.

So, what was his world-changing idea? Brainstorming, and it’s time to bury it.



Creativity: “Big C” versus “little c”

Before we go any further. I want to take a moment to discuss creativity. It can be a little tough to define. But it's important that you and I agree on a definition, because it's going to change how you read this book.

I've talked to too many people who openly dismiss their own creative accomplishments. They'll give a sheepish, “Oh, I'm not creative.” And then they'll show off their elegantly designed garden or offer a bite of their special recipe. Rather than recognizing their own creativity, they'll point to a select number of creative geniuses throughout history – people like Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Edison, and Mozart.

There's no arguing about the creative abilities of these folks. Their creations, often referred to as “Big C” Creativity, are the moments when an idea sparks a big jump forward. Obviously, not everyone can be a Da Vinci or a Mozart. Still, we're all capable of everyday moments of creativity that are vital to the success of our businesses or some other aspect of our lives. This everyday creativity is often referred to as “little c” creativity.

There's a second thing I'd like to point out about the Michelangelos and Edisons of the world. There's no doubt that each of these people is a talent worthy of reverence, but time has warped our perception of their

actual abilities. We judge them by their crowning achievements and overlook the work they put into achieving greatness. For example, everyone knows Michelangelo's David and his work on the Sistine Chapel. But few people consider his years as an apprentice, where he learned the skills that he would ultimately master and adapt in the creation of his masterpieces. He studied at the feet of some of the greatest masters of his age. He learned from their experiences and added his own ideas.

When tasked with solving a creative challenge, we place unreal expectations on our creative abilities, especially if we haven't been actively training our brains. To start working on a project and tell yourself or your team, "Go be creative," is unrealistic. In fact, it's as ridiculous as Bertoldo di Giovanni, the artist under whom Michelangelo apprenticed as a sculptor, giving his protégé a slab of marble on his first day and saying, "Carve me a statue."

So, give yourself a break.

Part I: The Collapse

“The greatest obstacle to discovery is not ignorance - it is the illusion of knowledge.”

Daniel J. Boorstin

Chapter 1: The Moment Everything Broke

I don't remember the first time I heard the word "brainstorming," which makes sense considering it was a well-known business tool before I was born. It was always just... *there*. Something people just... *did*.

By the time I entered the workforce, I'd brainstormed my way through middle school projects, high school term papers, college advertising classes, and family vacation planning sessions. What I'm trying to say is that I was an experienced and seasoned brainstormer. At least I thought I was, but I wouldn't say I was trained, *per se*. Just like virtually everyone else, I learned by doing.

It wasn't until I entered the world of advertising that I saw the brainstorm truly come to life, and not necessarily in a good way. There was undoubtedly a more defined process. One that more closely followed Osborn's original methodology, but there was also a certain pageantry to it. When a client attended a brainstorm, they weren't just paying for the ideas. They were paying for the experience, and they wanted their money's worth.

At one point, I had a boss (who shall remain nameless) who believed in her heart that the theatrics were the most valuable part of a brainstorm. We would host practice sessions, where she'd offer us critiques on our showmanship. The saddest part is that she wasn't wrong. If you can get a client caught up in the moment, you can get them to buy into almost anything. *Almost*.

That's what made me a true believer. I'd been witness to the driving force behind some fantastic ideas. Things that were, in some cases, and would have been, in many more, truly revolutionary ideas. So, what happened? A lot of great ideas fell by the wayside for one reason or another. And more than a few died in the cold light of morning. After the wave of brainstorm euphoria wore off, the client stared at a formerly revolutionary idea and said, "I can't present this to my boss. She'd kill me."

The student becomes the teacher

At a certain point in my career, I transitioned from a brainstorm participant to a brainstorm facilitator. It happened overnight. Most likely because the previous facilitator got a new job at another agency. All of a sudden, I WAS ON! To call it nerve-wracking would be a massive understatement. Suddenly, you're standing in the middle of the room, with between 10 and 40 eyes focusing on you, and the success or failure of the meeting sits squarely on your shoulders. My palms are getting sweaty, and my mouth is dry just thinking about it.

I'd had plenty of experience watching them happen, but there was no real training process to lead one. So, off to Google I went, and I studied what other experts told me to do. Armed with this amazing knowledge, I strutted into my first brainstorm and fell flat on my face. I'm probably being overly dramatic, but it certainly didn't go as I hoped. The next one was passable. The one after that was better. Eventually, I got pretty good. Some (not me) might even say I got great. But that doesn't mean things went flawlessly. I can still remember some epic failures along the way.

List of epic failures

- I once had a client bring a brainstorming session to a complete standstill by loudly exclaiming, “BORING!” Rude or not. Right or not. There was no coming back from that.
- I once had a senior team member from our company come in with an agenda to get the group to agree to an idea they already had. No matter where the conversation went or what idea was proposed, the team member indelicately steered the conversation back to their favored idea. Eventually, they won.
- We once hosted a brainstorming session at the client’s request, where we aimed to get into the mindset of our 21-year-old target consumer by playing the drinking game Flip Cup and going clubbing. We all survived, so it wasn’t a total failure, but I can assure you no good ideas were had... or at least remembered.

And while these brainstorms were no doubt failures, they pale in comparison to...

The Brainstorm from Hell

My journey began on a sunny, spring morning. I had just arrived at work, and as I walked up the steps to my desk, an account director called me over to her desk. “I hope you don’t have anything going on next Thursday. Our client called this morning and asked for you to attend a big brainstorm they’re planning.”

“Just me? And how big is big?” I asked nervously.

I wasn’t nervous about being invited. After all, we’d been working with this client for several years. I knew our contacts very well and was flattered to be asked. What concerned me was that I was the **ONLY** one chosen from our agency to attend a brainstorm hosted in the grand conference room of a local hotel. Since it was an in-town event, there were no budgetary concerns about bringing a few extra team members, but the client only wanted one agency representative. It felt like my invitation checked off an item on a to-do list somewhere. Invite an agency person. Check. Even worse, there was no further information about the meeting. Agenda to come. Lunch will be provided. The promised agenda never came.

A few days later, I drove up to a large, black wedge-shaped hotel situated across the street from the airport. The ominous structure did little to ease my fears as I parked in the lot. I grabbed my pen and a small

notebook, where I had jotted down a few ideas. My notes were mostly scattered thinking. Nothing earth-shattering, which isn't surprising considering there was no agenda or brief, but it gave me comfort to have *something*. I walked through the lobby and rode the elevator to the ballroom on the top floor. I stepped out of the elevator into a sea of confused faces. People were milling about, grabbing coffee, and then standing in small groups. As I circulated through the crowd huddled in the foyer outside the ballroom, I noticed a couple of common themes in all the conversations.

“Do you know why we're here?”

“My boss told me to come.”

“I'm not creative.”

“They aren't going to listen to us anyway.”

“I hope they let us out early.”

The large wooden doors of the ballroom swung open, and the brainstorm organizing committee invited everyone into the large, dimly lit room. Inside the seats were arranged in a series of semicircles around a single chair, also known as the International Formation of Mandatory Creativity. As people took their seats, a company executive walked to the center of the semicircle and welcomed the assembled crowd. He proudly stated that the group represented every department within the company, from marketing to finance to legal to production. The expectation of this diverse group, and



their broad knowledge of the company, was to brainstorm the future of their product lineup. With the goal of the meeting finally clear, the executive introduced a professional facilitator. She took the stage to some tired 70s rock anthem, and started her routine.

“Everyone, get up. Come on, I need you to stand up and get that blood flowing. Let’s do some dancing. Don’t be embarrassed. This is a safe space.”

The attendees scanned the semicircle to see if their supervisor was watching them, and then danced just enough to avoid a negative comment at a future performance review. Just like that, this disaster was off and running. The next few hours were filled with hackneyed group brainstorm exercises, including, “We’re going to cross the features of some animals with a product to see what new ideas we get.” My small group

was assigned a giraffe. After much discussion and some fighting, we arrived at a product with a really long neck for hard-to-reach places. It was embarrassing to present back to the larger group in the moment, and even more so to write about it now. But we weren't alone. Every group struggled. With no preparation time and very little guidance, attendees reverted to familiar roles. The legal folks killed ideas that didn't strictly follow every guideline. Production teams killed ideas that didn't fit on existing machines. Finance teams killed ideas that sounded too expensive. Marketing teams killed ideas that didn't sound like big news. It was a conceptual blood bath.

I took some cleansing breaths and promised myself that I'd never sit in another poorly run brainstorm.

At the end of the day, factions within the company were at each other's throats. People were frustrated and tired. The facilitator was doing her best to put on a brave face, but her assistant looked panicked. The few ideas that made it through the blood bath were uninspired. Tens of thousands of dollars and several hundred hours of effort were wasted with nothing to show for it. The few ideas that were even remotely interesting were filed away, likely never to be examined any further. It really

was the Brainstorm from Hell. As I left the hotel and walked back across the parking lot to my car, I took some cleansing breaths and promised myself that I'd never sit in another poorly run brainstorm.

The post mortem

I sat in my car for over an hour, capturing as much as I could about the meeting, including a rough timeline, observations, questions, and overheard comments. Anything that would help me perform a post mortem and learn from the mistakes of the day. I wanted to get it all down on paper while the experience was fresh in my mind.

Where did it all go wrong?

It was very clear. The answer was EVERYWHERE!

Nothing about this entire thing was right.

The reason to host it. Misguided.

The goal of the meeting. Off-target.

The structure of the meeting. Embarrassing.

The location of the meeting. Soul-sucking.

The attendees. Ill-prepared.

It was a nearly perfect representation of a broken process. But why? How could everything have been this bad? There must have been signs from the start, so how did they get overlooked or ignored? How did nobody raise their hand and voice any concerns?

Because people had faith in the process. It was allowed to happen because people had misplaced faith that a proven process would overcome any obstacles placed in its path, as if it were some magic spell. Say the word “brainstorm” and everything will be alright.

It reminds me of a scene in *The Office (US)*, where Michael and Dwight are driving to a meeting, and the GPS says *Turn right*. Michael instinctively turns right. Dwight tries to stop him by pointing out that the GPS actually wants him to bear right... not turn right. Clearly, there’s a lake if they turn directly right. It can’t mean turn right. As they careen into the lake, Michael shouts, “The machine knows what it’s doing.”

The machine knows what it’s doing... indeed. But the machine clearly doesn’t know. Or at least the people operating the machine don’t know. So, why do teams keep coming back to brainstorms when they’ve failed? Because it’s the only tool most people have in their basket. It’s a testament to Alex Osborn and his branding prowess that brainstorming became the default method of generating cool ideas at work.

The birth of brainstorming

Osborn first describes the process in his 1942 book *How To Think Up*. He explains how brainstorming was inspired

by military commando teams, who focus the effort of their team on a single objective and stop at nothing to accomplish it. Teams of 5-12 people attack a creative or business challenge “using the *brain* to *storm* a creative problem, and to do so in *commando* fashion, with each stormer audaciously attacking the same objective.” They would generate as many ideas as possible, and refrain from judging anything shared with the group, no matter how outlandish it seemed. Participants would look for places to add to an idea or combine two ideas in a 1+1=3 mentality.

In his book, Osborn laid out the original blueprint for group idea generation. His brainstorming guidelines created the ideal conditions for creative thinking. At least on paper.

The process, he argued, worked best when the challenge was simple, specific, and easy to discuss without needing a notebook. Osborn offered a simple test: if you needed a pencil and paper to understand or explain, it was too complex for a brainstorm. He even provided a real-world example, where a client wanted ideas for a product name, packaging, and launch plan all in one session. The brainstorm bounced around without much success or momentum, and Osborn attributed their struggles to a lack of focus.

Preparation mattered, too. Osborn believed that participants should be briefed ahead of time, allowing

their subconscious minds sufficient time to start working on the idea. For him, the best ideas often arrived before the meeting even began.

For the structure of the session, Osborn felt a small group of five to twelve people was best. They should be roughly equal in rank, gathered in a casual setting, and led by a skilled facilitator. Not just a timekeeper, but someone trained to manage the energy of the room and guide the session toward valuable outcomes.

Then came the four cardinal rules:

1. No criticism of ideas – to prevent fear from shutting down the flow.
2. Encourage wild ideas – the weirder, the better. You can always reel them in later.
3. Aim for quantity – more ideas meant more raw material to work with.
4. Combine and improve ideas – because the magic isn't just in what one person brings, but in what the group builds together.

It's a system built on optimism. A system that believed a room full of people in the right environment could come up with something brilliant.

The illusion we fell for

How did this become the default idea generation process for every business, university, charity, and bake sale in the world? Because the idea succeeded in winning clients. So, everyone copied it.

The idealized version of brainstorming sounds great from the outside. Bringing together a group of your top thinkers and letting them riff on a key business challenge sounds amazing. The energy swirling around the room as idea sparks get tossed around and are nurtured into full-fledged creative infernos.

Then there's all the pageantry. The whiteboards. The sticky notes. The smell of the markers. The absolute chaos as the incessant stream of ideas is scribbled down and stuck on a board. The flurry of activity as those ideas take shape and are grouped together. As one sticky note becomes two. And two becomes four. It's like watching life spring forth in real time. It's amazing.

Then there's the overarching spirit of possibility and anticipation. The entire group sits on the edge of their seat, with their ears perked up. Or at least they should be. As people bandy ideas about the room, there's a chance that any utterance could become the next industry-redefining idea.

Who wouldn't want to be a part of that? It sounds absolutely intoxicating. I want to be there right now

instead of writing this page. I'm sure you'd rather be there than read it. This all sounds so great, but what happened?

Welcome to the real world

In Osborn's idealized version, a brainstorm group gathers in a well-lit and spacious room to generate ideas about a single well-defined challenge or opportunity. Since the subject of the meeting is so new and exciting, the team is naturally energized and engaged. They generate an enormous volume of great ideas until sticky notes cover the walls. The team breaks for a delicious and healthy lunch, and then begins the process of building and developing their ideas. As time winds down, the team clusters sticky notes together in several brilliant big ideas. The leader of the meeting gathers the ideas together and provides everyone with a clear understanding of the next steps. Meeting notes are sent out in a timely manner, and concrete results are carried out with reasonable expedience. It sounds like an amazingly efficient and productive process. Something anyone would love to experience. It's also, at least in my experience, a complete and total myth.

More likely than not, your brainstorming experience has been more similar to this. It starts with the chime of

an incoming email. You receive a meeting invitation to participate in a brainstorm for something. Your name came up in a conversation about some topic because you were a) keenly interested in it or b) totally unaware of its existence. The invitation provides minimal details, except for a brief message from the organizer, along with the time, date, and location. Beyond the cursory details, there's nothing to help you prepare or do any pre-thinking. You arrive at the designated time and place, unsure of what is happening or the desired outcome. A large number of other people also attend (at least eight, but up to 20). The organizer hands out a selection of creativity toys, such as Silly Putty or a Slinky, and presents you with a complex problem that needs to be solved. There's an awkward silence at first. People are hesitant to offer solutions, but eventually the floodgates open and ideas start flowing. Some are new, but many are not. The organizer frantically attempts to write everything down on sticky notes or big easel pads, but for some reason, the markers aren't working. The markers NEVER work. While someone searches for markers, the group gets sidetracked by idle chatter about the latest TV show or office politics. Before long, a functional set of markers arrives, and the walls are covered with suggestions. At the end of the meeting, people discuss how great it was and how many ideas there were, but there's no discussion of next steps. The

organizer collects the ideas and takes them triumphantly back to their office. The collected notes are placed in a prominent place - the corner of the desk, on a pile of urgent work, etc. After a few days, they move to a less prominent place. Over the course of days and weeks, they shift several more times until they find a permanent home in the corner or under a pile of more urgent work. They're forgotten, and nothing happens. Then, a few months later, you receive an invitation for a new brainstorming session with a similar goal.

It's one thing to describe the gap between the myth and the reality. It's another to see how organizations institutionalize that gap. The Green Box was a case study in exactly that.

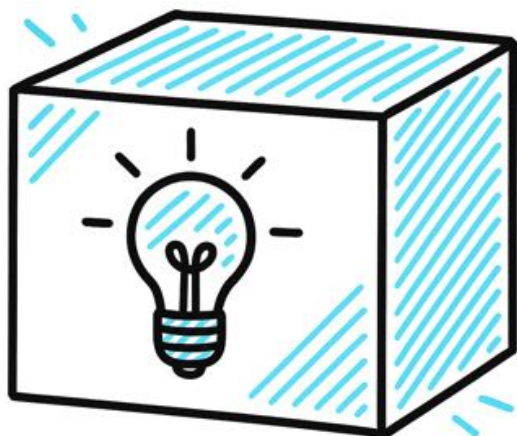
Complexity kills: The Green Box case study

I'm not sure why, but most corporate innovation processes are incredibly complex. Whether you're talking about a 200-page innovation toolkit that nobody reads or an *agile* innovation process that is anything but agile, they all seem like bloated, uninspired messes.

Let's talk about The Green Box.

Most likely born in a boardroom or somewhere close, it was the unholy child of innovation and bureaucracy. On paper, it sounded like a great idea. It was a company-wide innovation challenge. Each month, the company would announce a theme. Anyone with an idea that fit the theme was invited to submit it. The goal was simple. Flatten the hierarchy. Crowdsource genius. On paper, it had that glossy sheen of democratized innovation. When the email arrived in my inbox, I eagerly jumped on it.

I filled out the form and a week later, an actual cardboard box showed up at my desk. Inside: Silly Putty, a couple of fidget toys, a branded water bottle, and a spiral-bound innovation framework. The instructions explained how to submit your first-round idea. Step by step. Framework by framework. Already, it felt like less of an invitation and more of an obstacle course.



If an idea survived the first round, the submitting team earned the privilege of moving on to round two, where they were paired with an executive sponsor, received some branded shirts for a company photo opportunity, and received a small financial reward. Make it to round three, and the team had the honor of presenting to a panel of senior leaders. If they liked it, the next step was to assemble a small team to pilot the concept... in addition to doing your regular job.

On the glossy poster in the break room, it sounded inspiring. In practice, it was exhausting. So many steps. So many checkpoints. Executive feedback at every corner. By the time you'd navigated the gauntlet, any pulse of originality had been flattened by the weight of the process itself. The Green Box didn't feel like a launchpad. It felt like a compliance exercise with branded swag.

That's the thing about complexity: it kills momentum. What started as a great opportunity to unlock ideas across the company ended up being corporate innovation theater. A shiny box of toys, a stack of forms, and bureaucracy masquerading as creativity. This is the problem with modern brainstorming. It's designed to look good. To feel creative. To capture the imagination. Instead of capturing the ideas.

Chapter 2: The Straight-line of Creativity

The process is broken.

As I sat at my desk, it was an easy thing to say.

Shocking to think, but easy to say. I didn't see myself as some novel genius who saw something everyone else was missing. Ignoring, maybe, but not missing. The first place I turned was to the internet (naturally). If a solution existed, there would be someone on Google trying to tell me about it, or more likely, sell it to me. Google was full of answers, but everything I found was essentially Osborn's process repackaged. They had a pretty new name. A shiny process chart and a few more or fewer steps, but they were essentially the exact same process

that would result in the exact same challenges. Then I found something.

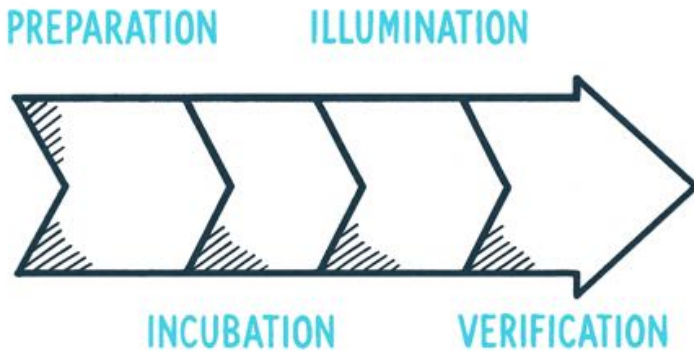
The science was always there

The answer wasn't in professional facilitators or shiny processes. It was somewhere else. It wasn't on Google at all (sort of). I found what I was looking for on Google Scholar. The answers were there all along.

While our early ancestors may have credited their ability to create to the Roman Muses, Divine Intervention, or good, old-fashioned insanity, a dedicated and brilliant collection of psychologists and cognitive scientists have dedicated their lives to studying how we think and where ideas come from. In 1910, John Dewey, a psychologist and educational reformer, took issue with the challenges facing teachers and students.

Oddly enough, he didn't focus on overcrowding or limited resources; he wanted to address the rampant lack of problem-solving skills. In his book, "How We Think", he outlined the beginnings of a four-step problem-solving model - defining the problem, suggesting potential solutions, exploring solutions, and testing their validity.

Over the next few decades, scientists conducted increasingly extensive research into the creative process. In 1926, Graham Wallas outlined the four stages of creativity in his book "The Art of Thought," as follows:



Preparation - In the preparation phase, the thinker recognizes a problem and lays the foundation by applying their existing knowledge to analyzing it.

Incubation - In the incubation phase, the problem is shifted to the subconscious brain to generate possible solutions, evaluate them, and reject the unsatisfactory solutions.

Illumination - The illumination phase is the “Eureka!” moment when a potentially workable solution pops into the thinker’s head. This moment often feels like it comes out of the blue, due to a lack of recognition for the work done by the subconscious mind.

Verification - The final phase is verification, where the thinker evaluates the idea to see if it passes all the relevant tests.

This model, in some form, has become the basis for almost every single visualization of the creative process.

And quite frankly, it pretty much sums it up. Except for one small thing.

Creativity isn't a linear process.

Creating order from chaos

The human brain has evolved to create order out of chaos. In a complex world filled with an overwhelming amount of stimuli, our early ancestors needed to filter the important from the unimportant. From an evolutionary perspective, it makes sense, right? We needed to know which things we could eat, and which things could eat us. So it's understandable why we're such big fans of processes, recipes, playbooks, outlines, and the like. We love to have a guide that shows us the steps to get from here to there, so we know what we need to do, what we can ignore, and when we're done.

American industrialist Henry Ford knew a thing or two about creating order from chaos. It was the his development production line that took cars from the world of custom-built coaches to a modern necessity. He looked at his factory and the people in it, and devised a process that started with nothing and ended with a car. When speaking about his conveyor-driven assembly lines, he cited three main principles behind their

efficiency and success. He said, “The principles of assembly are these:

(1) Place the tools and the men in the sequence of the operation so that each component part shall travel the least possible distance while in the process of finishing.

(2) Use work slides or some other form of carrier so that when a worker completes his operation, he drops the part always in the same place – which must always be the most convenient place to his hand – and if possible, have gravity carry the part to the next workman for his operation.

(3) Use sliding assembling lines by which the parts to be assembled are delivered at convenient distances.”

In hindsight, it seems logical, but at the time, it was a revolutionary concept. And it gave Ford a competitive advantage that put the company on the path of becoming one of the largest in the world.

This straight-line approach wasn’t just prevalent in the manufacturing world. We’ve already discussed Wallas’ model of creativity. Much like Ford’s approach to building cars, Wallas (and almost everyone since) envisioned building ideas in the same linear process. There’s only one problem.

The impact of a linear approach on creativity

So, what's the downside of defining creativity as a linear process? In his fantastic book, "Hey Whipple, Squeeze This!," legendary advertising writer and creative director, Luke Sullivan, describes creativity like "... washing a pig. It's messy, it has no rules; no clear beginning, middle, or end; it's kind of a pain in the ass, and when you're done, you're not sure if the pig is clean or why you were washing it in the first place."

Creativity and innovation are rarely (if ever) a linear process. By depicting it as a linear process with established stages, you end up overemphasizing the outcome. A linear process depends on a very definite beginning and a definite conclusion. You need to know where you're starting from, and you need to know when you've reached the end of the process. In Ford's case, you had a car, which is an easily recognizable conclusion. But where does an idea end? How do you know when you're finished thinking?

The creative process is non-linear. It can be iterative or even a series of concurrent processes. But because the human brain wants to categorize something as the end, we end up artificially constraining a messy process into a line. And that line ends in one of two potential outcomes

- success or failure. Either you came up with an amazing idea, or you didn't. Regardless of which conclusion we reach, the finality of the outcome influences our view of the idea and ourselves going forward.

The repercussions of failure

The obvious danger of placing such heavy emphasis on the conclusion of a project is a question that every person has asked themselves countless times: “What happens if I fail?” Of course, no one begins a project or institutes a process with the expectation of failure. In fact, quite the opposite. As management Professor Katherine Klein and organizational psychologist and researcher Joann Sorra point out in “The Challenge of Innovation Implementation” (1996), organizations expect a process to lead to some sort of increase in organizational productivity or performance.

This is a natural expectation. If they're doing the work to implement it, they have the right to expect some sort of improvement, no matter how incremental. But it's the automatic anticipation of success that makes a perceived failure all the more damaging. Even Klein and Sorra felt compelled to assign blame for the failure of an innovation. “An organization's failure to achieve the intended benefits of an innovation it has adopted may

thus reflect either a failure of implementation or a failure of the innovation itself.”

The combination of high expectations and an uncertain return can hamstring an innovation effort before it even has a chance to get up and running. People are naturally hesitant to lend their name and reputation to anything outside the norm due to the fear of failure. As the old business saying goes, “Nobody gets fired for hiring IBM.” The thinking is that they’re a recognized and trusted name. If you hire them and they fail, you have some additional protection versus going with an unknown and failing.

In “Bias Against Creativity,” Mueller, Melwani, and Goncalo (2012) discussed the impact that bias can have on people. “When endorsing a novel idea, people can experience failure, perceptions of risk, social rejection when expressing the idea to others, and uncertainty about when their idea will reach completion.” As a result, they said, a fear of failure impairs the ability to recognize creativity when it’s needed the most.

Building a climate of innovation in your organization requires that other competing, and especially conflicting, value preferences take a back seat.

At an organizational level, a fear of failure can have far-reaching implications and long-lasting effects on a company's future. In “Keeping Innovation Alive After the Consultants Leave,” Charles Prather (2000) says,

“Building a climate of innovation in your organization requires that other competing, and especially conflicting, value preferences take a back seat. For example, risk-taking is one of the most important dimensions of the climate for innovation; yet, many organizations send mixed messages, such as ‘take risks but don’t fail.’ If every single R&D initiative succeeded brilliantly, you can bet the advances were baby steps forward, and more adaptive than innovative.”

But the risk of failure isn’t the only risk.

Oh No! We succeeded.

Success can be just as dangerous as failure. Maybe more so. Because at least with failure, you’re forced to re-examine what went wrong. Success? That’s seductive. It tricks you into thinking the work is done. Box checked. Victory lap. And once you start believing you’ve cracked the code, the drive to keep pushing evaporates.

Joachim Stempfle calls this out in “Overcoming Organizational Fixation: Creating and Sustaining an Innovation Culture.” (2011) Success reinforces itself. Proven models, tried-and-true playbooks, frameworks that worked last time, they all get locked in. People lean on them because they feel safe and efficient. And for a while, they are. Until they aren’t.

The trap is that the more these patterns work, the more ingrained they become. High-status leaders, those who have climbed the ladder by mastering the old system, are the least likely to abandon it. Why would they? Their careers, reputations, and sense of competence are tied to maintaining the status quo. Asking them to toss it aside for something unproven feels like asking them to set fire to their own résumé.

That's why success can be a prison. It cements the very habits that make it harder to do anything truly new.

We're never going to make it

The compulsion for a linear process is so strong that even when we're making progress (but not direct, linear progress), there's a sense of unease. For example, during a brief break in a planning session, I was surveying a wall covered side to side with sticky notes. Things were coming together. There were some good individual nuggets, and I could see a path to our ultimate goal. But, to be honest, it looked like a chaotic mess.

My boss appeared in my peripheral vision and surveyed the board with me. After a couple of beats, he turned to me and said, "How do you feel like things are going?" It's a terrible question. One loaded with massive amounts of doubt and concern.



To be fair, the morning session zigged and zagged. There were fast starts and perceived setbacks. There were moments when someone asked a devastating question and a bunch of sticky notes were pulled back off the wall. From the outside, I could understand how things might have felt a little chaotic. But we were always moving forward. Always improving.

I took a deep breath and said, “You know that moment in the Olympics, when a gymnast is running full speed at the vault? They hit the springboard, ricochet into the air, and begin an impossible set of spins and twists? And for a moment, you think to yourself, ‘They’re never going to make it.’ That’s where we are. We’re mid-spin. Now, we just need to stick the landing.”

This will come as no surprise to anyone who knows me or viewed my bio photo in the back of the book, but I’m no gymnast. But from what I’ve read, the trick to sticking

the landing is to get your head around, spot your landing zone, and use the countless hours of practice and repetition to align your body for touchdown.

Our afternoon session did exactly the same thing. We got our collective head around and focused on the goal of our meeting, brought the ideas into alignment and stuck the landing. But in the early stages, because we didn't follow a straight line, it didn't feel like progress.

A better way to view creativity

So if creativity isn't a straight line, what should the model look like? People always want a clean answer. More structure? Less? A step-by-step guide? A wide-open sandbox?

Here's the uncomfortable truth: it needs to sit somewhere in the middle. Too much structure, and you suffocate the work. Too much freedom, and you end up wandering around in the creative wilds. The best systems give you just enough scaffolding to climb without telling you exactly where to put your hands.

But most importantly, the system needs to allow for the mess. Creativity doesn't move in one direction. It loops. It doubles back. It stalls, then jumps ahead. It's filled with fits and starts. Dead ends. Left turns. If you've ever tried to create anything, you know this firsthand. There's a

reason pencils have erasers, right? You're going to make mistakes, and that needs to be part of the process... not a hindrance to success. You don't "finish" a problem and move on. You revisit it. You reframe it. You scrap half the work and start over, only to realize the scraps were the best part. That's iteration.

One more thing: the process must feed the creativity and confidence of the people using it. If it doesn't build confidence, it dies. Every small win reinforces the belief that you can do it again. And that belief is the only thing that keeps people going when the next obstacle appears.

So no, the answer isn't a straight line. It's not a commando raid as Alex Osborn suggested. It's a cycle. A loop. A system with enough bones to stand up and enough flex to bend when the real world hits.

Part II: The Rebuild

*“All great deeds and all great thoughts
have a ridiculous beginning.”*

Albert Camus

Chapter 3: The Clover Model of Creativity

Everywhere I looked, every model was a line. From Wallas' Model to early design thinking models, everything portrayed creativity as a process that started in one place and proceeded to another place. It wasn't accurate, and it was (to say the least) problematic, because it didn't match how creativity actually worked.

I can't claim that I was the first person to notice this. Psychologists have been poking holes in these neat diagrams for decades. John Dewey was one of the first to notice that problem solving wasn't a matter of steps, but of messy, iterative inquiry. Graham Wallas tried to box creativity into four stages – preparation, incubation, illumination,

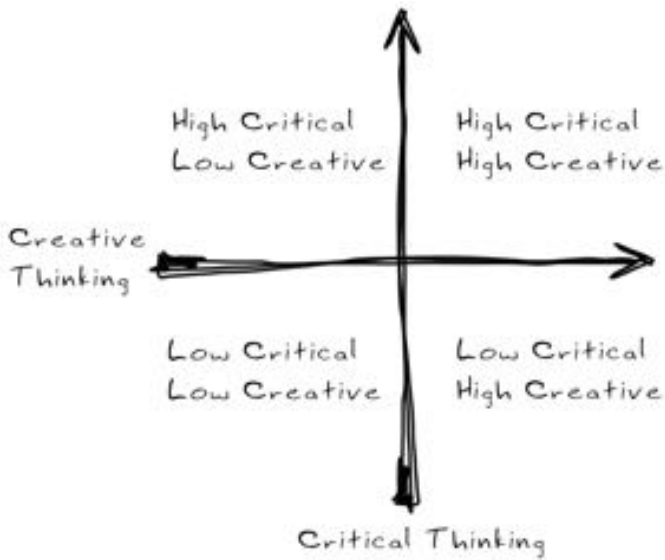
verification – but later researchers found that those stages don't happen one after another. They overlap. They loop. They repeat. Creativity is recursive.

The creative-critical mix

Here's the thing. To accurately capture the creative process, you can't just focus on creative thinking. For every ebb, there needs to be a flow. For every divergent/creative session, there needs to be a convergent/critical thinking session. You need a process that helps generate ideas and narrow them down to the right ones.

A lot of people view creative and critical thinking as opposing forces, but they aren't. This isn't about expansion and contraction. They're complementary forces. First, you use creative thinking to generate ideas. Then use critical thinking to select the strongest ideas. And then you use creative thinking to build on the strongest ideas. It's a stair step of creativity and critical thinking. And that got me thinking.

In "Think Unbound: Changing the Way People View and Teach Creativity in the Work Environment" (2015), I outlined a different way to look at creativity and critical thinking. If you treated them as complementary forces, you could graph it out like this. Creative thinking on the



X-axis. Critical thinking on the Y-axis. This gives you four distinct territories of thinking:

- High Critical Thinking - Low Creative Thinking
- High Critical Thinking - High Creative Thinking
- Low Critical Thinking - Low Creative Thinking
- Low Critical Thinking - High Creative Thinking

By having all four areas meet in a central point, it creates a dynamic space where you can drift from quadrant to quadrant in a natural (and even organic) way. Without the enforced linear process, you can move from a highly creative space to a highly critical space and back, without feeling like there was some sort of setback.

As I outlined in my thesis, this view of creativity gives you a unique shape to map the creative process against: a clover. When you lay the traditional phases of the

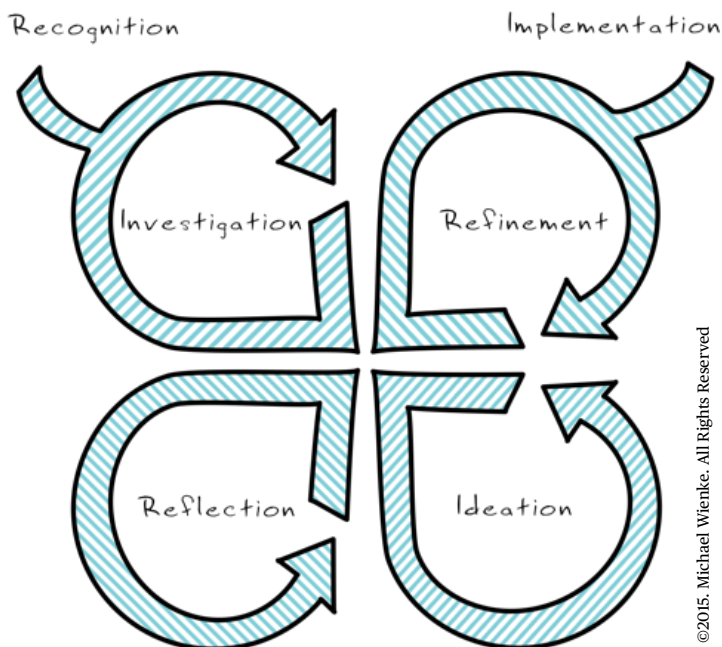
creative process into this framework, you end up with something that looks like the illustration on the next page.

Phase 1: Recognition & Investigation

Every creative act begins with noticing. Recognition isn't glamorous, but it's the moment when someone spots a crack in the system, a gap between what is and what could be. This is the quadrant of high critical thinking and low creativity. It's less about "what wild idea can we dream up?" and more about "what's broken, and why?"

Psychologists call this problem construction, and it's one of the strongest predictors of creative success. Teams that take time to define and investigate the problem space consistently produce better, more original solutions than those who rush to Ideation. Yet in most organizations, recognition gets shortchanged. We're so eager to get to the sticky notes and the big ideas that we skip the messy business of interrogating reality.

Here, critical thinking is the tool of choice. You dig into data, analyze patterns, scan the competitive landscape, and question assumptions. It's about building a map of



the territory before deciding which path to take. Done well, this stage doesn't slow creativity down. It sets it up. Because the sharper your understanding of the problem, the more powerful your eventual solutions can be.

Phase 2: Ideation

This is the loop that most people think is creativity. The free-thinking free-for-all. The wall of neon sticky notes feels productive even if nothing survives the recycling bin. In The Clover Model of Creativity, Ideation

sits in the quadrant of high creativity and low critical thinking. That second part is important. At this stage, judgment is the enemy.

When you're generating possibilities, you need freedom to stretch past the obvious. Research on traditional brainstorming has shown for decades that evaluation apprehension – the fear of looking stupid – is one of the fastest ways to kill originality. People shut down not because they don't have ideas, but because they're already censoring themselves. That's why in this model, Ideation is about deliberately suspending the critic in your head.

The point isn't volume for its own sake. More ideas don't magically equal better ones. The point is range. Exploring enough of the possibility space that you find surprising connections, odd angles, the things you wouldn't have stumbled onto if you'd been polite, safe, or efficient.

Good Ideation feels playful. It's messy, sometimes silly, and often uncomfortable. And that's the whole point. This is where you let imagination roam without worrying yet if the idea could ever survive outside the room.

Phase 3: Reflection

Sometimes the best thing you can do for an idea is nothing at all. Not push. Not analyze. Just let it sit. Reflection is The Clover Model of Creativity's quiet space, the place where you step out of the noise of creative thinking and the grind of analysis. It doesn't look impressive. It might be walking the dog, zoning out in the shower, or staring into space while your coffee goes cold. From the outside, it looks like you've checked out. But inside, your brain is still working, just on its own terms.

But beneath the surface, your subconscious is busy. Psychologists call this incubation. It's the reason breakthroughs show up in the quiet moments before you fall asleep or while you're driving home. By stepping away, you let the clutter of competing thoughts settle. The fragments from Investigation and the sparks from Ideation can finally start connecting without the pressure of "performing creativity" on demand.

The danger in modern work is that we skip this stage. We fill every gap with meetings, emails, notifications, and noise. No empty space, no Reflection. And when there's no Reflection, ideas stay half-baked.

The Clover Model of Creativity validates this downtime. It reframes it as part of the process. Reflection isn't idleness. It's where the brain does its deepest integration work. Creativity needs silence as much as it needs sparks.

Phase 4: Refinement & Implementation

Ideas are easy. Making them real is the hard part. That's what this loop is about. The point where creativity finally meets reality. Refinement and Implementation sit in the high-creative, high-critical space, the time and place where imagination and judgment have to work together. It's where you stop sketching and start shaping, taking something fragile and giving it enough structure to survive outside the room.

In practice, this means stress-testing ideas against reality. Can it work? Will it work? What needs to change for it to stand on its own? It's the stage where half-baked notions turn into prototypes, drafts, pitches, or first attempts. And because The Clover Model of Creativity isn't linear, this phase doesn't mark the "end." Implementation often sends you back around the loop – to re-investigate a blind spot, generate a new variation, or pause for Reflection when things don't quite click.

This loop also answers one of the biggest criticisms of creativity: that it's all talk and no follow-through. Refinement and Implementation prove otherwise. They remind us that creativity isn't just the spark of Ideation.

It's the sweat of turning that spark into something people can see, use, or feel.

The central stem

Just like all four leaves of an actual clover, all four loops connect at the center. That hub is the pivot point – the place where every path crosses. It's not a “stage” in itself, but a checkpoint. Every time you hit the center, you get to ask a deceptively simple question: “Are we ready to move forward?”

If the answer is yes, you keep going. If the answer is no, you don't treat it as failure. You loop back. Maybe you need another round of Refinement. Maybe you return to Investigation to sharpen the problem. Maybe you pause for Reflection. The point is, the center gives you freedom. Movement isn't linear, and it isn't permanent. It's responsive.

This is what makes this model different from every other model I've seen. In a funnel or a diamond, backtracking feels like breaking the rules. In this model, it's the rule. The hub reframes what would normally look like wasted effort into natural momentum. You're not “starting over.” You're circling back, layering, adapting. That's progress.

The lens that changes everything

This model isn't just another framework to hang on a wall. It's a lens. Once you see creativity this way, it's hard to unsee it. The looping, the circling back, the messy connections feel natural because they match the real-world experience of making things. And that's the point. It's time to stop pretending creativity is a neat, linear, and efficient process.

Take a step back and look at the systems and methods we've been using to generate ideas. They don't work because they don't match what's actually happening. Take brainstorming. Osborn's four rules were supposed to free us. Suspend judgment, chase quantity, combine and build, welcome the wild. Sounds fine on paper. But through this model's lens, you start to see the cracks. Brainstorming demands you stay in one loop (Ideation) while ignoring the rest. It tries to lock you in a room and pretend that Investigation, Reflection, and Refinement don't exist. No wonder it fails.

And yet, entire industries, entire careers, have been built on the ritual of gathering people in a room and calling it innovation. We keep repeating the same ceremony, even when the outcomes tell us it doesn't work. The Clover Model of Creativity makes it obvious: brainstorming isn't just outdated, it's fundamentally

mismatched to how creativity actually operates. Now it's time to dive into why.

Before we go on, I want to give you a chance to choose your own path forward.

- If you're interested in the science behind what works, what doesn't and why, turn to the next page.
- If you want to skip the science and read about a creative process built to thrive in the mess, skip to page 87.

Chapter 4: Why Brainstorms Fail

So, creativity is a living, messy loop. It's a mix of convergent and divergent thinking. It's ever changing. Now let's turn that lens back on the method that refuses to die: brainstorming.

Osborn's big idea was that if you just got people in a room and told them to go wild, magic would happen. For a while, it looked like progress. But here's the uncomfortable truth: brainstorming was never built to handle the full weight of creativity. It locks you into one mode – generate, generate, generate – while ignoring everything else ideas actually need to survive.

The irony? Researchers have been studying it for decades, and the evidence is clear. Scores of brilliant behavioral scientist, psychologists, organizational behaviorists and cognitive specialists have looked at brainstorming and innovation from every angle. And their research tells a compelling and terrifying story.

So, let's dive in.

You hate creativity, even if you think you don't

Yeah, I'm as shocked as you are. If that's how you feel, why are you even here?

Some things are just easy to love. Puppies. The first warm day in spring. A gooey cinnamon roll that's just come out of the oven. Everyone says they love them, and everyone REALLY does love them. And then there are things that everyone says they love, but secretly they don't, like honest feedback. Here's a scene that plays out in millions of homes every weekend.

"Does this outfit look ok?"

"Yep."

Honesty is something people think they want until they get it. And creativity is exactly the same. In a study by Mueller, Melwani, and Goncalo titled "The Bias Against Creativity: Why People Desire But Reject Creative Ideas" (2012), they studied why people ask for creative ideas and then reject them. They concluded that creativity increases uncertainty. "The more creative an idea is, the less certain people are it will work."

Early in my career, I worked for an agency with a large carbonated beverage client. We were responsible for the retail promotions for their flagship brand. Our job was to get shoppers to stock up for big soft drink occasions

throughout the year - the holiday season, sports championships, summer, etc. The brief was a simple one. Come up with ideas, with an explicit request for “out of the box” thinking.

“Are you sure?” we asked.

“Yes.”

Well, we weren’t going to miss our opportunity. We racked our brains for a new and compelling way to sell soft drinks to stay-at-home moms for the Christmas season. At the presentation, we followed their instructions. We presented once-in-a-lifetime trips to the North Pole. We pitched a life-sized snow globe pulled across the US by semi trucks. We showed the clients idea after idea after idea.

During the meeting, the clients shifted nervously in their chairs and looked at each other for reassurance. Big ideas require big budgets, and they can be hard to sell up the chain of command. At the end of the meeting, a client I knew well lingered a bit longer than the rest. I pulled him aside for some honest feedback. He looked me in the eye and said, “This company has been around for almost 150 years. People bought our product before I got here. They’ll buy our product after I’m gone. My job, while I’m here, is to not screw anything up.”

In his heart, he understood that innovation was a business necessity and without it, their company would face increasingly difficult obstacles, including stronger

competition and shifting consumer tastes. However, when faced with a creative concept they requested, the clients found ways to avoid selecting them, because they didn't want to deal with the risk. Basically, novel ideas face evaluation challenges for the very reason they're appealing, because they're unknown.

The more creative an idea is, the less certain people are it will work.

There are ~~no~~ bad ideas

People naturally crave validation. They want to share ideas that other people like. Thoughts that earn approving nods, and a chorus of “yes, ANDS.” So, we filter through our thoughts, share the ones with the best shot at acceptance, and quietly file the outlandish ones. It doesn't matter that one of the core tenets of brainstorming is that there's no such thing as a bad idea. We all secretly know there are, and we don't want to be the person to share one. There's nothing quite as humiliating as sharing an idea with the group and having them meet your thought with blank stares. Or even worse, the dreaded, “I want to make sure we capture that. I'll just put it over here in the parking lot for later discussion.”

The reality is that you'll never come up with anything truly amazing if you aren't willing to have some bad ideas. But that's easier said than done. In their paper "Evaluation Apprehension: Why the Good Stuff Stays in Your Head," Camacho and Paulus (1995) outlined that the fear of being judged leads people to withhold their most unconventional ideas. This is doubly true in groups with more senior team members. People fear that a bad idea will reflect poorly on them, so they play it safe and only share ideas they are highly confident the group will accept and support. The result is less innovation or outlier ideas.

I've only seen superpower-level fearlessness a few times in my career. I remember one particular situation where a young, eager, and extremely fearless creative person shared an idea so "bad" that the entire room burst into laughter. Everyone thought he was kidding. He bravely faced the group as the laughter wound down to chuckles and finally snickers. Once it subsided, he said, "No... seriously... think about it." You could feel a shift in the room. People started shooting glances at each other. There was something there, and you could sense the tide of the room turning. Ultimately, a version of the idea he pitched was presented to the client. From laughing stock to showpiece, but only because he was brave enough to share it. And confident enough to stand alone behind it. That's a superpower you need in your corner.

Being fearless in a brainstorm is a superpower - one I wish I had.

The illusion of productivity

There's no doubt the energy of a brainstorm is intoxicating. You get caught up in the excitement. Swept away by the moment. The 45 or 60 minutes you were together flew by. The group was IN THE ZONE. Ideas were flying left and right. People are buzzing as you leave the room. You are confident that you hold an endless trove of pure brilliance in your hands. Then there's the next morning, you unroll the flip chart or look at the photos, and the excitement evaporates. Yesterday's brilliance is today's chicken scratch. Does that say floof?

The reality is that large groups are never as productive as they feel. And certainly not as productive as they could be. In "Productivity Loss in Brainstorming," Diehl and Stoebe (1987) look at why sessions, even high-energy sessions, fall short. They found that despite the excitement, energy, and post-meeting congratulations, these sessions actually under-delivered. Why? Because of the Illusion of Productivity. In large groups, there's a tendency among people to look around the group and gauge their performance against the rest of the group. If



everyone threw out a couple of ideas, and you did too, then subconsciously, you've done your part. This social mirroring means that once people feel they've contributed at least as much as the average, they ease off. Over time, the entire group's output can dwindle as everyone unconsciously calibrates to a "good enough" level. Yet, because everyone contributed, they leave thinking the session was productive. "Look at all these flipchart pages we filled!" It's an illusion of productivity. The group might have settled into mediocrity without realizing it.

The loudest voice wins

Brainstorms are an extrovert's dream, and an introvert's nightmare. In a loud, frenetic environment where your ideas must be heard. There's going to be one dominant voice. Whether it's ego, expertise, or just a love of their own voice, the loudest voice in the room is going to make sure you hear their ideas. Good. Bad. Utterly forgettable. They're going to talk over, through, and around anyone else who wants to participate. In "Social Influence Process in Group Brainstorming," Paulus and Dzindolet (1993) found that one or two dominant individuals in a brainstorm will take over the entire thing. Not only will they influence the direction of both discussion and decision-making, they will actively suppress the contributions of other attendees, regardless of the quality of their ideas.

I mentioned earlier in Chapter One about an experience I had with an agency team member. We had the opportunity to pitch a client who was a key player in an area that was one of their personal passions. We intentionally didn't invite them to the brainstorm, because we wanted to start from scratch. I can still remember the sight of their slightly agitated/mostly relieved face appearing in the doorway. "I found you," they exclaimed, "I had some ideas and I wanted to make sure you heard them." They plopped down in a chair, and from that moment, the brainstorm was effectively over.

I'm not dismissing the possibility that the dominant voice might have good ideas, but they aren't the only ones with good ideas.

We can't all talk at once

Despite my best efforts to wrestle control away from our overly passionate team member, it was hopeless. What began as a carefully constructed session with a targeted result became something else. It turned into a transcription session with nine witnesses. For me, this was always one of the fatal flaws of Osborn's method. As groups get bigger, you end up with more listeners, because you can't all talk at once.

If you have a 12-person group, like Osborn envisioned, you end up with one person talking and the other eleven listening. Now, a skilled facilitator can work around that and make sure they're engaging the group and giving everyone a chance to speak, but there's still only one person talking. Or at least talking effectively.

While this might not sound like the worst outcome, I can't tell you how many times someone had a spark of an idea, but by the time they could actually share it with the group, it was gone. Just like that, a potentially brilliant idea was lost to the ether. Or as the conversation organically drifts from topic to topic, an idea that was

relevant to an earlier topic loses relevance. In “Call It Production Blocking,” Diehl and Stroebe (1987) talk about this exact scenario. The wait between when an idea occurs and when it is said is critical. The longer the delay, the more likely it is that the idea will be forgotten, the person will have second thoughts, or the conversation will drift to a point where the idea is no longer relevant to the discussion. And with that, it’s lost.

Nailed it!

Do you know why the dominant voices speak first? Because it works. In “Fixation on Early Ideas,” Smith (2003) talks about how once the first idea is on the table, it dominates the discussion and limits the exploration of alternatives. There’s a sense of novelty around the first idea. It starts early in the meeting and builds momentum and mass like a snowball rolling down a hill. Whether it’s good or not, it pushes other ideas out of its way. That’s why meeting dominators jump at the chance to go first, because they know it increases the likelihood that their idea will survive. All they need to do is play a little defense.

This may sound ridiculous, but I’ve seen this in real life. I worked for a packaged goods brand, and they came to us with an exciting new secret project. They’d named

it Project Astronaut (not really, but close enough). Our challenge was to come up with the consumer-facing name of this product. The problem? The clients had secretly (and possibly even unintentionally) fallen in love with Astronaut. We spent months, and round after round of brainstorming, trying to come up with something better. Every name fell short.

“Not futuristic enough.”

“It’s missing some of the mystery.”

“I want something with an edge.”

There was never any actionable or specific feedback. Nothing you could argue against. Just feelings. The funny part? They tested the name with focus groups, and it tested terribly. Consumers didn’t love it... or even understand it. But nothing was going to change the clients’ minds. In the end, Astronaut went to market... and blew up on the launch pad.

I’m just here for snacks

As groups grow larger and dominant voices take center stage, another weakness of the brainstorming process emerges. And quite frankly, it’s one of my favorite terms of all time: social loafers. The term was coined (as best I

can tell) in “Social Loafing: A Meta-Analytical Review and Theoretical Integration” by Karua and Williams (1993). They used the term to describe people who are in a brainstorm, but they really aren’t there. They might be quietly doodling, sneaking a peek at their phone, or just doing...nothing. The rest of the group ends up shouldering the weight, and if you recall our discussion on the illusion of productivity, these individuals end up dragging down the average.

It’s hard to say why they aren’t more engaged. Maybe they really are just here for the snacks. Maybe they got busy and didn’t have time to do any thinking beforehand. Or they’re actually updating their LinkedIn profile. Depending on the size of your group, social loafers can be a significant drain on overall creativity. Whether they are overtly not participating or being more subtle, everyone in your group sees them and wonders, “If they don’t care, why should I?”

Devil's advocate

We all know one. They're so excited to be part of the process. They have a lot of thoughts and opinions they can't wait to share with the group. They sit in a prominent place in the room and wait. While the team shares thoughts and other blue sky thinking, they sit quietly and observe. They wait for progress to be made. Once a consensus begins to form, they begin to stir. They don't share ideas or build on someone else's ideas. They squirm or grimace. They might even resort to clearing their throat, as they signal their unease. Finally, they can bite their tongue no longer, and they spring into action with seven simple words, "I'm going to play Devil's Advocate here."

They speak with an air of superiority, as if they're imparting great wisdom upon a room of dullards. They glance around the room to make sure they have the group's attention. As they speak, they proceed to poke holes, pull at threads, and generally stomp all over the idea. They have no solutions; only problems. Lots and lots of problems.

When they've finished their assault, they sit back with a smug, apologetic look and say, "Sorry, I liked the idea. I just felt like someone needed to play Devil's Advocate." But here's the thing, it's not just the idea they killed. In "Improving Decision Making By Means of Dissent,"



Nemeth, Connell, Rogers, and Brown (2001) discovered that a Devil's Advocate actually drags down the whole meeting. Once they start advocating, it becomes more likely that the overall session will devolve into criticism without constructive alternatives, which lowers group morale and slows creative momentum.

Having an opinion isn't difficult. It's a basic human ability. Ask the parent of a toddler, and they'll tell you that kids too unsophisticated to tie their own shoes have devoutly held opinions about all manner of things. So, anyone can sit in a meeting and play the role of a Devil's Advocate. After all, it's much easier to tear something down than it is to build it up. But the problem is that the Devil's Advocate has real weight. As outlined in "Negativity Bias in Evaluation," Baumeister, Bratslavsky,

Finkenauer, and Vohs (2001), people tend to overweight critical feedback. If two people say an idea is good and two people say the idea is bad, the negative votes are given more weight. This is doubly true in collaborative idea sessions.

Letting go of the lie

By this point, you've certainly picked up on a few things. Hopefully, one of them is my strong aversion to the concept of brainstorming. Perhaps calling it a lie is a bit of an overstatement. Osborn's method was certainly a step forward at the time, and it clearly gave his agency a competitive advantage. But that doesn't mean it's still a cutting-edge business process.

Society has changed.

Business has changed.

People have changed.

But the process of brainstorming is still following the same basic flow from 1942.

Part of that can certainly be attributed to the relative effectiveness of the process. More of it can be attributed to the lack of critical thinking of the people implementing it. That ends now, and it ends with you. It's time for all of us to let go of the lie. To see what's possible when we do something different.

Chapter 5: On the Bright Side

Ok. Ok. I get it. That last chapter was pretty negative. But there were a lot of problems to discuss, and in my defense, the title is Alex is Dead, so it shouldn't be a total surprise. But it's time to turn the page... literally.

The good news is that there was good news. Not everything was broken. As the psychologists and cognitive scientists conducted their work, they identified some aspects of various practices and processes that were effective. They examined topics such as group dynamics, group size, and preparation time. They found that all these factors had a significantly positive impact on a group's ability to generate creative solutions to the

problems they faced. So, buckle up, it's time to explore some of the positive influences on creativity.

Before you begin

The easiest place to begin is at the beginning, but in the world of creative thinking, the best place to start is actually before the beginning. In “The Effectiveness of Creativity Training: A Quantitative Review” by Scott & Mumford (2004), they examined the effectiveness of pre-work before a creative thinking session. They looked at both warm-up exercises and cognitive priming, and their findings suggested it helps. That shouldn't come as much of a surprise, though. For example...

QUICK... Give me your five favorite movies. Uh...in a pinch... Alien vs. Predator and Fast and the Furious 2, 3, 5, and 7.

Now, give me a bit of time, and I could come back with a more thoughtful (and certainly less embarrassing) list of films. There's a reason for that. In the moment, your brain locks up, and you quickly say the first thing that comes to mind. Once you've had a bit more time, your brain relaxes a little, and then you remember what your top 5 truly are.

Generating ideas works the same way. They call it priming the pump for a reason. You have to get the sludge and grit worked out before you get anything good. By giving your thinkers an assignment beforehand, it allows them to come to the session with more thoughtful ideas.

This goes beyond priming the pump, though. In “Time For Individual Reflection,” Paulus and Brown (2007) explored the value of solitary thinking time before larger group discussions. They found that providing a bit of time to reflect on your own increased the creative output AND reduced the pressure to conform to groupthink. That extra bit of time gave people the chance to independently evaluate their own ideas and gain the confidence to voice and advocate for them.

By encouraging thinkers with a priming question and giving them time to work through it in their own thoughts, you’re laying a solid foundation for later success.

Different questions.

Different answers.

A lot of creativity, comes down to the inspiration that sparks it. That shouldn’t come as a surprise. Any of a

million different inputs can produce a subtle variation. But when it comes to traditional brainstorming, we give everyone the same brief. Why?

*If you ask everyone the same question,
you will get the same answers.*

In “Diversity of Information Sources,” Paulus and Nijstad (2008) looked at what happens when you expose people to non-traditional or cross-industry insights. Ultimately, they found that exposing people to different stimuli expanded their problem-solving capabilities.

In reality, it shouldn’t be surprising, but for some reason, it is. If you ask everyone the same question, you will get the same answers. I can’t tell you the number of brainstorms I’ve facilitated where I called on someone who had been particularly quiet. The most common response? “I had a bunch of stuff, but everyone else already mentioned them.” Of course they did! Because we asked you to come up with answers to the same questions. The human brain tends to conserve energy (or be lazy, depending on your viewpoint). As a result, it will think of a few top-of-mind solutions, and then move on to something else deemed more important. When a roomful of brains generate top-of-mind solutions to the same question, there’s going to be a lot of overlap.

Different experiences. Different knowledge.

Asking different questions is great, but what's even better? Bringing in people with different experiences. Another finding by Paulus & Nijstad was that assembling a group with diverse experiences broadens the range of knowledge, insights, and concepts that the team can draw upon. The result? The group generates a larger number of more novel solutions to the challenge. In hindsight, that's one of the few things the Brainstorm from Hell did right. They assembled people with experience across the organization in an attempt to tap into their collective knowledge. Now, without some pre-thinking or clarity around expectations, it didn't work how they hoped. But at least they tried.

Who's up for a challenge?

Okay, you have a group of people with diverse life experiences. What's next? Well, you could give them a mind-numbing task that is beneath their capabilities. Alternatively, you could provide them with a task that is both achievable and challenging. Now, get ready to be stunned. When Hunter, Bedell, and Mumford (2007)

investigated this exact question in their study on “Climate for Creativity,” they found that groups were intrinsically more motivated and generated more interesting solutions.

This means it’s up to you, as the designer and/or facilitator of this creative thinking session, to put in some pre-work of your own. Give them a real challenge to solve. You’re not working with a group of children... unless you’re literally working with a group of children, in which case getting wild ideas won’t be a problem. Ask any kid who wants to be a brain surgeon-pirate-astronaut.

The second part of Hunter, Bedell, and Mumford’s findings is that you need to afford the group a bit of flexibility in how they tackle the challenge. It’s common for a facilitator to think, “I’m standing at the front of the room, so I must be the leader.” Not so fast. If you’re spending time trying to lead or shape the discussion, you’re artificially limiting the group’s potential. You need to stand back and let the magic happen. Your primary role is to gently nudge the group if it gets stuck or off track.

Keep it real

One last thing about asking a team to tackle a challenge: you need to keep it real. In “Creative Self-efficacy,” Mathisen and Bronnick (2009) looked at the impact of asking a team to solve a real-world challenge versus a hypothetical challenge. Again, no real surprise, but the real-world scenario challenges performed better. To be clear, they were examining a specific aspect of creativity - the application of knowledge and skills, but it’s safe to expand those findings to encompass the challenge itself.

Why? Because a real-life challenge will spur real-life feelings. If you’ve assembled a diverse team of people, there’s a high likelihood that someone in that room has experienced the problem you’re trying to solve. Or they might have knowledge relevant to why the challenge exists in the first place. Either way, that knowledge serves as a jumping-off point for the group. It gives extra energy to the discussion.

You gotta have faith... faith... faith

Self-efficacy refers to a person’s belief in their ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish a particular

task. So, in the words of George Michael, “You gotta have faith.” Looking back at Mathisen and Bronnick’s work on self-efficacy. One of the interesting elements of their research was the compounding effect of creative success. Essentially, giving people the opportunity to succeed at creative tasks increases their confidence in their future success. The result of this is that when they run into a more challenging project, they’re more likely to persevere.

As you start looking at creative thinking sessions, this has both short-term and long-term implications. In the near term, start the group with a few easy questions or exercises to get the ball rolling. As the team sees the fruits of their efforts, they’ll build momentum that will carry them through potentially more challenging questions later. In the longer term, that momentum will build from session to session. Teams that experience ongoing success will naturally function at a higher level as they continue to win.

I’ll discuss this further later, but I’ve been part of several teams that have reached this stage of creative flow throughout my career. The group had been through successful ideation sessions over the course of months or years. Everyone in the room knew what the team was capable of, so there was a sense of calm regardless of the challenge. It was that team-wide self-efficacy that brought a sense of self-assuredness that no problem was too big.

Another reason those teams experienced success? Repetition. Creativity is like a muscle that needs exercise to stay in shape. Mathisen and Bronnick also outlined the importance of long-term reinforcement. As people participated in more follow-up sessions, they became better, more efficient thinkers.

Big ideas from little groups

In Osborn's original vision of brainstorming, he envisioned teams of 5-12 thinkers tackling an objective. As I mentioned earlier, his original inspiration was World War II-era commando groups. It's no coincidence that U.S. Army squads typically consist of 6-10 soldiers. While that may be an ideal number for physically attacking something, it's not necessarily the case for mentally attacking something. In "Group Creativity: Innovation Through Collaboration," Paulus and Nijstad (2003) found that smaller groups were significantly more effective. In fact, they pegged the ideal team size as three to six members.

According to their work, this team size offered the best balance of participation and increased idea generation, while reducing social loafing. I've never been in the military or had anyone attack me, but I can't imagine there's much social loafing in combat. Although the

stakes are lower in a creative thinking session, it's best to be on your guard.

I need to think

We've already discussed the value of giving thinkers a bit of time to think independently before the creative thinking session begins. Still, there's also equal value in giving them time to pause and reflect throughout the entire process. In "Organizational Climate for Creativity and Innovation," Ekvall (1996) focused on the value of idea time. It's during this process that people can pause to reflect that ideas can mature without premature criticism. So often, people think about creative thinking sessions as this whirlwind of activity and energy that spawns greatness, but sometimes the greatest Eureka! Moments come in those quiet reflections when we have a chance to breathe and let our subconscious mind take over.

In fact, the very first Eureka! Moment comes from just such a pause. If you aren't familiar, here's a quick recap. King Hiero had a trust problem. He'd given a goldsmith a small fortune to make him a crown, and he had a sneaking suspicion that the craftsman kept some of the gold for himself. But it's not like you can hack his crown in half to check.



Enter Archimedes. King Hiero gives him the problem to solve, and initially, he's stumped. To get his creative (or scientific) juices flowing, Archimedes heads home for a bath. As he's sliding in for a soak, he notices something. The more of him that went into the tub, the more water spilled out. And in that moment, he connects the dots: the volume of water displaced equals the volume of the object submerged. Which means you can measure density without destroying the object. He supposedly leapt out of the bath, running naked through the streets shouting "Eureka!" ("I have found it!").

I've had a similar experience, with significantly less nudity - thankfully. A client requested an Ode to the American Farmer, and the project was assigned to me. Having grown up in suburbia, I struggled to find the voice

and strike the right tone. The day before the assignment was due, I was desperately trying to distract myself from the internal countdown that haunted my every thought. I was mowing the grass when inspiration finally hit me. I stopped mowing halfway through the yard and wrote the entire ode in a single attempt. What's even more impressive is that the client approved it virtually unedited. This is what Paulus & Brown (2007) talked about when they highlighted the importance of the "incubation effect." This time away allows your subconscious mind to work on a problem, which is essential for these breakthrough moments.

Tear down... then rebuild

Most creative thinking sessions follow a similar story arc. See if this sounds familiar.

Step 1: Good ideas are generated

Step 2: The best ideas are selected

Step 3: Profit.

Every session starts with generating. And every session ends with editing. Separating the wheat from the chaff. And there's usually a LOT of chaff. But in that analogy, you typically don't stop with the wheat. You take that wheat and grind it into flour. Then, you combine the flour with other ingredients to make bread. Then you

take that bread, cut or tear it up, and combine it with other stuff to make something else.

In “Celebrating 50 Years of Reflective Practice,” Isaksen & Treffinger (2004) make a similar case for creative thinking. Their work demonstrated that a combination of divergent and convergent exercises generated ideas that offered both novelty and feasibility. And isn’t that the goal we’re all looking for? Good ideas that actually work.

Yes, and...

In the world of improv comedy, there’s one simple rule: never kill the scene. When your partner says something unexpected, “A penguin walks into a dry cleaners.” You don’t respond with, “No, it didn’t.” You say, “Yes, and he says, ‘I’m here to pick up my tux.’” The same goes for ideas at work. The moment someone shares something new, you have a choice: build on it or shut it down. One path invites more ideas, the other teaches everyone to keep their thoughts to themselves.

In “Organizational Climate for Creativity and Innovation,” Ekvall (1996) outlines the essential role culture plays in idea generation. A welcoming culture where new ideas are met with interest and encouragement, especially early-stage ideas, encourages teams to take greater risks and push the boundaries

further out. This becomes even more important as teams work through a cycle of divergent and convergent thinking sessions. That early openness pays significant dividends later on, as those ideas are given time to mature and develop.

A welcoming culture where new ideas are met with interest and encouragement, especially early-stage ideas

In “Creativity in Context,” Amabile (1996) supports this concept. By offering constructive feedback, where thinkers build on ideas rather than evaluating them too early, thinkers are encouraged to provide more novel and potentially less developed thoughts for the group to consider. They’re more willing to share an idea that might be something, so that the group can help bring it to life.

Is this heaven?

In the 1989 movie “Field of Dreams,” Shoeless Joe Jackson (played by Ray Liotta) has just finished playing catch with Ray Kinsella (played by Kevin Costner). He’s jogging off the field to return to the haunted corn field

from which he appeared. He stops in the outfield and turns to Ray and shouts, “Is this heaven?”

Ray pauses for a moment. Smiles and says, “No, it’s Iowa.”

In “Sparkling Fountains or Stagnant Ponds,” West (2002) talks about the importance of psychological safety. By creating the equivalent of creative thinking heaven, you have the opportunity to build something truly special - a place where your thinkers are free to take risks, admit mistakes, and propose unconventional ideas produce more creative outcomes.

I realize I’ve just spent countless pages telling you all the hallmarks of what an amazing creative process should look like. There’s a very realistic possibility you’re reading this book because your boss, your team, or your company fail to exhibit a single one of these characteristics.

Perhaps you read the section on why brainstorming fails and thought, “Yep... that’s us.”

And then you read this section, and it sounded like some sort of fantasy world filled with rainbows, ponies, and endless delights. I promise you this. I felt the same way, and it’s not impossible. In fact, it’s very possible.

Now, let’s see how you can make this fantasy a reality.

Chapter 6: Building a Better Thinking Process

After years of watching brainstorming implode, I didn't want another set of clever tweaks or a straight-line system with updated names. I wanted a system that actually worked. One that respected how people think, rather than forcing them into a ritual that never quite fit.

So I started from scratch. I looked at what science said about how ideas form, what psychology revealed about fear and judgment, and what real teams needed to stay engaged. Then I began building. Each experiment – from rethinking how problems are framed to reimagining how meetings are run – became a small step toward a more reliable creative process.

What emerged wasn't a single "session" but a full framework: a way to guide creativity from the first spark of recognition to the final round of Refinement. The tools that follow, from the IdeaBrief to smaller, more focused group formats, are the building blocks of that system. Together, they translate the principles of The Clover Model of Creativity into practice.

This is the part of the story where theory turns into craft.

Step 1: Start with the IdeaBrief™



One of the fastest killers of any project is a lack of clarity. If you can't clearly and succinctly explain the What? of your project, the How? has no chance of succeeding. From my earliest agency days, I've always appreciated a well-crafted briefing document for two reasons. First, it gives you clearly defined parameters of the box you're trying to think outside of. It's a sword to spur action and fight for good ideas. Second, it gives you clearly defined success parameters, so you know whether you have accomplished your goal or not. It's a shield to

defend good ideas that people may not like. If they meet the brief, they should be considered. Like it or not.

So what is the IdeaBrief?

It's a short, one-page document that provides everyone in the group with the goal of the session and other important details. For the sake of simplicity, the IdeaBrief is broken into four parts.

Aim: What is the one thing you're trying to accomplish in this brainstorm? This will be the meeting's mantra, so keep it simple. You should have ONE goal that can be summed up in ONE sentence or less. If you have more than one goal, have more than one session.

Background: Not everyone in your creative thinking session may be familiar with the history, competition, or information that will impact the success of your idea. This is the place to give them any relevant information that should influence their thinking. Keep in mind that the entire IdeaBrief should fit on one page, so avoid overwhelming them with unnecessary details. Keep it simple and convey key information in bullet points. Use short paragraphs only when necessary.

Obstacles/Considerations: What's standing in the way? Are there any items that are currently preventing you or have the potential of preventing you from achieving the goal listed in your Aim statement? This information may enable your session to find creative solutions that will make your Aim easier to achieve.

Opportunities: Where are the unexplored opportunities? Are there emerging markets or new technologies you would like to consider? New use cases? Provide your thinkers with any fertile territory to help them achieve the Aim. It's okay to even provide them with a series of open-ended questions to inspire them to think about the problem from a different perspective.

FACILITATOR TIP #1: I cannot stress this enough. As the leader, planner, or facilitator of what's to come, you absolutely cannot rush this portion of the project. The remainder of this process is time- and energy-intensive, and the IdeaBrief will serve as the foundation for everything that follows. If you write a poor brief, you WILL get poor outcomes. Garbage in. Garbage out. Make sure your organization is aligned on the goals you're trying to accomplish. We'll discuss this further later, but it is a critical step. Hold firm on focus. One brief = one goal. If leadership insists on tackling multiple challenges, split the team into two parallel processes. Each one has its own IdeaBrief. Never let the focus blur inside a single session.

Step 2: IdeaBrief review and initial idea sharing



Once you have refined and approved the IdeaBrief, and it is ready to serve as the springboard for your team, you'll want to gather the participants for a review session. This meeting serves as a baseline for the group. Everyone gets a chance to hear the Aim, Background, Obstacles, and Opportunities as a group. It's a chance to ask and answer any questions. It's essential that your group feels empowered to ask any clarifying questions that come to mind, and it's equally important for you to leave space for them to raise questions. Don't plow through the review. Leave pauses that invite participation. Watch the group for signs of apprehension or confusion. If you see anything, dig into it. The most important thing is to ensure the group understands the request.

As your team listens to the briefing, their minds will begin to turn over the possibilities and push at the edges of the assignment. There will be sparks of ideas. Or even better, additional insights and context that you didn't even know. If you give them the opportunity, the

attendees will add another level of depth and perspective.

Maybe they read an article. Maybe they talked to someone in the hallway. Maybe they've experienced a legitimate pain point that never came up in the planning process. The initial idea sharing session is their opportunity to bring that forward. Rather than trapping those nuggets in one mind, you offer them the chance to spur ideas in the whole group.

This session also serves another purpose. As a rule, the human brain loves to conserve energy. I won't say it's lazy. It's efficient. But in this situation, when you're asking it to explore novel and creative solutions to a problem, that efficiency will manifest itself in harvesting low-hanging fruit. By offering people the chance to voice their ideas early in the process, you avoid having multiple individuals spend time exploring the same concept and returning to the group with overlapping ideas. You capture them early and let the group know that these ideas will be shared back later, so they don't have to worry about working on them anymore.

FACILITATOR TIP #2: Frame this as a share session, not a discussion. Capture sparks for later, or encourage people to jot them down privately. The purpose here is to clear the decks.

Step 3: Pre-thinking assignments



This is where things get really exciting. Asking people to accomplish a single task (e.g., generating new product ideas) significantly limits their creative output for several reasons. First, it's such an open-ended and gargantuan ask that people aren't sure how to attack it. So, they get overwhelmed or struggle to get started. Second, it doesn't inspire diversity of thought, so even though you're providing a massively open-ended question, the "efficient" brains are immediately going to head for the most obvious path.

To inspire true diversity of thought and maximize the efforts of your participants, you want to divide the group into three or more small groups. For each of those groups, you give a different pre-thinking assignment. This is how it works.

Hypothetical challenge:

"A mid-sized retail bank wants to attract Gen Z customers, but its product set feels dated. They've asked your team to come up with ideas for a new financial

product or service that would make the bank relevant to 20-25 year olds within the next year.”

Rather than ask each person to come up with ideas for a new financial product, you divide the challenge into three smaller asks.

Ask the members of Group 1 to individually explore the banking habits/preferences of 20 to 25-year-old consumers. What pain points are they experiencing?

Ask the members of Group 2 to individually explore brands/products that are succeeding with target consumers. What features or experiences are they offering that are helping them succeed with that audience?

Ask the members of Group 3 to individually explore what banking trends are going to shape the next 3-5 years of the market. Where are things headed? What new technologies are on the horizon? Where do we need to be to succeed?

FACILITATOR TIP #3: Not every research thread will come back with gold, and that’s okay. Because multiple groups are working on the same questions, weak inputs get offset by stronger ones. Diversity of effort matters more than perfection in any one group’s output.

Step 4: Individual thinking time



Once you've given them the larger challenge you're trying to solve and their focus area within, the next thing you need to do is give them time. There's a direct correlation between subconscious processing time and inspiration. You need to provide your thinkers time for that Eureka! moment to occur while they're in the bath, mowing the lawn, or just living their life.

The question is how much time you should give them. The answer is 24 - 72 hours. Push it past three days, though, and human nature takes over. The assignment gets shoved behind urgent emails, forgotten until the night before, and suddenly you're right back where you started – with rushed, shallow thinking.

The window between 24 and 72 hours is the creative Goldilocks zone. Just enough pressure that the task feels real, but enough breathing room for the brain to work quietly in the background. That's when the flashes of originality tend to surface. It doesn't guarantee greatness, but it sets the stage for it.

FACILITATOR TIP #4: Encourage people to jot down notes, sketches, or voice memos if ideas pop up.

Reflection alone is fine too. The important thing is protecting that 24-72 hour incubation window where the problem stays warm but doesn't get shoved aside.

Step 5: Small group breakouts



This is where the magic happens. Instead of clumping everyone back into a hot, stuffy, and overcrowded conference room so that they can listen to one person drone on and on AND ON, you break them out into smaller teams. But not how you might expect. Going back to our hypothetical Gen Z banking problem above, you don't clump everyone from Group 1 together.

Instead, you pull one person from each group. Each team consists of one person focused on Gen Z pain points, one person on banking trends, and one person on brands that are experiencing success with Gen Z consumers. Suddenly, every conversation is richer than the sum of its parts.

Here's why it works:

Diversity of research: Although everyone started with the same questions, they didn't conduct the same

research. They had areas of interest, varied experiences that informed their search, unique resources to guide them, and different biases to inform their decisions. In the end, the same questions yielded vastly different results. Everyone had the same starting question, but they came back with wildly different answers.

Varying group dynamics: Each trio forms its own ecosystem with different rhythms and energy. Those dynamics will shape how the group starts and where it ends up. Some groups will go deep into a few ideas. Others will skim across the top of a dozen ideas. Some groups will play it safe, while others go as far out of the box as they can get.

Volume of ideas: One of the biggest challenges in traditional brainstorming is production blocking. Only one person can talk at a time. In this structure, with three or more small groups working independently, multiple people can talk at once. So the one-at-a-time bottleneck has been solved.

Accountability: In a group of three, no one can hide. If you've been tasked to research a specific question for your group, there's an expectation that you'll deliver for your group. It's also a lot harder to socially loaf in such a small group. Each person needs to be engaged.

Less pressure: While there may be more pressure to participate, there's less pressure to succeed. In a large, one-shot brainstorm, you've put all your eggs in one

basket, so you need that session to be a success. With smaller groups, you've got multiple shots at success. As a result, there's less make-or-break pressure on each group.

Accelerated timeline: If you've ever planned a meeting for more than a few people, you know the challenges of finding a convenient time. In this model, you only need to find time for three people, so groups can get ideas flowing sooner.

A platform for quiet voices: If you're not comfortable speaking up in front of a large group, smaller groups will provide a better opportunity to voice your opinions. This means you get to hear from everyone and benefit from their knowledge, insights, and experience, rather than just hearing from the loudest members of your team.

The result? These groups cover more conceptual ground, more quickly, and with greater depth. Instead of twelve people circling the same handful of safe ideas, you've got multiple teams exploring different corners of the map. That's where the breakthroughs start to appear.

FACILITATOR TIP #5: If you know the participants well, build trios with complementary skill sets. If you don't, random assignment works just fine. Either way, running multiple groups in parallel reduces the risk of any one team underperforming.

Step 6: Refinement and shortlisting



At the end of their creative thinking session, each group has the opportunity to spend some time reviewing and refining their ideas. This stage can take a few minutes or even allow participants to step away and reflect individually. The time can be adjusted to fit the project's overall timeline and deadline.

The result should be the same. The small group narrows down their ideas to a shortlist they think best meet the brief and deliver on the project requirements. While it can be challenging to choose favorites, it's an essential step in the process to prevent the broader group from being overwhelmed by ideas. Due to the small group's ability to cover a broader range of conceptual territory than a larger group, some ideas must be trimmed at this stage. (But don't worry, they aren't totally dead yet. You'll see.)

From there, the group needs to determine who will bring their ideas back to a small group of representatives from each team. This could be either a senior (or more experienced) member of the team or it could rotate

among the groups, so everyone has the opportunity to share ideas with the larger group.

FACILITATOR TIP #6: Anchor every idea back to the IdeaBrief’s Aim. Ask: “Does this actually solve what we set out to do?” Each group should narrow to 3-5 finalists. Don’t trash the rest. Archive them. They’ll resurface in the big group build.

Step 7: Shortlist share session



The next phase of the process reunites the representatives from each small group. In this step, the team of 3+ representatives shares all the shortlisted ideas from each group. Similar ideas are combined (or linked together). Ideas with potential, but fixable weaknesses or shortcomings, are given a little extra attention. And the weakest ideas are ruled out.

This session shouldn’t take long, but it will require a level of honesty from the group representatives. It’s natural to have a soft spot for your group’s ideas, but decisions need to be made based on which ideas best answer the Aim of the IdeaBrief. Ultimately, this isn’t about a small group “winning.” It’s about the entire

group, so the goal of every small group is to build the best solution.

Each team representative gives the others a rundown of their idea, including a quick recap of any necessary inspiration to bring the concept to life. Each representative can either share their original notes or have the ideas freshly transcribed on a whiteboard or flip chart.

In this phase, you're looking for moments of illumination. That spark in the other group representatives where they sit back in their chairs and say, "I wish we'd thought of that." Once the representatives agree on a shortlist of the best ideas, it's time to bring them back to the whole group.

FACILITATOR TIP #7: Keep this session short and focused. Limit each rep to 7-10 minutes max to share their ideas. Remind everyone that the shortlist isn't about protecting your team's babies. It's about surfacing the ideas that best answer the IdeaBrief's Aim. Document the final shortlist clearly before moving on.

Step 8: The big build



For the final stage of the process, it's time to get the whole group together. I know... I know... I've spent a lot of time railing against the evils of big creative thinking sessions, but there's an exception to every rule. And here's why this is the exception.

The agenda is straightforward: review the shortlist of ideas that have survived every prior filter, then open the floor to proposals and suggestions for improvement. It's about adding the polish. Patching gaps. Tightening edges. Making good ideas great. This is also where you can bring back some abandoned ideas that weren't strong enough to stand on their own, but might help fix a weakness with one the finalist concepts.

Keep it brisk: an hour or less. Assign a note-taker (or use a shared doc) to capture every add-on, tweak, and build. Those refinements are then returned to the small groups for incorporation before the ideas move forward.

The point isn't to generate new ideas. The point is to finish strong, together.

FACILITATOR TIP #8: Cut off any attempts to reopen the debate. Remind the group: “We’re not re-arguing the shortlist. We’re building on it.”

Method to the madness

At first glance, an eight-step process probably feels like overkill. More work, more steps, more hoops to jump through than the classic “shut everyone in a room and throw spaghetti at the wall” routine. I get it. That messy version feels faster. But here’s the catch: it isn’t repeatable, and it doesn’t consistently deliver anything worth keeping.

Think about cars before Ford. Every one was a one-off. Hand-built by coach builders, crafted like a bespoke suit. Gorgeous, sure, but painfully slow to make and difficult to repair, because no two parts were the same. Then Henry Ford rolls in, introduces the assembly line, and suddenly you can crank out reliable, working cars at scale. The Model T wasn’t just cheaper, it was consistent. You knew what you were getting.

This process works the same way for ideas. Instead of praying for lightning to strike in a chaotic room, you’re creating an assembly line for creativity. Each step builds upon the last, and each part fits seamlessly into the next. The result is a reliably, repeatable process.

Structured approaches to creativity consistently outperform free-form brainstorming. Meta-analyses of creativity training indicate that step-by-step methods yield stronger long-term gains in both the originality and usefulness of ideas. Training people in structured creative problem solving actually boosts their self-efficacy, as we discussed earlier. In other words, give people a process, and they'll not only produce better ideas, but they'll also believe in their ability to do it again next time.

So yes, eight steps look like a lot compared to Osborn's four rules. But where he gave us the dream of creativity, this is the factory that makes it real.

This isn't about a small group winning. It's about the entire group, so the goal of every small group is to build the best solution.

Scenario 1: Welcome to the real world

But... I have no time. The presentation is due in a couple of days.

Well, then the clock is ticking. There's the ideal way to do things, but sometimes you just have to deal with the

circumstances you find yourself in. So, how can we complete this process as quickly as possible? Let's get lean*, but be forewarned, this is going to be an all-hands-on-deck situation.

Step 1: The pressure is on you here. If you're going to get great ideas in a day, this needs to be the best brief you've ever written. Remember - garbage in, garbage out. Keep your brief extremely narrow in its focus. There's not enough time to waste on extraneous details. You need a tight and focused brief with a clear Aim and deliverables.

Step 2: Send out the brief and the thinking assignments the day before the session. Even on an accelerated timeline, you need to give participants 24 hours to digest and think. If you can find a few minutes to review the brief in person, I recommend it, and then release them to think independently.

Step 3: Arrange the small group sessions for the first thing in the morning, or as early as possible. Obviously, you don't want groggy brains, but you need to leave time for the evaluation and building process. You want your teams to hit this session hard and stay focused and in the zone for the full hour. Afterwards, give them a short break to mull over their ideas. Then, have them come

back for one more sprint to see if they can spot any critical flaws or next-level builds.

Step 4: Now, it's up to the group leaders to do the hard work. Unlike the regular process, they'll be reviewing thoughts that are less refined (possibly significantly so). In the full timeline version, this could be a rotating list of less experienced members. In this scenario, it's critical that you fill this group with your most seasoned talent, particularly those with a proven ability to spot diamonds in the rough.

Step 5: Share the ideas back out with the group (via email, Slack, Teams, etc). This is another departure from the regular process. In this accelerated format, you'll give everyone time to review the ideas and come to that meeting as prepped as possible.

Step 6: In this group build session, it will be a bit more tense. In the regular timeline, ideas at this stage have been given more measured thought and testing, so this session is mainly about building - not questioning or challenging. However, in this accelerated timeline, an idea may have reached this stage with critical flaws. It is the responsibility of thinkers in this session to challenge ideas that do not meet the Aim of the IdeaBrief.

Step 7: For the remaining available time, the group needs to pressure-test, build, and refine the ideas until the final ideas are shared.

Sample timeline:

Start Time:	Activity:
Day before	Write the brief
3:30p	Share brief with the team
4:30p	Individual thinking time
9a	Small group thinking sessions
10a	Break + additional individual reflection
10:30a	Small group sprint for final adds and edits
11a	Group leaders share ideas + trim
12:30p	Selected ideas are shared with whole team + individual thinking
1:30p	Whole group assembles for builds
2:30p	Final edits and polishing

***WARNING:** This accelerated timeline should only be attempted by people who have done this before.

Scenario 2: I have all the time in the world

If the sprint is brutal, the stroll is seductive. Endless time feels like a luxury, but it's really a trap that arrives too slowly to be noticed. Without a deadline breathing down your neck, it's easy to slip into the bad habits of overthinking, analysis paralysis, and overworking an idea until it loses its spark. Give a team six weeks, and they'll spend five of them inventing reasons not to finish.

The problem is momentum. Urgency sharpens the edges of thinking. It forces choices. When you strip that away, you get drift. Teams lose energy, and ideas get second-guessed into oblivion. The leisurely stroll kills more ideas than the one-day sprint ever will.

So how do you fight it? You cheat. You build in artificial constraints. Break the big timeline into mini sprints. Set immovable milestones. Declare decision days where an idea has to move forward or get tossed. If the clock won't tick for you, you have to wind it yourself. Otherwise, the work just stalls until someone has the discipline to jumpstart it again.

Creative performance isn't fueled by infinite freedom; a balance of freedom and challenge fuels it. Too much slack time, and the challenge disappears. In other words, no pressure, no diamonds. If you want great ideas, don't take the stroll. Set a finish line on the calendar and ensure everyone is aware of it.

Chapter 7: Testing It in the Wild

When I finished mapping out this process, I thought I knew what I had. A great process for a limited use case - agencies attempting to shake up their creative thinking process. A novelty, but not universally applicable. I couldn't have been more wrong.

As I've moved throughout my career from Fortune 500 companies to fintech scale-ups and been invited to speak at content and marketing conferences, the framework I built has shown a tremendous ability to flex to meet a wide range of use cases.

Hopefully, this chapter will lay out some new and unique ways to flex the framework, and as you read

along, I'm sure you'll think of new use cases I've never dreamed of.

A quick note before we go on. The three, real-life scenarios I cover are all based on my experience in marketing agencies or fintech companies. If you're curious how this system might be applied to other scenarios, I wrote some hypothetical use cases to show how I would approach challenges in logistics, human resources, cybersecurity and health tech. If you want to check those out, they start on page 190.

Now, back to the rest of the book.

Turning the mirror on myself

The first chance to test this new approach didn't come in some workshop or side project. It came in the form of an email to the agency I worked for. Short. Blunt. No way to misread it: our ideas were too safe.

Was it frustrating? Sure. Especially given this particular client's habit of killing our bolder ideas before they ever had a chance to breathe. But in hindsight, the note was the encouragement we needed to look in the mirror. A

chance to step back and ask the uncomfortable question: had our process gotten too comfortable?

We'd been running on a system that looked and felt right. Big rooms, lots of energy, everyone involved. It had carried us far, helped us win big, national clients, built our reputation. But success can turn ritual into routine. The client's email gave us the nudge to stop coasting on "what always worked" and actually interrogate our process.

For me, it was oddly well-timed. I'd just spent months swimming in research on why creativity sputters inside organizations: groupthink, evaluation apprehension, novelty bias. I had theories, models, even notes covered in academic one-liners. Now, I had the chance to try it outside the classroom – to rebuild our machine in real time, with real stakes.

The challenge

Our agency identity was practically engraved in brass: collaborative, coaching-heavy, big-group energy. We loved the all-hands buzz. Pack the room, fill the walls, ride the momentum. We believed a full room meant a full pipeline of ideas. It felt democratic. It felt modern. It felt like culture.

And to be fair, it worked. We'd been together a long time, tasted real success, and believed in our process. It



had grown the agency and built a reputation we were proud of. It wasn't autopilot. We gave every project everything we had. Over time, we'd even codified it into "best practices," the kind of playbook you hand to new hires and tell them, "This is how we do things here."

The trouble is, the way you've always done things eventually becomes the only way you know how to do things. What started as wild and energetic hardened into habit. We had a system we could trust, but had it gone from a springboard to crutch?

That was the real challenge the client's email exposed: not whether we had a process, but whether our process could still get us (and our clients) where we needed to go.

The inquiry

We needed to re-evaluate our process. So we started with the simplest, most humbling task: map it out. Not the glossy version we showed clients, but the real, honest-to-god, how-does-work-actually-get-done-around-here version.

Our process was a beast, and it needed to be wrestled onto the page. There's a phrase: nobody likes to see how sausage gets made. Well, we saw it. Snout to tail.

No jargon. No fancy deliverables. Just a whiteboard and an agreement to capture every step, from "brief arrives" to "deck goes out." And the uncomfortable truth was, even though everyone thought they knew the process, they didn't.

We uncovered steps we still did because a long-gone client once required them. Internal checks from a former account director who hadn't been around in years. Habits we carried from project to project simply because they'd worked once before. Our flow was littered with relics and landmines.

But what stood out most was the gravity of brute-force brainstorming. It sat at the center of everything, like the sun in a solar system. No matter how a project started, it always got pulled back into the same orbit: a big room, a pile of stickies, and the hope that somewhere in the volume was a breakthrough.

The sessions

Once we had the process mapped, the next step was to pressure test it. Where were the weak points? What did people know but never say out loud?

It’s not the most creative way to start, but an anonymous survey was the fastest way to surface insights. A few straightforward questions:

- How long do you spend preparing?
- Do you have enough time to prepare?
- What stands in your way?
- Do you prefer large groups or small groups?
- Do brainstorms feel tailored to the project?

The responses weren’t easy to read.

Team survey results:

Statement	Results:
I spend 1 hour or less preparing	92%
I would like two or more days to prepare	71%
Time or workload inhibits me from thinking in advance	64%
I prefer working in small groups	57%
Brainstorms didn't feel tailored to the project	67%

The first theme was preparation, or the lack of it. Most people admitted they walked into sessions with minimal pre-thinking. Not because they didn't care, but because the prompts were too generic to spark anything useful. Without a sharper angle, it was hard to get momentum going before the meeting.

The second theme was duplication. When everyone's pre-work landed in the same narrow space, half the room ended up repeating the same ideas. Why push yourself if your contribution is just another version of what's already been said?

The third theme was about format. While people liked the energy of a big room, they wanted smaller, more focused groups where ideas could actually be built. The large sessions felt like a good kickoff, but not a good place to do real creative work.

The feedback was clear: the very structure we relied on to unlock creativity was, in practice, holding it back.

The result

What followed was messy but necessary. We didn't have the luxury of time, so we built and tested as we went. Small groups became our proving ground. We dumped our giant room approach for a series of focused challenges. Different configurations, different prompts, rapid cycles. It wasn't graceful, but it worked.

Out of that chaos, a new process started to take shape. We still started with a client brief, the same way every agency does. But then rather than send people off on their own, we opened with first thoughts in the room. Not to solve the problem on the spot, but to clear the obvious. If one person thought of it, chances were five others had too. Getting it out early stopped us from wasting cycles polishing duplicates.

From there, we introduced sharper prompts and gave the team time away from the table. Space to think, reflect, and come back with something deeper. When we reconvened, it wasn't in one overwhelming group. It was in smaller units, where people felt freer to push an idea further, test it, and add edges. Leaders then carried the strongest concepts forward, sharing across groups, layering, and finally pulling everything back into one large review. By the time we returned to the full room, we weren't starting from scratch. We were building on substance.

The final step was Refinement. Not just choosing "the best" ideas, but shaping them until they were strong enough to face the client. It was deliberate, iterative, and far less theatrical than our old brainstorming.

Did it save the account? Not entirely. By the time a client invites other agencies to pitch, the writing is usually on the wall. But the process itself was a breakthrough. It gave us sharper ideas, more energy, and

proof that our system could evolve. That was the real win: we didn't just defend the way we'd always worked. We built something better.

Let the wargaming begin

During my time at a Fortune 500 payments company, I worked for a smaller sub-team in a highly competitive market. While the rest of the company held a Top 2 position in the broader payments industry, our product resided outside of the Top 10 players in our sphere. As such, we often found ourselves playing the David fighting off a horde of Goliaths.

This is often referred to as a “challenger” brand, which is typically a fun category position and brand persona to embody, because you can, by definition, challenge the conventional wisdom of the category. Brands like Warby Parker, Dollar Shave Club, and Casper Mattresses all built a standout brand voice and persona that turned their start-up brands into serious competitors.

Our situation was different. We weren't the primary brand. We were a sub-brand, so we had strict guidelines and expectations within which we had to play. No “in your face” social posts. No outrageous PR stunts. We had to be very careful to live within the parent brand guidelines.

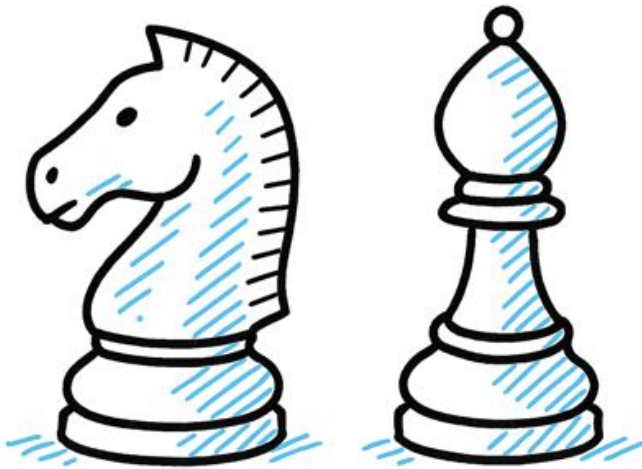
The other complexity was that everyone knew who we were. Because we carried the name of our parent company, there was never a chance we were going to sneak up on anyone. Our competitors knew that if they let us get our foot in the door, there was going to be trouble. So, they did everything in their power to keep us out.

The challenge

It started innocently enough - with a little head-to-head competition. We kept running into and trading wins with the same Top Ten competitor. Then things took a turn. From the industry intel we'd received, it quickly became apparent that they decided to make a serious play for our customer list. And they were pursuing it HARD.

In response, the executive team in our group began discussing how we, as a marketing and sales organization, were going to combat them. At this point, one of the roles I filled on the team was leading our competitive intelligence effort. I kept track of every publicly available activity - social posts, press releases, job postings, release notes, everything.

One of the benefits of this role was that I had access to a treasure trove of data. Through some marketing black magic, we could use what we found to better position ourselves against what we knew about them. There was a



lot of hypothesis and guesswork, but we knew two things for sure:

1. They were actively pursuing our customer list, which means they knew as much about us as we knew about them.
2. Whatever we did, we knew they'd react.

So we needed a plan that could anticipate potential scenarios and adapt in real time.

It was going to be a real chess match.

The solution

We needed to war-game our strategy and our selling story. After successfully pitching the idea to our strategy team, we shared it with our executive leaders. Here's how the idea came to life.

We took our executive team, plus an assortment of sales, marketing, and technology team members and divided them into two teams - Team Red and Team Blue. Team Red played the role of our competitor, while Team Blue played the role of our company.

We created a complete dossier of both companies based on the information we had and shared with everyone involved. Team Red was asked only to use the info in the dossier to work against Team Blue (vs. the inside knowledge they had from their role within the company).

Each member of the team was given specific areas of expertise and pre-work questions to research and answer.

The teams would follow the process I outlined earlier of pre-thinking, small group, and large group sessions to build out a plan.

The goal was a simple one. We needed to develop an understanding of our positioning in the market - our strengths/weaknesses and how we could create a

compelling narrative that would resonate with prospects. To do that, we needed to accomplish a few key milestones along the way:

1. Develop a thorough understanding of both companies' strengths and weaknesses
2. Identify areas of opportunity
3. Outline attack and defense strategies for likely scenarios
4. Draft talking points to reinforce our strengths and mitigate our weaknesses
5. Craft a selling story and reason to believe
6. Incorporate strategies and messaging back through marketing and sales materials

The sessions

“In order for this to work, you need to be honest,” I told the Red Team, “You need to really believe and behave like the Blue Team is your competition.”

There was a long pause in the room. I'd just asked them to tell me every weakness, shortcoming, and gap in Blue Team's product and sales pitch. But, in reality, I'd asked them, “Tell me why the company you work for (and our product) stinks.” To say they were hesitant to be honest was an understatement.

“We owe it to them... and us,” I said. “If we don’t attack them like we want to put them out of business, they can’t develop a defensive strategy.”

After a little more cajoling, the dam finally broke. And it was a FLOOD. You could see the therapeutic effect of being able to talk about our product’s shortcomings openly. Similarly, with the Blue Team. They were initially hesitant to praise the positives of our competitor, but once the ball finally got rolling, we were able to have an honest conversation about where they were a better product.

Over the course of a couple of days (not ideal, but remember, we were dealing with executive-level scheduling challenges), we worked through a series of carefully planned exercises, including:

The Four Ways of Seeing - A deceptively simple framework that forced everyone to get out of their own shoes. We looked at ourselves, our competitors, our customers, and the broader market – four vantage points that rarely line up neatly but reveal the blind spots hiding in plain sight.

Strengths and Weaknesses - The obvious first step, but always more painful than expected. Listing your product or company weaknesses in front of your boss isn’t exactly fun. Still, the honesty cracked open some surprisingly productive conversations.

Assumption Challenging - This was where the sparks started to fly. Every time someone said, “Well, of course they would never do that...” the opposing team’s eyes lit up. Turns out, the most dangerous assumptions are the ones nobody bothers to question.

Scenario Planning - Now it started to feel like a real chess match. Team Red would make a move, Team Blue would counter, and suddenly the whiteboards looked like a battlefield. For a moment, it felt less like marketing and more like military strategy.

Attacks and Defenses - Here’s where the adrenaline really spiked. When your colleagues are role-playing the enemy and calling out exactly how they’d poach your clients, it stings. But it also sharpens your defenses in a way no generic sales training ever could.

Selling Stories, Reasons to Believe, and Obstacles - Finally, we took all the raw nerves and insights and shaped them into something usable. A selling story strong enough to win a pitch, backed by reasons to believe.

The result

After the series of small group exercises, we exchanged findings, reviewed them, and reconvened as one large group. In the final group session, both teams came together to share knowledge and insights. We used the

renewed perspective of the Red Team to shed new insight on our selling story. They felt renewed enthusiasm and empowerment to challenge aspects of the story that the Blue Team (and our entire team) took for granted.

The end result was a tighter, more compelling story that was grounded in the pain points of our customers. We stripped away some of the unfounded assertions and replaced them with tangible facts. In addition, we had a library of powerful responses to prospect objections and competitor claims, so that the front-line teams were armed with content they could feel confident in.

Ultimately, we saw usage of these materials go up, a bump in sales confidence, an increase in sales effectiveness, and won deals.

The strategic pivot

In another scenario, a business-to-business software-as-a-service (B2B SaaS) company I was working for made a strategic pivot to target a new vertical. The target vertical was a very specialized field with long-time employees. This meant that you needed to talk the talk and walk the walk to even think about moving into this space. Anything less than fluent expertise would be sniffed out



immediately and expose you as a pretender who didn't have the experience to succeed.

The challenge

We identified a highly lucrative opportunity in a growing market that was ripe for disruption. Our solution met the needs of the vertical we were targeting, but we were a new player in a market filled with known entities. However, the existing players were no longer meeting the needs of their customers. We needed to move, and move fast to capitalize on this opportunity. The only question? How do you quickly train up several teams within your department and create product, sales, and marketing materials within a short period of time? Especially in a

market where newcomers are easily identified and quickly discounted.

The solution

The solution was a simple one. We had a group of employees who spent years in the vertical we were targeting, before they switched to work for our company. If we could efficiently mine their knowledge and their experience and effectively disseminate it across our teams, we could quickly coach up our teams to attack this opportunity.

In short, we needed to create a bootcamp that involved learning the nuances of the industry and then practically applying that knowledge into product insights, marketing materials, and sales training.

The first step was anchoring everything around the IdeaBrief. We needed everyone to have a rock-solid foundation of what we were attempting to accomplish. I will admit - this was one of the longer IdeaBriefs I've ever put together, because it needed some additional context to explain the background and nuances of our target industry. We felt it was important to give everyone participating a shared baseline of knowledge before we sent them off to their small groups.

Next, we reorganized into small strike teams dedicated to a unique aspect of the vertical. Each team had four people:

- A subject matter expert (SME) to ground us in the facts
- A product lead to tie back to features and strategy
- A content writer to shape the story
- A designer to visualize the idea

Each pod worked through the process: independent research, small group sessions, and collaborative builds. Their job was to explore relevant topics, identify new product angles, study high-performing formats, and generate assets we could actually use.

What made this different from a typical session was that we weren't producing half-baked ideas on sticky notes. The goal for each small team was to develop a deep (or as deep as possible over a couple of days) knowledge of the vertical and produce an assortment of assets. This included: updated product positioning, sales narrative, targeted content (blogs, social posts, and a white paper). Everything we needed to launch our programs quickly.

The sessions

Since everyone was flying in from all corners of the globe, we had a tight timeline to turn everything around -

3 days MAX. As we mapped out the three days, we came to a very stark realization. It was going to be a long, grueling experience.

I tapped into a tangential life experience that involved my horrendous planning during a bike ride across Missouri. For some insane reason, I scheduled the longest ride for Day 3 of a four-day ride. It was the worst plan ever, and I spent the first two days psyching myself out about the third day. It made it really hard to enjoy anything else, because the LONG RIDE was always hovering in the distance. And then when I finally got to it, I was already tired. An all around a bad plan.

So, I learned my lesson. In this situation, I made the first day long and exhausting, and each successive day was shorter. The third day ended early (and with an organized team happy hour).

Briefing - At the start of day one, each team dug into its go-to-market briefing. We named our customer profiles, argued over what they wanted to buy, and forced ourselves to strip away assumptions. The goal was clarity: who are we really selling to, and why would they believe us?

Individual Thinking - After the initial small group session, we gave people an hour alone with their thoughts. No email, no Teams messages, just pen, paper, and the brief. We spread to the far corners of the office. Every phone booth, reflection nook, and isolated hot

desk was filled with someone reading through the IdeaBrief and jotting down notes.

Creative Thinking Session - Afterward, we pulled each of the small groups together to trade ideas. The flurry of activity was amazing, and our SMEs were the real heroes. Keeping teams focused on our customer and speaking their language. I had the opportunity to bounce from room to room. That's always a fascinating experience, and I highly recommend it if you get the chance. Some teams start fast and finish slow. Others start slow and finish fast. Some keep a steady pace throughout, and on a rare occasion (though not this time), you'll get a team that goes off the rails. When that does occur, that's typically where I spend most of my time trying to get them back on track. But this time, each room was humming. From sticky-note matrices mapping audiences and messages, to half-baked concepts that only made sense to the person saying them, the ideas flew around the room. Each room followed three simple rules: Capture everything, always build, keep moving forward.

Refinement - After a 30-minute break to stretch our legs and get a little psychological and emotional distance, teams returned to their rooms to begin the process of refining their explosion of ideas. Our SMEs worked hard to keep our teams in the mindset of our prospective audience. And the teams worked to shape ideas around the red thread - that singular idea that ties everything

together. Suddenly, campaigns weren't just a list of tactics. They were stories that moved from curiosity to conviction.

Share & Build - At the end of each day, we made teams present their rough work to the full team. No hiding, no excuses. It was a raw share session that invited other teams in to poke holes and add builds. What started as a crazy idea became a breakthrough concept. And that was the end of Day One.

Deep Dive Refinement - Day Two started with a recap. Day One had been a little overwhelming, but people arrived with a sense of excitement about what had been accomplished in such a short time and where we could be at the end of today. After a temperature check of the teams and a reminder of our Day Two goals, we were off and running.... Well off and thinking. Each group went into an extended Refinement session. Their assignment? Take the Day One ideas, plus the end-of-day builds, and turn them into something polished. This session ended with a quick, mid-day review for executive buy-in.

Creation - Once the story was fine-tuned, we turned ideas into assets. White papers, one-pagers, infographics, email flows, social posts. Whatever would make the campaign real. It wasn't pretty, but by the end of two days, we had more usable content than most teams deliver in a month. And that was the end of Day Two.

Final Polish - The morning of the final day was about smoothing rough edges. Our SMEs gave the content a careful review to see if it passed the sniff test. Jargon was trimmed, visuals sharpened, and headlines clarified. By the end, each team had a credible go-to-market campaign ready to walk out the door. And a sales team that felt confident to use it.

The result

By the end of the sprint, we didn't just have slides and sticky notes. We had three fully armed teams who could walk into the market and actually talk the talk. They knew the customer pain points, they had the language, and they carried stories that felt authentic – because they came from people who had lived that industry.

The impact was immediate. Within weeks, the sales team had lined up a slate of high-quality conversations with prospects who usually wouldn't have given us the time of day. And instead of tripping over the jargon or fumbling the details, our people spoke with confidence. That confidence opened doors, and those doors turned into deals.

It wasn't perfect, and it wasn't polished like a big-budget campaign rollout. But it was fast, it was focused, and it worked. The process turned a potentially vulnerable pivot into a legitimate foothold. More

importantly, it proved that when you give smart people a system and a deadline, they can ramp up faster than anyone thinks possible.

For more examples of plans for different business scenarios, check out the Additional Use Cases at the end of the book.

Part III: Bring It to Life

*“Creativity is thinking up new things.
Innovation is doing new things.”*

Theodore Levitt

Chapter 8: Prepping the Organization

In 2010, IBM asked 1,500 business executives across 60 countries and 33 industries what single leadership quality would matter most in the decade ahead. Their answer wasn't discipline, vision, or integrity. It was creativity.

That was a big statement at the time. IBM put creativity at the very top of the list. Not as a nice-to-have, but as the essential trait for navigating complexity. And yet, more than a decade later, how many organizations have actually built a culture that lives up to that claim? Judging by the past 15 years of corporate decision-making, the answer is... very few.

So, what went wrong? Why has organizational creativity failed to take root? Four usual suspects rise to the surface:

Short-term thinking. Everyone swears by the importance of creativity, but when the pressure is on, executives default to dashboards and quarterly earnings. It's hard to nurture long bets when your calendar is ruled by the next reporting cycle.

Failure phobia. In most organizations, mistakes are career-ending events. Leaders talk about “risk-taking,” but the moment something flops, reputations are damaged. Under those conditions, even the bravest people learn to keep their heads down.

Innovation theater. Hackathons, ping-pong tables, and gamified idea contests gave innovation a new stage, but most of it was performance art. Companies embraced the optics – culture decks, colorful labs, branded beanbags – while quietly underfeeding the messy, unglamorous work of creativity. It's the organizational equivalent of focusing on one loop of the model while letting the rest waste away.

Analysis overload. Since 2010, business has been drunk on data. Every move is modeled, every idea benchmarked. But the approvals take so long and require so much evidence that the spark dies before it's even tested. Creativity needs oxygen, but it's suffocated under an avalanche of decks and dashboards.

Leaders still say the right things. They repeat “creativity” like a mantra at town halls and in annual reports. They put it in mission statements and boldface it on strategy slides. But saying it and structuring for it are two very different things. Creativity doesn’t thrive on slogans. It thrives on how people are rewarded, how risks are treated, and whether leaders leave space for the messy, unpredictable parts of the process.

Here’s the deeper problem: most executives don’t even know what they’re looking for. Creativity is praised in theory but treated with a vagueness that leaves organizations leaning on safe routines while congratulating themselves for “encouraging innovation.”

The IBM study got one thing right: creativity is the most important leadership trait for a complex world. But they didn’t warn us how hard it would be to sustain in environments built for efficiency, predictability, and control. And that’s where the real gap lies. It isn’t between what leaders say and what they believe, but between what they say and what their systems actually reward.

How success becomes a trap

One of the great ironies of business is that success can quietly become the enemy of creativity. Wins get codified

into rules. Habits harden into rituals. And before you know it, the muscle that once made you adaptable turns into a cast that locks you in place.

Psychologists call this functional fixedness. Abraham Maslow gave us the most famous version: “When all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.” Tools, processes, even ways of thinking get frozen in their original purpose. That hammer may have been the perfect solution once, but when it’s the only thing you reach for, you stop seeing new possibilities.

I’ve watched this happen inside organizations. Someone suggests a new approach, and the first response is, “That’s not how we do it.” No malice, just reflex. At its core, functional fixedness isn’t laziness. It’s comfort. Familiar tools feel efficient. Familiar processes feel safe. And the bigger the company, the more those grooves deepen.

No story illustrates this better than Kodak.

In 1975, a Kodak engineer named Steven Sasson built the world’s first digital camera. It wasn’t sleek or pocket-sized. It looked more like a toaster, shot in black-and-white, and had a resolution of just 0.01 megapixels. By today’s standards, it was laughable. But it worked. And it landed on the desk of a company that, at the time, WAS photography. Kodak controlled nearly 90% of the U.S. film market and made billions off film processing and photo kiosks.

They had the future in their hands. And they buried it.

Why? Because to Kodak, everything was a film problem. Their hammer was film stock, film chemistry, film distribution. And when you've invested billions in film, a little toaster-sized gadget that bypasses it all looks less like an opportunity and more like a threat.

For the next two decades, Kodak doubled down on their hammer. They kept building kiosks. They kept telling themselves that consumers would always prefer physical film. Paul Snyder, in his book "Is This Something George Eastman Would Have Done?," puts it bluntly: "Day after day, month after month, year after year, Kodak continued to underestimate electronic imaging... It was too painful for Kodak to face the reality that electronics would make film obsolete."

The tragedy here that Kodak had great ideas. They even had prototypes. The tragedy is that success blinded them to their value. They were locked in a feedback loop where past wins validated present habits. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it" became less a saying and more a survival strategy. Until it broke.

Kodak isn't alone. Every successful company faces this trap. The more a process or product works, the more leaders protect it. They stop questioning it, because to question it feels like questioning the foundation of their own careers. What's rewarded is not curiosity, but

preservation. And preservation is the opposite of innovation.

Here's where this model becomes useful as a lens. The Clover Model of Creativity assumes movement. Ideas loop, shift, and re-enter from new angles. Success in one loop doesn't give you license to stop moving. It demands that you keep circulating.

The hard truth is that success breeds rigidity. Rigidity kills adaptability. And adaptability is the oxygen of creativity. If organizations want to survive, they need to break the habit of treating past success as proof of future security. Otherwise, their hammer will turn every opportunity into just another nail.

The dangers of analysis extremes

If success can freeze an organization, analysis can paralyze it. It's a Goldilocks problem. Too little, and you end up chasing half-baked ideas. Too much, and you smother the life out of them. You need something in the middle.

I've never had a creative idea in my life that didn't benefit from a little analysis – Reflection, Reconsideration, Refinement. Even geniuses edit. The Mona Lisa we marvel at in the Louvre? Scans revealed



that Leonardo painted at least one earlier version with a different face. Creativity without refinement is chaos.

But there's a difference between refinement and over-analysis. And that difference can be fatal.

I once worked with a client who needed a name for a new distilled spirit. The brief was ambitious: it had to reflect their heritage, capture the unique flavor profile, and double as a bar call – something a bartender could hear clearly and pour without confusion. We came back with five strong naming territories, each with multiple candidates.

Instead of narrowing down, the client wanted to keep all five territories alive. Writers were split across directions, churning out more names. We submitted a shortlist. They wanted to see the full list. We shared it, reluctantly. That turned into requests for even more

names. With each round, the feedback grew less about potential and more about nitpicking. “This one doesn’t feel mysterious enough.” “That one’s too modern.” The cycle repeated until weeks of work collapsed into paralysis. In the end, they picked something forgettable. Not because better options weren’t there, but because analysis drained the oxygen out of the process.

Psychologists Barry Schwartz calls this the “Paradox of Choice.” More options don’t create freedom; they create anxiety. The more paths you analyze, the less satisfied you feel with the one you finally choose. Add group dynamics into the mix and the effect multiplies. As a result, this project included endless lists, endless feedback, endless dissatisfaction.

The opposite extreme is just as dangerous. Overconfidence in your own idea blinds you to its flaws. Mumford and his colleagues called this errors of optimism. When teams fall in love with their first idea, they magnify its strengths, ignore its weaknesses, and dismiss alternatives too early.

The danger is that organizations tend to bounce between both extremes. Either they fall head over heels for an untested idea, or they bury promising ones under a mountain of focus groups, studies, and feedback decks. Both are ways of avoiding risk. One does it by rushing forward, the other by hiding behind analysis.



The Clover Model of Creativity offers a different rhythm. Reflection and Refinement aren't separate silos; they're part of the loop. You generate, you test, you pause, you revisit. It's amazing what can happen when you treat analysis as a checkpoint. It sharpens ideas even faster.

The challenge isn't whether to analyze. It's how much, and when. That's the balance leaders need to get right.

The environment question

Even the best process collapses if the environment won't support it. You can build the sharpest tools, design the cleverest frameworks, or run the most inspiring

workshops, but if people return to an organization that doesn't value creativity, it all dies on contact.

Psychologist Kamal Birdi proved this in 2005. He studied the effectiveness of different creativity training workshops and found that participants often walked away buzzing. Their confidence spiked, their belief in their own ability to generate ideas soared. Success, right? Not exactly.

When Birdi tracked participants after training, he noticed something striking. The ones who returned to supportive environments that encouraged experimentation and tolerated mistakes kept using their new skills. Their creativity grew. But the ones who returned to rigid, risk-averse organizations? Their gains evaporated almost instantly. Birdi's conclusion was blunt: "Before introducing any creativity training, the organization needs to ensure the environmental conditions are amenable... a working environment that is averse to change would be like taking a carefully cultivated palm tree and planting it in the middle of the Arctic."

I've seen that play out firsthand. The infamous Brainstorm from Hell wasn't a failure of the people in the room. It was a failure of the supporting structure. Everyone showed up, everyone wanted to contribute (mostly), but the larger organization had no real appetite for change. Leadership treated creativity like a one-off

event instead of a cultural commitment. The result? Employees mirrored the ambivalence they saw at the top. They were there in body, but not in spirit.

This is the part organizations don't like to hear: you can't fake the environment. Culture leaks. If leaders say they want bold ideas but punish every misstep, people notice. If they celebrate experimentation in public but quietly reward only efficiency in private, people notice. And when the signals don't line up, creativity withers.

This model makes this visible. Each loop requires a different kind of energy – Investigation, Ideation, Reflection, Refinement. If the environment only rewards speed or only tolerates Refinement, the other loops don't stand a chance. The whole system collapses.

That's why prepping an organization for creativity isn't about posters, slogans, or innovation labs with beanbag chairs. It's about creating conditions where The Clover Model of Creativity can actually function. Drop it into a rigid, risk-averse culture, and you shouldn't be surprised when it freezes on impact.

How to actually build buy-in

Here's the part most leaders underestimate. Announcing the process is the easy part. The hard part is the politics necessary to get buy-in. You can have the

most research-backed framework in the world, but if nobody inside the organization believes in it, it won't survive its first encounter with reality.

That means the real challenge isn't implementing this model. It's creating an environment where it can actually flourish.

The baby photo effect

I call it the Baby Photo Effect. When new parents have a baby, they don't lead with a lecture on genetics or developmental milestones. They lead with pictures. They always have them ready. They're advocates because they're in love with the outcome, not the messy process.

That's the kind of energy you need for a new creative system. You need advocates who will run around the office showing it off. Not because someone told them to, but because they can't help themselves. Their enthusiasm makes the process contagious.

You can't manufacture that energy with memos or mandates. You earn it by giving people an experience worth talking about. Which means you need to start small and focused, even though your natural inclination is to shout it from the rooftops.

Start with Witnesses

Pick one team. One project. Run the process there. The goal isn't to prove your process works. It's to create witnesses. People who saw it firsthand, who felt the difference, who can walk back into the larger organization and say, "I was there, and it actually worked."

That testimony matters more than any deck. Internal proof beats external preaching. And when those witnesses start talking about it in the hallways, curiosity spreads. Suddenly you don't have to sell the process. Your peers are doing it for you.

Show the Difference

When we tested a new approach at the agency where I worked, we ran two parallel groups. One used the old process. One used the new. Same brief, same talent. At the end, we stacked the outputs side by side and had a neutral party evaluate them.

The result wasn't just more ideas. It was better ideas – sharper, more novel, more feasible. And we got there faster.

The data was useful, but the real power was in the room. The team that used the new process walked away energized. They felt like they'd unlocked something. And

they couldn't stop talking about it. That buzz spread faster than any chart could.

Create Constituency, Not Compliance

This is how you build a constituency. Not by shoving a new system down the throat of a skeptical organization, but by creating small wins that people can point to and say, "See? That's better."

The mistake most leaders make is thinking rollout equals compliance. That if they announce a new process and mandate training, adoption will follow. It won't. People don't rally behind mandates. They rally behind proof of concept.

The Clover Model of Creativity works because it respects looping, messy, iterative nature of the creative process. Rolling it out has to follow the same logic. Start small. Loop. Adapt. Spread. Each success creates a new advocate, and those advocates build the political cover you need to keep going.

Question the Rituals

Here's the unexpected bonus: running these experiments exposes rituals that nobody was questioning. At the agency where I worked, the new process revealed just how many of our habits were steps we'd inherited from old clients, old leaders, old ways of

working. We kept doing them because “that’s how we do it.”

The experiment gave us permission to finally ask: Why? Why do we gather everyone in one room? Why do we expect breakthroughs in 60 minutes? Why do we cling to rituals that make us feel productive instead of ones that actually generate better ideas?

Those questions didn’t just improve the process. They cracked open the culture.

The Long Game

Building a constituency is tough, and it’s slower than top-down decrees. It’s messier than an all-hands training session. But it sticks. And it changes the narrative from “the boss told us to” into “this actually works.”

That’s the moment creativity stops being a buzzword and starts being a practice. That’s when the model takes root.

Because in the end, buy-in requires trust, proof, and the energy to keep going when things get tough. And the organizations that figure that out are the ones that don’t just chant “creativity” at town halls. They actually live it.

Rolling out a new system in your organization is only half the battle. Unless the people champion a process, it will never move beyond a poster in the breakroom. And

people bring their own biases, fears, and habits to the table.

If prepping the organization is about shaping the system, prepping your people is about shaping the mindset. Even the best culture won't carry you if the individuals inside it aren't ready to think – and work – in new ways.

Chapter 9: Prepping the People

It was the first day of our summer internship. As a company, one of the things we took great pride in was involving our interns in actual projects from Day One. No coffee fetching. No busy work. From the moment they walked through the front door of our office, it was “roll up your sleeves and dig in.” We didn’t expect them to immediately deliver, of course. It would take time to get up to speed, learn our processes, and whatnot. But we wanted them to get exposure right off the bat.

They’d spent the morning working their way through the typical new hire onboarding process. Here’s how you track your time. This is where the bathrooms are. The regular stuff. Then we went out for a team lunch to give

them a chance to meet everyone they'd be working with for the next few months.

Mid-afternoon, we pulled the team together to think through some ideas for a project. It wasn't anything complex or high stakes. Just a fun introduction to our creative process. As the team, maybe five full-time employees and 2-3 interns, gathered in the room, we started throwing out ideas. Everyone joined the fun, except one intern. He sat quietly and watched the group. It was a little unusual, but we just figured he was a little shy.

After the session wrapped up, he pulled me aside and said, "That was really amazing to watch."

"Thanks. I'm glad you enjoyed it. Next time, don't be shy about shouting stuff out. There are no wrong answers. You never know where something is going to lead."

He nodded slowly and then said, "That's the thing. Where do you get ideas?"

I won't pretend I had some great, insightful answer. In all honesty, the question threw me a bit. I don't remember my exact answer, but it was something like, "Well, we all have our own ways. Let's set up some time and talk about it more."

I tell this story, not to shame anyone, but as a reminder. If you're going to implement this process, it's essential to remember that not everyone comes from the

same background. As I've said in this book, everyone is creative in their own way, but that doesn't mean it comes naturally (or easily) to everyone. But you never know where an amazing idea will spring from. I've had people who didn't speak for an entire creative thinking session, and then BOOOM! They said one thing that completely changed the way we were thinking.

So, how do you get people ready?

Big C vs little c: a reprise

At this point, we're almost 3/4 of the way through this book, so I don't expect you to remember everything you've read. If you still remember my little speech about "Big C" Creativity vs 'little c' creativity, you can skip this section. For everyone else, here's a quick recap.

We can't all be creative geniuses who reshape the path of human history. I'm talking about the Mozarts, the Michelangelos, the Edisons, the Curies, and the Lamarrs*. People who compose music, carve breathtaking sculptures, or develop world-changing inventions. But it's important to remember that, at some point, the greatest creative geniuses in history were just regular people. We judge them by their crowning achievements and overlook the work they put into achieving greatness. For example, everyone knows

Michelangelo's David and his work on the Sistine Chapel, but few people consider his years as an apprentice, where he learned the skills that he would ultimately master and adapt in the creation of his masterpieces.

As a result, we think of creativity as "Big C" Creativity and discount or downplay the 'little c' creativity moments that happen in our everyday lives - the baking, the decorating, the designing, the writing. All the myriad ways that our inherent creativity makes itself apparent. To even begin the process of preparing your thinkers, the first step is to get them to recognize their own creative capabilities.

*If you don't know who Hedy Lamarr is, do yourself a favor and look her up. She's an actress from Hollywood's Golden Era, who was part of the team whose discovery laid the groundwork for Bluetooth and Wi-Fi. It also made torpedoes more difficult to jam.

Reframe creativity

I mentioned earlier that people often confuse creative with artistic. In their minds, if they can't paint, draw, or sculpt, then they aren't creative. It's essential to shake them out of this mindset of what is and isn't creative. In "Evaluations of Self-Perception of Creativity," Reiter-



Palmon, Robinson-Morrall, Kaufman, and Santo (2012) outlined ten creative domains, including visual arts, music, dance, architectural design, creative writing, humor, inventions, scientific discovery, theatre and film, and culinary arts.

I'm not sure I've ever met someone who doesn't exhibit any of these skills in some form or another, so when I approach people, it's often from the perspective of learning which one of these skills they exhibit. That's easy enough for co-workers and friends, but what about strangers you're meeting just before a creative thinking session? One of the ice-breaker/introduction activities I often use is a creativity reframing exercise that invites people to share some aspect of their personality that aligns with one of these ten areas. Then, we talk about how creativity can come in many forms, and that's

exactly what we want and need them to bring to the session we're about to start - their unique creative perspective and experience.

Encourage whole-self thinking

Once you've established that anyone can be creative, the next logical step is that any idea or experience can prompt a creative breakthrough. Early in my career, I worked for an agency that attempted (unsuccessfully) to launch its own brainstorming-style process. They held training sessions with spiral-bound books to explain how our process was going to set us apart in the industry. Honestly, the "proprietary process" was essentially brainstorming with all the names changed and cool process graphics. But the one thing they stress, and I still believe today, is that a good idea can come from anywhere.

It's easy to believe, because I've seen it happen. I've watched maintenance staff, support staff, office staff, and random passersby drop a piece of knowledge or an insight that shifts the perspective of an entire room of thinkers. A nugget that breaks a creative stalemate. Or an utterance that sparks a whole new line of thinking. But it isn't just accidental, either. I've seen some of the most amazing ideas come from everywhere and everyone.

You never know when someone in your office has a passion for something related to the root of your challenge. Or when they have an insight that seems truly unrelated, until it clarifies a problem you didn't even know you had.

That's where whole-self thinking comes in. It's looking through your entire wealth of knowledge and experience to find nuggets that might be tangentially relevant. It's also about giving thinkers the permission (and the comfort level) to share things that (at first) might sound completely random. Again, this is where the initial small group thinking sessions pay dividends. Those tangential experiences are easier to share in a group of 3 or 4 than they are in a group of 10. And there's an increased likelihood that those small teams will listen and engage with the idea versus moving on to something else. But if you want teams to really listen and dive in, you have to show them how.

Modeling the process

Earlier in the book, I talked about Michelangelo and the years he spent as an apprentice under the tutelage of Bertoldo di Giovanni, who himself studied under the great Donatello. The point I keep trying to make is this - as great a talent as Michelangelo undoubtedly was, he



benefited from an apprenticeship under a skilled master, because it helped him accelerate his learning and maximize the talent he already had.

Similarly, in your organization, you need to model the behavior you want new participants to follow. In “Creative Self-Efficacy: Its Potential Antecedents and Relationship to Creative Performance,” Tierney and Farmer (2002) outline the importance of a supervisor or group leader to the performance of a group, particularly in modeling the creative skills they want team members to exhibit. If you want your thinkers to succeed and exceed, it’s going to be up to you to create the environment and model the behaviors you know will make them successful.

Here’s a quick recap of skills that encourage creative growth in team members:

Fluency - Generating a large volume of ideas gives teams more raw material to work with. The more options on the table, the higher the chance of uncovering something truly valuable.

Originality - Unique, surprising ideas cut through the noise. They push the team beyond obvious answers and open doors to innovative solutions competitors won't see coming.

Flexibility - Shifting easily between perspectives or problem frames helps teams avoid fixation. It allows creative progress even when the first angle stalls out.

Imagination - The ability to envision possibilities beyond current reality is the spark that fuels breakthrough thinking. Without imagination, innovation collapses into incrementalism.

Field Independence - Thinking beyond group norms or established patterns ensures fresh contributions. It prevents teams from falling into echo chamber solutions.

Knowledge of Heuristics - Knowing creative strategies and mental shortcuts gives teams practical tools to escape ruts and structure their idea generation more effectively.

Independent Thinking - The courage to stand by one's own perspective fosters diversity of thought. Teams need those voices that don't just conform but push the conversation forward.

Coping with Novelty or Chaos – New ideas often arrive messy and unclear. Comfort with ambiguity allows teams to sit with uncertainty long enough for real insights to emerge.

Recognizing Gaps in Knowledge – Spotting what’s missing is often more valuable than spotting what’s there. It guides the team toward overlooked opportunities and unanswered questions that spark innovation.

It wouldn’t be fair to expect you (or anyone) to demonstrate all of these capabilities. But the more the better. Pick the ones you’re good at, and surround yourself with the creative thinkers who show a strength in an area where you have a weakness. Together, you can model as many of these behaviors as possible and set your team up for success.

Empower them to own the process

This book is full of tools and advice. That’s why you picked it up. It shows you how to lay the foundation that will give you the best chance of consistently generating great ideas. However, and it’s a BIG however, every situation is a bit different. I’ve given you several solid case studies of how I applied this system in real-life business scenarios, and I have more examples (both real

and hypothetical) in the Additional Use Cases at the end of the book. The key thing to remember is that each of those situations was wildly different from the previous scenario. Different challenges. Different opportunities. Different personalities in the room.

For beginners, you'll find more initial success by sticking close to what I've outlined here. As your groups get more experienced, view this book as less of a script and more of a framework. When you empower your thinkers to own the process, they'll surprise you. Empowering a person to take what they've learned and make it their own increases self-efficacy and allows a person to make adjustments and additions to the behavior.

Just as Donatello passed the torch to Michelangelo, you must pass the torch to your team. And just like Michelangelo learned from a master and then added his own artistic touches, your team will do the same. This isn't about rote repetition. It's about creating a personal process that every single thinker can use to maximize their self-efficacy, productivity, and creativity.

As Abraham Maslow said, "I think therefore a good question might be not why do people create? But why do people not create or innovate? We have got to abandon that sense of amazement in the face of creativity, as if it were a miracle if anybody created anything." By effectively prepping your team for success, you can do

your part to give your team the necessary tools to not be surprised when they come up with something amazing.

Chapter 10: Prepping Yourself

This had to be the slowest elevator on Earth. I looked at the floor indicator panel as it slowly crept up. 6... 7.... 8..... $8\frac{1}{4}$ $8\frac{1}{2}$ $8\frac{9}{14}$ For the love of God! When the doors finally opened on the 9th floor, I ran in and pressed the button for the 11th floor. The light flickered momentarily and then blinked out. I pressed it again. And again it blinked out. “Right,” I sighed, “I need a badge to get onto the 11th floor.”

I ran off the elevator to grab someone from the 9th-floor creative thinking session to use their badge to give me access. As we waited awkwardly in the lobby, I asked how the session was going. “Pretty good, we were hitting our stride right when you came in to get me.”

“Sorry for dragging you out to use your badge,” I said.

“No problem,” they responded, “One of the joys of a co-working space.”

The elevator doors parted, and I jumped in. They swiped their badge, pressed 11, and I was off.

When I walked into the huddle room on the 11th floor, the room was quiet and everyone was staring at their phones. “How’s it going?” I asked.

“We had some questions, so we decided to wait for you to come back.”

Inside, I wanted to scream, but that wouldn’t have been effective, nor would it have fostered an open environment for sharing creative ideas.

So, you’ve prepared the company. You’ve prepared the team. But how do you prepare yourself?

Embrace your inner facilitator

If you’re anything like most people, the idea of standing in front of a group of people is terrifying, especially when you’re purporting to lead them in a creative thinking exercise that’s going to unveil some breakthrough revelation.

Paging Imposter Syndrome... Party of one.

I get it. And I’m not immune to that feeling myself. I still host sessions where (despite my preparation and

confidence in the process) there are moments before we start that I think this could all go terribly wrong. And then the session starts, the momentum builds, and we hit our mark as a team.

In those moments, I think back to Tierney & Farmer's research in "Creative Self-Efficacy: Its Potential Antecedents and Relationship to Creative Performance." They found that leaders build creative self-efficacy through modeling and verbal persuasion. That's exactly what you need to do as a facilitator. You don't need to be a creative genius or some sort of visionary. You don't need to lift the whole group on your back and carry them to a creative outcome.

Remind yourself that you're not here to provide genius on demand, you're here to create the conditions for other people to think.

You need to model openness, curiosity, and constructive engagement. Listen to ideas. Ask thoughtful questions. Encourage everyone to contribute. That's enough to unlock participation and get the ball rolling.

Here's the minimum skill set you need.

- Hold the focus on the Aim.
- Manage the clock
- Make sure everyone contributes (even the quiet ones)

That's it. Everything else is personal style. In the end, it doesn't matter if you're creative or not. I've seen stereotypically creative people fail horribly at facilitating creative thinking sessions because they let discussion drift or drag. Or because they allowed one person to dominate the meeting (or they tried to dominate it themselves).

All you need to do is keep those three simple rules in mind. Keep the group on task. Honor the brief. And invite quiet voices to participate. Everything else will take care of itself.

The show starts in 5

Still feeling pangs of anxiety? That's okay too. Getting up in front of a room can be tough. In fact, one 2012 study found that public speaking ranked 2nd on a list of fears... just behind DEATH! So, a little anxiety is to be expected.

I was having a conversation with my son about the very same topic. He gets deathly nervous when he needs to speak in front of a group. Sweaty palms. Body trembles. The whole experience. So, he was regaling me with his most recent public speaking foray, where he had to stand up in front of his class to debate some aspect of the Civil War. He was convinced it went terribly.

Here's the thing. He also swims competitively. So, he's no stranger to dealing with nerves and excited energy. He's also no stranger to getting up in front of crowds, which can be 50 times the size of the class. He still gets nervous, but he's found a way to calm himself. To focus on the race at hand. I've seen him do it. It's two big arm flaps where he wraps his arms around himself and slaps his hand on his back. It's a relaxing arm jiggle at his side. Adjust the goggles. Two big breaths. And he's ready to race.

To calm your nerves, you need to find your calming routine. Whatever it is. For me, it's a last flip through the notes. It's a positive visualization of success from a past creative thinking session. And away we go.

Whatever your routine is, find it and follow it. Remind yourself that you're not here to provide genius on demand, you're here to create the conditions for other people to think. That shift of removing the pressure to be "the creative one" is often enough to loosen the grip of Imposter Syndrome. Some facilitators like a small ritual: a deep breath, a stretch, even jotting down three questions to use to spark conversation. Whatever works, the point is the same: calm yourself so the group can feed off your steadiness. If you're grounded, they will be too.

Big personalities. Little ideas.

Every facilitator eventually learns the same truth: the ideas are the easy part. The hard part is the people. Rooms come alive (or fall apart) based on how you manage personalities. That's the real job. You're not there to be the genius at the whiteboard; you're there to keep the energy moving and make sure one person's quirks don't derail the whole group. The trick is not to fear these moments, but to expect them.

Up to this point, we've talked about breaking big groups into smaller, more manageable groups that are mainly responsible for themselves. But eventually, you're going to find yourself face-to-face with a larger group, and I'd be remiss if we didn't at least talk about how to deal with these groups.

The quiet room. The hijacker. The clock killer. The cynic. They'll all show up eventually. Your job is to hold firm, keep calm, and carry on. Keep the process intact. When you do it well, nobody notices. And that's the point. A good facilitator disappears into the background while the group does its best thinking.

The quiet room

You open with a question and watch it die midair. No eye contact. People shuffle papers, glance at phones.

Someone coughs. It feels like a hostage situation, and the silence stretches so long you start to hear your own pulse. Don't panic. Most groups need a warm-up before they'll risk putting ideas out loud. Lower the bar: ask for something obvious, even boring, that everyone can agree on. Then break into pairs or trios and let them talk in smaller circles before sharing out. Momentum builds slowly. Once a few voices find their footing, others will follow.

The idea flood

Sometimes silence isn't the problem; chaos is. Ideas pile up on sticky notes, scribbles cover the whiteboard, and it feels like progress. But sheer volume doesn't equal clarity. Without structure, the flood drowns everyone. This is where you hit pause. Cluster similar ideas, name the themes, and get the group to dot-vote or rank priorities. It shifts the energy from generating more to making sense of what's already there. People relax when they see a shape emerging from the mess. The point isn't to stop the flow. It's to channel it so the good ideas don't get lost in the noise. Creativity is worthless if nobody can remember where the wall of sticky notes actually led.

The clock killer

Nothing drains a session faster than getting stuck in the weeds. The clock killer is usually well-meaning, diving deep into details while the agenda quietly burns. Thirty minutes later, you're still debating step one, and the group is restless. Here's the move: name the time out loud. "We've got ten minutes left to shortlist or we won't make it." That simple frame shifts the group's mindset. Scarcity sharpens focus. You don't need to be a tyrant with a stopwatch, but you do need to guard the arc of the session. Creativity without deadlines turns into daydreaming. Remind people of the finish line and they'll sprint.

The side conversation

Two people in the corner are whispering. Or worse, laughing. It feels like disrespect, but more often it's a spark they don't want to lose. Left unchecked, though, it fractures the room. The move is to fold it back in. "Sounds like you're onto something. Want to share it with the group?" Most of the time, they will. If it's off-topic, capture it on a "parking lot" list and return later. Either way, you've turned distraction into contribution. The key is to handle it lightly. Don't scold, don't shame. Keep the energy positive. A good facilitator knows side

talk isn't always sabotage. Sometimes it's just ideas trying to sneak in through a different door.

The energy crash

It's 3 p.m. The sugar high is gone, caffeine's worn off, and the energy in the room wanes. People aren't out of ideas. They're just out of gas. This is when facilitators panic and try to push harder. Don't. Get people standing, swapping partners, or doing a lightning round with absurdly short time limits. Physical movement resets mental energy. Even a two-minute stretch buys you another half hour of focus. Remember, creativity feeds on energy. If the room feels flat, the ideas will too. Your



job isn't to drag them across the finish line. It's to change the terrain so they can walk again.

The cynic

You'll know them by the folded arms, the smirk, the quiet comments about "corporate theater." They're not entirely wrong. Many brainstorming sessions are theater. But cynics mask insight behind attitude. If you try to wrestle them, you lose the room. So don't. Instead, give them a challenge they can't shrug off: "What's one improvement you'd actually care about?" That small shift puts them on the hook. They may still posture, but if you listen past the delivery, you'll often find the sharpest critique of the problem. Once they see that their candor is valued, they stop doubting or resisting and start shaping the conversation.

The hijacker

The hijacker doesn't just bring opinions. They bring an agenda. No matter what the group discusses, they steer it back to their pet project. It's frustrating, and if you ignore it, the whole session gets swallowed. The trick is acknowledgment without surrender. Capture their point, write it visibly, and park it on a "Later" list. Then return the group to the Aim. This shows respect without letting them drive. Most hijackers just want to be heard. Once

their idea is captured in ink, they relax. The group moves forward, and the process stays intact.

The ghosts

You walk in and notice empty chairs that were supposed to be filled with the people whose presence mattered most. Maybe they were double-booked, maybe they didn't value the session. Either way, the group feels incomplete. Pretending otherwise doesn't help. Call it out: "We're missing voices we expected. Do we move forward with what we have, or reschedule?" Sometimes the honest answer is to push ahead. Other times, you hit pause and save everyone's time. The effectiveness of the session and the credibility of the outcome is more important than when the meeting happens... usually.

The tech fail

Virtual session and meeting app freezes. It's a hybrid meeting, and the people online can't hear half the room. Suddenly, you're no longer facilitating; you're tech support. Don't let the tools own you. Always have a low-tech backup: sticky notes, a Google Doc, even a quick sketch on paper you can photograph. If you keep the Aim visible and the process clear, the session can survive without gadgets. In fact, the lack of tech might even inspire unique solutions if you frame the challenge

correctly. Keep the energy moving. Remind the group that the system is bigger than the tool.

The groupthink spiral

On the surface, this looks like success. Everyone is aligned, nodding, agreeing. But the ideas feel flat, safe, predictable. That's groupthink. Nobody wants to rock the boat, so they settle for consensus. Your move: introduce friction. Assign someone the "red team" role. Ask, "What if we did the opposite?" It doesn't take much to break the trance. Remind the group that creativity requires tension. When everyone thinks alike, the best ideas stay hidden.

The status game

Hierarchy shows up in subtle ways. Junior folks defer. Senior voices get nods they haven't earned. The result: safe ideas. Level the field with anonymous input. Use sticky notes collected silently, digital forms, or solo writing before group share. Once the ideas are on the wall, discuss them without names attached. Suddenly, the best thinking stands on its own. By shielding creativity from power dynamics, you're giving these ideas a chance to breath and grow. Without that protection, the room won't give you its real brainpower.

The tangent trap

You start with the Aim, but soon the group veers off. They're forty minutes deep in a side problem, and nobody remembers why you're here. Tangents feel productive, but they rarely are. The move is to capture, name, and park them. Stick it in the parking lot where everyone can see. That way, people know their thought isn't lost, just saved for later. Then pivot back to the Aim. This keeps momentum while respecting contributions. A tangent ignored breeds resentment. A tangent captured keeps the session intact.

Find your own way

From overcoming Imposter Syndrome to dealing with nerves to managing a tough room, this chapter has been about arming you with the tools to succeed as a facilitator. But here's the thing: You'll eventually find things that work better for you than anything I've shared.

That's the truly interesting part of leading these sessions. You learn more and become better from each one you lead. Some will be great, and some will definitely leave room for improvement. But each one will be an amazing experience, because you get a front row seat for

the creative process. You get to be there for the birth of an idea. And that's always an incredible experience.

Chapter 11: Making the System Your Own

Ok. It's time for two sentences of unfiltered arrogance. The first few times I saw the system working as I'd intended, my mind said, "I'M DOING IT! IT'S WORKING!" I was a genius. Then I went through a few sessions that weren't quite so good. Not because the process wasn't sound or practical, but because *I* wasn't good. Like the scenario I painted earlier in the book, I was running from room to room. The pace was hectic. I was off my game. And the people in the room (or rooms) expected me to do something, which I did. I felt like the Pied Piper. Everyone was waiting for me to play, so they could

dance. But just because I did a thing that worked, doesn't mean it was the right or best thing.

That's when I realized, this should never be about me. For this to scale, it had to grow beyond my capacity to lead it. It had to be about the system. And the thinkers using the system to succeed. The challenge is stepping back from something you've grown and developed from a pre-idea into something that can take on a life of its own. You have to move from the magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat to a mentor who shows others how to build the magic hat.

It's sort of like being a parent. You take what you've learned and pass along your best advice to your children. Then you step back and watch them take some of it to heart and ignore other bits.



Stepping back so others can step up

After weeks of planning, the entire team was in town to work on our Q2 strategy. Lily was going to take the lead. We'd outlined the goals. Created the IdeaBrief. Mapped out our activities. Sent the pre-thinking questions. Everything was set. All that was left was the session itself. The easy part. As everyone settled into position, I took an unfamiliar seat at the back of the room. This wasn't my show to lead.

She was organized, calm under pressure, and had a knack for reading the room. She started by walking the group through the IdeaBrief, slow and deliberate. But as she gained confidence, she picked up steam. The gears of the process began to turn. Teams split into small groups, scribbling furiously. The wall is filled with stickies. When she called them back together, she steered them toward the shortlist without flinching. A couple of ideas stumbled, a few fell flat, but the bones held.

By the end of the hour, the table was covered with a handful of viable, polished concepts. The energy in the room was tired but satisfied, the way a team looks after a solid workout. It didn't look exactly like my version. It wasn't supposed to. That was the point; this isn't my

system. It was Lily's system. And now it's your system. It's up to you to do something amazing.

The bones are good

As a homeowner, I've always been attracted to older homes. They have certain character and peculiarities that I find enchanting. But the most important thing is to find a home with good bones. It's homeowner shorthand for, "sure, there's stuff you're going to have to update, and you'll run into some hiccups along the way, but there's a solid foundation. You don't have to worry about it crumbling down around you." There might be lime green tile in the bathroom. Or carpet in the kitchen (true story). But the foundation is there, and it's something you can work with and build on.

That's how I think about this system. You're still going to have to do some work. Have a plan and a vision. But the good bones are there to support whatever you have in mind. That's exactly what the IdeaBrief is. It's the solid foundation. The good bones of the whole process. Without it, every team reinvents the wheel; with it, they can slot the necessary pieces right into place: Aim, Background, Obstacles, Opportunities. Everyone can hold it in their head, repeat it, and apply it. Like a

quarterback calling a play, everyone knows the language, the roles, and the goal.

Research shows that shared mental models improve coordination and resilience, and I've seen the same in practice. When people had the IdeaBrief, sessions moved faster, stayed on track, and ideas were more relevant. When they didn't, groups wandered off into side problems, tangents, and distractions. That's why teachability starts with a mental model: it's the compass that keeps people oriented, even when facilitators change or group energy shifts. Without it, things collapse into chaos.

Customization without chaos

So, as you get more comfortable in the system, how much can you change before things stop working? It's a natural question. Here's an honest assessment - the core process needs to stay the same. The sequence of IdeaBrief → Solo → Small Groups → Refinement → Shortlist → Big Build is essential to the system's success. If you skip any step, you'll feel things begin to break down.

However, within those steps or between the steps, you have quite a bit of flexibility. You do different kinds of pre-thinking exercises and different kinds of priming. You can assign the small groups a specific exercise or task.

You can have teams work virtually or asynchronously. In the back of the book, I've shared a number of Additional Use Cases to show how you can customize this process for different projects.

Overall, I encourage you to test and adapt the system as you get more comfortable with it, but the spine of the process needs to stay intact.

Keeping it alive

The first time you run this process, it'll feel electric. People leave buzzing, you've got a wall full of ideas, and for a moment, it feels like you've cracked the code. But the real challenge isn't getting one session right. It's keeping that momentum alive six months later, when everyone's calendars are clogged again and the neon stickies have lost their novelty.

Run a short debrief after every session. What worked? What clunked? Capture it. Don't overthink it. Two bullet points per person is enough. Over time, those notes become gold. Rotate facilitators so it's not always the same person steering the ship. That spreads the skill set and keeps things from becoming "Mike's process" (or Lily's, or whoever's). Keep a living playbook where you log lessons and tweaks. Celebrate the small wins: that one idea that came out of nowhere and made it into

production, the session that cracked a problem the team had been stuck on for months. Shine a light on those moments, because they tell people the process is worth the time.

And don't forget the stories. Share them, even the messy ones. "Remember when we thought the thinking session was a train wreck, but that one sticky note turned into our new product line?" Folklore is how the process takes root across teams.

Keep an eye out for stagnation. Old habits creep back in unless leaders protect the space, model curiosity, and remind people why this matters. Left unattended, the system won't collapse dramatically. It'll just fade into background noise. And that's a worse death than failure.

The boundary between evolution and drift

Here's the tricky part. Every system needs to evolve, or it dies. But too much drift, and you're back to the same broken brainstorming we buried in Chapter 1. The line between the two is thinner than it looks.

Healthy evolution is when teams tweak the how but protect the why. You swap out sticky notes for digital boards. You shorten solo time because your group is

small and fast-moving. You add sketches or props because that's how your people think best. That's evolution. It keeps the system alive and relevant.

Drift happens when the guardrails get ignored. When someone skips the IdeaBrief because "we already know the problem." When a leader refuses to break into small groups because "it'll be faster this way." When reflection disappears because "we don't have time." That's not evolution – that's erosion. And erosion will always take you back to the same tired cycle: the loudest voice wins, everyone else shuts down, and you wonder why the session didn't work.

Think of it like renovating a house. You can repaint, knock down walls, redo the kitchen – that's evolution. But if you start hacking away at the foundation, the whole thing collapses. The system can bend a lot further than people expect, but it can't survive without its bones.

Epilogue - Is This Really The End?

Well, I can't believe we've made it this far. You reading this book. And me writing it. This has been a labor of love for almost 10 years. I've started and abandoned more versions of this book than you can imagine.

Why?

Because I couldn't stop thinking about it.

Every time I tried to walk away, another thought would tap me on the shoulder – a better example, a clearer metaphor, a sharper truth. I kept finding (or wanting to find) ways to make it better and stronger.

In hindsight, that feels fitting. Because creativity never really is done. It's a process of endless revision. You fix

one thing, and another appears. You improve the model, and the model improves you.

A researcher's confession

I'm incredibly passionate about the science behind this system. A lot of what you've read here was born from my master's thesis. In the early drafts, it showed.

They read more like research reports than something anyone other than my mom or my thesis advisor would want to read. They were precise, but lacked life.

The hardest thing part of this book wasn't doing the research, it was letting it go.

Because science can explain how creativity works, but it can't make you feel it. I wanted this book to do both: to give you enough of the science to trust the system, and enough of the story to feel the human heartbeat underneath it.

My goal was to make this approachable and enjoyable. I wanted to give you something you could dog-ear, underline, argue with, and try out in the real world.

The “real room” test

One of the things I always struggled with when I read books like this was that I found myself asking a simple question: “It sounds good on paper, but have you actually done this in a real room with real people for a real scenario?”

Too often, the answer was no.

I’ve sat through too many glossy frameworks that sound brilliant until they meet the messiness of human behavior. That’s why I’ve worked so hard to ground everything here in lived experience. I wanted you to see the moments where I ran these sessions, watched them succeed, sometimes watched them fall apart, and learned from both.

If there’s one thing I hope this book proved, it’s that creativity can be practical. Tangible. It sweats, stumbles, and occasionally swears. And that’s what makes it beautiful.

Passing the torch

I hope I’ve been able to tick those three boxes about this approach:

- How this model works
- Why it works
- What it looks like in motion

But more than that, I hope I’ve given you permission to make it your own.

After all, I meant what I said: this isn't my system anymore. It never really was. I just gave shape to what's always been true – that ideas grow best in open air, that structure and freedom need each other, and that creativity isn't something you have, it's something you practice.

So take it. Break it. Rebuild it.

Make it better.

The real reward

If I'm honest, the greatest joy of this work has never been the moments when it all goes perfectly. It's been the quiet breakthroughs. A great idea bursting forth in an excited shout. The even better idea that smolders and then slowly catches fire. When someone who thought they weren't creative suddenly sees that they are.

That's the moment I live for. When confidence catches light.

It reminds me why I do this, and why I'll probably never stop. Because creativity, at its best, isn't about innovation or productivity. It's about the feeling that you can shape your world instead of just reacting to it.

If this book has helped even one person feel that spark again, then the ten-year detour was worth every hour.

The conversation continues

And if you ever want to talk more about this – the process, the practice, the hard parts, the weird parts – I’m easy to find.

Drop me a line at info@alexisdead.com.

I love these conversations. I learn as much from them as I do from the research. Every person who tries this system teaches me something new about how creativity lives and breathes.

That’s the beauty of letting an idea go. It starts to teach you back.

A final thought

So wherever this book finds you...at your desk, in a meeting room, or staring at a blank page you’re not sure how to fill, I hope you’ll remember this:

You already have everything you need to create.

The tools are just reminders.

And if one day you find yourself in a room that feels too quiet, too heavy, too afraid to imagine, draw a small clover on the corner of the whiteboard.

Someone will ask what it means. And that’s how you start.

Part IV: Appendix

*“Ideas are like rabbits. You get a couple
and learn how to handle them, and
pretty soon you have a dozen.”*

John Steinbeck

Additional Use Cases

As I said earlier in the book, I've mainly used this system for marketing-related tasks. Since there's a high probability that you don't work in marketing, the goal of this section is to provide a glimpse into how I'd use this system for challenges across industries and departments.

For the scenarios, I asked my favorite AI tool to generate fictional business scenarios where a company might be looking to innovate. What follows are eight scenarios pulled from across industries – manufacturing, healthcare, retail, crypto, and beyond. None of these companies exist. All of these problems do. And each shows how the system can turn panic into possibility.

The Supply Chain Shuffle

Scenario Overview

A mid-sized manufacturer with a global customer base suddenly learns that a major port is shutting down because of a strike. Cargo is sitting on docks, ships are idling offshore, and containers are piling up with no clear timeline for resolution. The ripple effect is immediate: clients start asking questions, distributors want guarantees, and competitors smell opportunity. If the product doesn't move soon, years of trust and contracts are at risk.

Business Challenge

This is an existential crisis for the company. The company's supply chain is exposed as fragile and overly dependent on a few key routes and partners. Leadership must show both immediate control and long-term resilience. But traditional command-center thinking won't solve this. The company needs to open its perspective, invite unconventional comparisons, and rebuild a supply chain that can flex under pressure.

The Clover Model in Action

Recognition & Investigation

Map the full chain from raw materials to customer delivery. Where does control end and dependency begin? What assumptions about the way we do things are being tested by this disruption?

Then, look outward. How do industries that face unpredictable bottlenecks – airlines, live event production, humanitarian logistics – keep things moving when one route fails? What visibility tools or decision protocols do they use that this company could borrow?

Ideation

Reframe the problem as the pattern. If ports are chokepoints, where else could flexibility be built? Look for alternate transport modes, staggered production, and domestic partners.

Pull in analogies from digital systems. How do networks route around broken nodes? How do cloud platforms maintain uptime across continents? What would it look like if your supply chain acted more like the internet? What if it could be self-healing, adaptive, decentralized?

Reflection

Sort the ideas by what stabilizes the company now versus what future-proofs it later. Which quick fixes risk reinforcing fragility? Which longer-term changes could actually simplify operations?

Compare your plan with case studies from leading manufacturers or logistics innovators that weathered major global disruptions. What did they change first? Process? Partnerships? Mindset?

Refinement & Implementation

Pick one short-term fix to stabilize shipments this quarter, and one structural change to test over the next year.

Design micro-prototypes: a dual-routing pilot, a secondary supplier test, a visibility dashboard trial. Measure not just cost, but confidence. How easily can teams make decisions when the unexpected happens?

Who's Involved? What Are They Looking Into?

- **Procurement Lead:** How have other manufacturers built supplier redundancy without driving up costs or complexity?

- Logistics Director: What patterns do we see in our most recent shipping delays? Are they caused by contracts, partners, or forecasting errors?
- Finance: How is disruption currently impacting cash flow, penalties, and customer concessions?
- Plant Manager: How adaptable is our production line if parts arrive out of sequence or from alternative suppliers?
- Marketing & Client Services: How have other brands turned operational crises into trust-building moments through transparency or storytelling?
- IT/Data Operations: What real-time visibility gaps prevent us from knowing where shipments or materials are?

Outcome

A cross-functional plan that balances speed with strategy – one that not only clears today's backlog, but redefines how the company anticipates and absorbs disruption.

The Hospital Bottleneck

Scenario Overview

A regional hospital is gridlocked. Beds are full, patients wait for hours, and staff are exhausted. IT blames staffing. Doctors blame administrators. Everyone's frustrated. The truth is, no one sees the full patient journey.

Business Challenge

The hospital is struggling as a whole, but each department is myopically looking at its own successes and failures. The goal is to uncover where coordination breaks down and rebuild the flow of care across intake, diagnostics, inpatient units, and discharge.

The Clover Model in Action

Recognition & Investigation

Start by examining the real flow. Track a single patient from arrival to discharge and document every handoff. Where does time vanish? Which “must-do” steps are habits, and which are requirements?

Look outward: how do the best-performing hospitals track and share patient movement? How do other

industries with capacity bottlenecks, like airlines or theme parks, manage complex handoffs and irregular traffic under pressure?

Ideation

Focus on what would make the system more visible and responsive. What if patient movement were treated like air traffic control, where everyone sees the same screen?

Study how other large systems maintain flow, including major event venues or logistics networks. What principles could translate to healthcare? Which small adjustments could create the biggest sense of momentum?

Reflection

Pause to separate signal from noise. Which ideas solve symptoms versus causes? Where are you still assuming your world is too unique to learn from others?

Compare your observations with external benchmarks: how do hospitals that rank high in throughput or patient satisfaction describe their coordination models? What patterns repeat across industries that deal in both urgency and precision?

Refinement & Implementation

Choose one small prototype to test for a week—perhaps a

shared status board or a new triage protocol. Define two metrics to track daily, like door-to-triage time or discharge turnaround.

Before rolling it out, review how similar pilots succeeded elsewhere. What safeguards or incentives did they use that you can borrow? This isn't going to be a one-time fix. Treat each test as part of an ongoing learning loop.

Who's Involved? What Are They Looking Into?

- ER Lead Nurse: Where do delays actually start, and which ones feel inevitable but aren't?
- Hospital Operations Director: How do logistics or aviation teams model and predict capacity bottlenecks before they happen?
- IT Systems Manager: Which systems fail to talk to each other, and what manual workarounds do staff use to fill those gaps?

Finance: How do other healthcare systems measure the ROI of operational resilience and patient flow improvements?

- Quality & Compliance: Which hospitals have streamlined compliance without compromising safety, and how did they win approval for it?

- Communications Lead: How do we currently manage patient expectations during long waits?

Outcome

A clear map of the full patient journey, a short-cycle test inspired by outside excellence, and a team that has learned to see a comprehensive ecosystem that moves people well.

Welcome Aboard... or Jumping Ship?

Scenario Overview

A mid-sized tech firm is bleeding talent. Nearly 40% of new hires leave within their first year. Exit interviews tell a consistent story: onboarding is confusing, culture feels opaque, and support disappears after week one. New employees arrive energized, then drift into frustration and self-doubt. For a company trying to scale, this level of turnover will prove to be a major impediment to their ability to scale.

Business Challenge

The company treats onboarding as paperwork and orientation rather than an experience that shapes belonging and belief. As a result, they struggle to integrate new hires into the company. Fixing it means building an environment where new hires feel equipped, connected, and confident – without overwhelming managers or pretending culture can be “taught” in a deck.

The Clover Model in Action

Recognition & Investigation

Review the current new-hire experience. Where do

people feel energized, and where do they start drifting? What assumptions does the company make about what “everyone already knows”?

Look outward: how do organizations with high retention rates create early belonging? What can we learn from sectors that integrate newcomers into complex teams instantly, such as hospitality, performing arts, or the military?

Ideation

Reimagine onboarding as a first-year journey. What if we gave employees time to learn the ropes from a mentor, rather than asking them to read about it in a manual?

Pull inspiration from subscription services, gaming, or fitness apps. What industries hook engagement through progress, recognition, and feedback loops? What would it look like if onboarding worked like leveling up?

Reflection

Step back and test assumptions. Which parts of onboarding are designed for the company’s benefit instead of the new hire? What emotional moments define whether someone stays or leaves?

Compare your ideas with examples from companies

known for strong culture-building. How do they balance structure with autonomy in those critical early months?

Refinement & Implementation

Pick one element to pilot for the next hiring cohort – maybe a structured buddy system, a week-one project, or a personal growth map. Define two success signals: early engagement and 90-day satisfaction survey.

Review how similar pilots have worked elsewhere. What rituals or storytelling techniques could strengthen your version before rollout?

Who's Involved? What Are They Looking Into?

- **HR Lead:** How do companies with top retention scores structure their onboarding timeline?
- **Manager:** What is the biggest drop-off in engagement/excitement of new employees in the first 90 days?
- **Learning & Development:** What can we borrow from consumer education models or online learning platforms to improve clarity and engagement?
- **IT & Systems Support:** Where do new hires lose time or confidence because of setup delays or tech barriers?

- Talent Acquisition: What expectations are we setting during recruiting that the reality of onboarding fails to meet?

Outcome

A redesigned onboarding experience that transforms uncertainty into confidence, and is built on lessons from both inside and far beyond the company's walls.

Staying One Step Ahead

Scenario Overview

A regional financial services firm has just failed a cybersecurity audit. The report exposed outdated systems, inconsistent playbooks, and fragmented communication between IT, legal, and leadership. A breach hasn't happened yet, but if it did, confusion would spread faster than the malware. While they may be technically prepared, the organization hasn't yet practiced thinking clearly under fire.

Business Challenge

Preparedness has to be a company-wide focus built around teamwork, timing, and trust. The firm needs to align how people act, decide, and communicate long before an attack occurs. The goal is to build foresight and a collective sense of calm.

The Clover Model in Action

Recognition & Investigation

Map how a ransomware attack would unfold if it happened tomorrow. Who acts first? What breaks communication flow? Which assumptions collapse?

Then look outward: how do aviation crews, emergency responders, or military units rehearse high-stakes failure safely? What can be borrowed from their preparation culture?

Ideation

Redefine readiness as rehearsal. What if ransomware prep were treated like a monthly fire drill? Instead of treating it as a theoretical scenario, what if we brought it to life for the teams involved?

Explore how simulation-heavy industries train for calm precision. What would your own version look like? Do red-team drills, mock incident rooms, and role rotation.

Reflection

Step back from the procedures and question the culture. Do people believe security is their job or someone else's? Are drills teaching confidence or compliance?

Compare your evolving plan with organizations that treat cybersecurity like fitness. It needs to be something you do every day.

Refinement & Implementation

Start small. Pilot a realistic 30-minute tabletop where

leadership and IT walk through a hypothetical breach together. Measure clarity, speed, and tone.

Before expanding, study how peers kept drills relevant over time – rotating scenarios, involving new roles, and capturing lessons fast enough to act on them.

Who's Involved? What Are They Looking Into?

- Chief Information Security Officer (CISO): How have peer institutions built mature red-team programs that stay fresh?
- Head of IT Operations: Which systems, if locked, would cripple operations first?
- Compliance: What examples exist of transparent reporting that built trust rather than fear?
- Communications & PR Lead: Which brands managed public trust masterfully after security incidents?
- Customer Support Manager: How confident are frontline staff in addressing customer concerns or misinformation?
- Executive Leadership: Where are decision bottlenecks hidden in our chain of command?

Outcome

A proactive resilience framework where every role, message, and decision has been rehearsed in advance that transforms cybersecurity from a fear response into a shared organizational reflex.

Startup at the Crossroads

Scenario Overview

A health-tech startup with a dozen employees is racing to develop a breakthrough medical device. Investors are interested, but the product is six months behind schedule, testing has failed repeatedly, and morale is fading. With just 18 months of runway left, the founders face a painful decision: double down on a stalled design or pivot before time runs out.

Business Challenge

While this may seem like an engineering challenge, it's a broader issue of organizational alignment. Each function sees a different blocker: the engineers blame design, the designers blame regulations, and advisors question usability. The team is drowning in opinions but starving for clarity. To survive, they need to distinguish what's broken from what's essential, and decide where to place their next bet.

The Clover Model in Action

Recognition & Investigation

List every known obstacle: technical, financial, and

psychological. What do we know is failing versus what we're only afraid might fail?

Look outward: how have other startups navigated similar turning points? Study case stories from hardware, biotech, or aerospace ventures that pivoted under pressure. What patterns repeat before a breakthrough, and what mistakes signal denial?

Ideation

Strip everything back to the core purpose. What problem are we truly solving, and what's the smallest version that proves it still matters?

Seek analogs from outside tech: how do filmmakers, architects, or researchers use prototyping to test direction without overcommitting? What low-cost, high-learning experiment could we run this month?

Reflection

Step back from the urgency. Are we making decisions from conviction or exhaustion?

Compare your current mindset to companies that survived the "valley of death." How did they separate sunk costs from genuine traction? What indicators of progress actually predict momentum?

Refinement & Implementation

Commit to one focused experiment. Define what success and failure look like, both technically and strategically.

Before acting, examine how other startups framed and communicated pivots to investors and teams. What tone earned trust? What framing invited support instead of panic?

Who's Involved? What Are They Looking Into?

- **Founders:** What parts of the original vision are still true? Which have quietly expired?
- **Engineering Lead:** How do product teams in aerospace or robotics test high-risk systems safely and cheaply?
- **Design Lead:** What can we learn from consumer tech or industrial design about simplifying complex interfaces?
- **Regulatory:** Which approval hurdles are realistically achievable in this phase?
- **Investor Representative:** What milestones must we hit to sustain confidence?
- **Product Manager:** What's the smallest build that delivers proof of concept?

Outcome

A unified, reality-based roadmap built around one decisive experiment – turning panic into focus, and uncertainty into the discipline of learning fast.

Reframing the Future

Scenario Overview

A regional art museum, once a cornerstone of its city's culture, has seen attendance drop by half. Loyal patrons are aging out, younger audiences are disengaged, and the curatorial team is split between preservation and reinvention. Social media feels like shouting into the void. The board is nervous. The staff is tired. The question is no longer how to fill rooms, but what purpose those rooms serve.

Business Challenge

The museum has spent years perfecting curation but not connection. To thrive again, it must redefine what a museum is for: a place of preservation, participation, or both? Leadership needs a framework that helps them learn from the outside world. Who already knows how to create energy, community, and belonging?

The Clover Model in Action

Recognition & Investigation

Map the visitor experience from awareness to exit.

Where do people lose interest? What unspoken barriers make the museum feel unapproachable or outdated?

Look outward: how do other experience-driven spaces, including festivals, interactive exhibits, esports arenas, invite participation without sacrificing integrity?

Ideation

Reimagine the museum as a living space. What if exhibits were built like seasons of a show, each with a narrative arc and recurring characters?

Draw inspiration from entertainment and retail. How do they use storytelling, anticipation, and repeat engagement to build loyalty?

Reflection

Step back and check your bias. Are you protecting tradition or avoiding risk? What parts of the institution's DNA can evolve without eroding trust?

Study how other cultural organizations navigated transformation. How are orchestras embracing multimedia, and libraries becoming maker spaces. What can you learn from their balance of continuity and change?

Refinement & Implementation

Pick one experiment that tests a new way of engaging audiences – a participatory installation, a collaboration with local creators, or a pop-up show in an unexpected place.

Before launch, review how successful cultural innovators built feedback loops into their programming so audiences feel seen.

Who's Involved? What Are They Looking Into?

- Curatorial Director: How do global museums create immersive narratives around static works?
- Director of Education & Community Programs: Where are we failing to reach new communities or schools?
- Marketing & Audience Development Lead: What lessons can we borrow from fandom communities or experiential brands that sustain attention year-round?
- Board Representative: What fears or assumptions about change are holding leadership back?
- Visitor Experience Manager: How do hospitality or theme park industries design delight into every step of the journey?

Outcome

A revitalized vision of the museum as a social space – one that values preservation and participation, inviting audiences not just to view art, but to belong within it.

The Donor Dilemma

Scenario Overview

A respected nonprofit is facing a slow, quiet crisis. Donations are down for the third consecutive year. Longtime benefactors are aging out, while younger supporters want transparency, immediacy, and measurable impact. Campaigns that once pulled heartstrings now barely register. Inside the organization, the development team is stuck between two worlds: preserve the legacy or reinvent how people connect with the mission.

Business Challenge

The biggest challenge the nonprofit faces is a misalignment between their communication of their mission and their audience. The nonprofit's story hasn't evolved. Donors aren't abandoning the cause; they're choosing organizations that speak their language. The challenge is to rebuild trust and energy without alienating the core community that got them here. To do that, the organization must learn from others who've mastered the art of relevance.

The Clover Model in Action

Recognition & Investigation

Trace the donor journey from first touch to renewal.

Where does excitement fade into obligation? Which stories inspire one-time gifts but not long-term loyalty?

Then look outward: how do modern membership models sustain engagement and belonging over time?

Ideation

Rethink what “giving” means. What if donors saw themselves as co-creators, instead of just contributors? How might storytelling and transparency feel if it mirrored community-driven platforms or social ventures?

Look to social enterprises, online creators, or crowdfunding campaigns that build emotional investment through visibility and shared progress.

Reflection

Step back from the urgency to fundraise and ask: what are people really buying when they donate? Hope? Recognition? Agency?

Compare your patterns with nonprofits that reinvented their brand voice from transactional to transformational.

What risks did they take, and how did they bring their legacy audience along?

Refinement & Implementation

Select one small test, perhaps a digital “impact tracker,” a live donor town hall, or a co-designed campaign where supporters help shape initiatives.

Before launch, study how other organizations created two-way communication loops that make donors feel part of the work.

Who Attends? What Are They Bringing to the Table?

- Executive Director: How are newer nonprofits redefining leadership visibility and authenticity?
- Director of Development: Which donor segments are shrinking fastest, and which show signs of potential growth?
- Communications Lead: Which parts of our messaging feel dated or self-congratulatory?
- Program Director: What can we learn from social enterprises or B Corps about showing tangible outcomes in real time?

- Board Chair: How have legacy nonprofits reinvented themselves without losing donor trust?

Outcome

A renewed donor engagement model that replaces fatigue with participation – one built on transparency, reciprocity, and a narrative that feels alive again.

The Classroom Reboot

Scenario Overview

A mid-sized school district has a problem everyone feels but no one can quite name. Teachers are exhausted, students are disengaged, and technology, which was once promised as the great equalizer, now feels like one more distraction. Lesson plans are rushed, test prep dominates, and creativity has quietly vanished from the room. The district is struggling to connect with students.

Business Challenge

The system wasn't built to encourage curiosity. Every attempt at reform adds more requirements. The real challenge is no longer about raising test scores. The district needs to rebuild their energy. The district needs a way to make learning feel alive again, to help educators and students rediscover the joy of exploration without losing accountability.

The Clover Model in Action

Recognition & Investigation

Outline a typical day from a student's point of view. Where do curiosity and energy peak or crash? Which moments spark real engagement, and which smother it?

Look outward: how do coaches, mentors, or creative studios build intrinsic motivation? What practices keep people hungry to learn without external pressure?

Ideation

Reimagine the classroom as a lab. What if lesson plans were treated like prototypes: tested, observed, improved?

Explore models from unexpected places: apprenticeship programs, bootcamps, or even game design. How do they balance structure with freedom, and feedback with flow?

Reflection

Pause and look at the system's assumptions. Do we reward mastery or memorization? Are we measuring what matters or what's easy to count?

Compare insights with schools or educational experiments that have re-centered creativity: project-based learning, experiential programs, or interdisciplinary "maker" models. What habits made their change sustainable?

Refinement & Implementation

Choose one pilot – a redesigned project, flipped lesson,

or new feedback ritual, and test it in one classroom for one month.

Before scaling, study how others rolled out innovation in low-trust environments. How did they protect teachers' time and confidence while shifting culture?

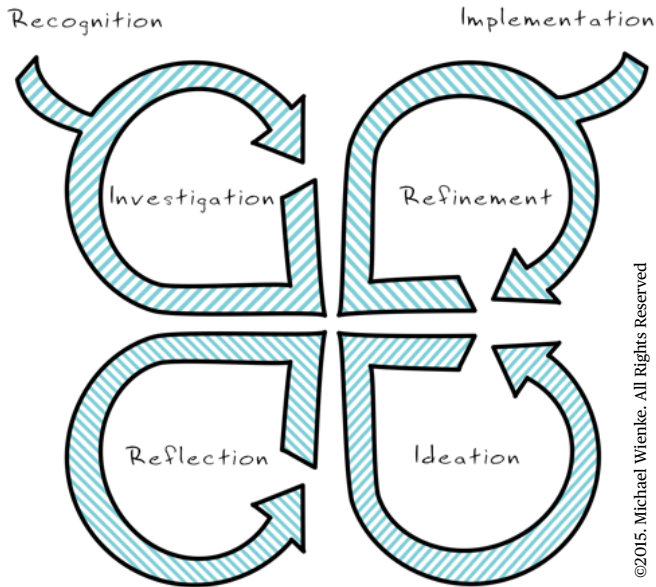
Who's Involved? What Are They Looking Into?

- Superintendent: What systemic pressures keep us prioritizing compliance over creativity?
- Principal: What can we learn from schools that redesigned their daily schedules to allow deeper work?
- Teacher Representatives: How do peer educators or alternative schools cultivate autonomy and curiosity?
- Curriculum Director: What's the gap between what we teach and what students actually remember or apply?
- Technology Coordinator: Where is tech genuinely improving learning versus just adding noise?
- Community Liaison: How have other communities turned parents and local organizations into active partners in learning?

Outcome

A renewed approach to teaching that restores curiosity as the measure of success – one pilot, one class, one rediscovered spark at a time.

The Clover Model of Creativity: Quick Refresh



Phase 1: Recognition & Investigation

- Creativity starts with noticing – spotting cracks, gaps, or broken systems.
- High critical thinking, low creativity: define the problem before rushing to solutions.
- Tools: data analysis, pattern scanning, questioning assumptions.
- Goal: build a clear map of the territory. A sharper problem leads to stronger solutions.

- **Key Questions:** Have we defined the problem in plain language?

Phase 2: Ideation

- The playful stage of possibility. Suspend judgment, silence the inner critic.
- High creativity, low critical thinking: range matters more than raw volume.
- Overcome evaluation apprehension. Don't censor yourself.
- Goal: push past the obvious and explore surprising connections.
- **Key Question:** Did we give individuals space before group discussion?

Phase 3: Reflection

- Creativity needs silence. Step back, let ideas incubate.
- Looks like downtime, but the subconscious is connecting fragments.
- Danger: modern work skips this stage with noise and busyness.
- Goal: create space for breakthroughs to surface. Reflection offers that pause for great ideas to take root.

- **Key Question:** Did we capture what worked and what didn't?

Phase 4: Refinement & Implementation

- Where imagination meets judgment. Turn sparks into something real.
- High creativity + high critical thinking: prototypes, drafts, first attempts.
- Stress-test: Can it work? What needs to change?
- Goal: prove creativity can turn great ideas into actionable ideas.
- **Key Questions:** Have we stripped away the weak ideas? Is there a pilot or test we can run fast?

The Central Stem

- The hub connects all four loops. Don't think of it as a stage of the process, but as a connection point.
- Key question: "Are we ready to move forward?"
- Yes → continue. No → loop back (Investigate more, Refine again, pause for Reflection).
- In the Clover, backtracking isn't failure. It's the process.

Remember: Creativity is a loop. The Clover Model of Creativity keeps ideas alive, adaptive, and moving forward.

Sample IdeaBrief Format

Aim: *In a single sentence describe your goal for this session.*

Background: *Provide key details and context to assist your thinkers in completely understanding the request.*

Obstacles/Considerations: *What is currently preventing you from achieving your aim?*

Opportunities: *Where are there unexplored opportunities, technologies, etc than can assist you in achieving your aim?*

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About the Author



Michael Wienke is a marketer, strategist, and writer obsessed with creativity and innovation. That obsession led him back to UMass Boston to study creativity, cognitive science, and organizational behavior – research that confirmed what he’d already lived through in hundreds of brainstorming sessions. Since then, he’s brought that passion into Fortune 500 boardrooms, global brands, and fast-moving fintech scale-ups. For Michael, creativity isn’t optional. It’s oxygen. Part art, part science – a muscle you have to flex, or lose.

ALEX IS DEAD

For years we've been told that brainstorming is the golden ticket to innovation. Put smart people in a room, throw sticky notes on the wall, and wait for lightning to strike. Except it rarely does. Ideas stall, groupthink wins, and companies keep mistaking noise for progress.



Alex is Dead is the story of what happens when we finally admit the obvious: the system is broken. Part memoir, part cultural critique, part practical guide, this book follows Michael Wienke's journey as he pulls back the curtain on brainstorming's empty promises.



Along the way, he unpacks why teams cling to rituals that don't work, why creativity makes people so uncomfortable, and how science offers better tools for problem-solving.

If you've ever walked out of a "big idea" meeting wondering what just happened, this is the book you've been waiting for.