

Exercise #4-5

The Micro-Creativity Toolkit

Action

Purpose: To help you unleash your team's creativity on a daily basis.

"Micro-creativity gets big results!"

Recalling his time spent working for advertising legend and superboss Jay Chiat, protégé Stevan Alburty remarked that, "It was the most unique work experience of our lives because there was such a sense of creativity and personal freedom."

How do superbosses create such dynamic, innovative environments? How do they spur talented individuals to think in powerfully original ways? Superbosses vary in their methods, but as a group they do something with respect to creativity that traditional bosses don't: they sweat the small stuff.

Many organizations take big steps to "bring creativity into the company." They hold creativity seminars. They provide their staff with ping-pong tables, fun furniture, and refrigerators stocked with beer. They might even hire a "chief creative officer." Then they move on, leaving work conditions more or less what they were. They don't inject a creative impulse deep into work processes.

These actions aren't necessarily bad, but you can't just "check the box" when it comes to creativity. If you want individual employees to take risks and embrace an innovative mindset, you have to push them to be creative in the minutia of their daily work. The more that people get in the habit of unleashing their creative talents on micro-tasks, the more likely they'll be to flex their creative muscles when major challenges arise.

Fostering what I call "micro-creativity" doesn't cost a lot or require loads of time, but it does take focus. To unleash your team's full creative potential, try these quick-and-dirty techniques inspired by the superbosses. You don't need to work with all of them. Simply experiment with the tools that best fit your own style as well as the culture of your team and organization.

Technique #1: Solicit Impromptu Contributions

Superbosses don't just expect creative thinking from their people during formal brainstorm sessions. They expect it at all times, and they frequently ask for it in the daily flow of work with no warning. American basketball coach Rick Pitino would turn to his assistants at key moments in games and shout, "I need a play! Gimme something!" One colleague remembered that Ralph Lauren "would ask your opinion as though he couldn't make a move without it."

You can spark your people to contribute original ideas by asking for it more often in the moment. When you're observing and coaching employees, make a point of asking them for advice on problems you are currently facing (Also see exercise 5-1, Impromptu Conversations). Set a goal for yourself: Ask five employees for ideas during an hour spent mingling with team members. The next time a difficult challenge crops up, don't just handle it yourself or ask your boss for advice. Make a point of asking two or three team members for their thoughts. And try approaching team members you might normally pass over (e.g., younger team members, or those with less experience in the matter at hand). The fresh thinking you get back from them might surprise you.

Technique #2: Hold Regular Ideas Sessions

Legendary football coach Bill Walsh held regular meetings in which "coaches and players alike were expected to provide input and feedback to allow the coaching staff to make changes in personnel or play-calling." Hedge fund billionaire Julian Robertson held daily lunches in which his young protégés would compete to dazzle him with their new ideas. "I used to think of Julian as this Venus Flytrap," one of his protégés said. "He would sit there and would say, 'feed me, feed me these ideas.'"

Are you holding regular ideas sessions with your staff? If not, why wait until you face a specific challenge that requires creativity, like a new business pitch or a presentation to a difficult customer? Hold these sessions every couple of weeks, maybe at lunch or at another time when people are already gathered. Make sure team members know what the session is about ahead of time so that they can start thinking about it. There's no law that says idea generation must come from the Gods – the truth is just the opposite. Anyone can come up with good ideas, but they need to invest time and energy in order to do so. This technique helps make that happen.

Technique #3: Listen Actively

Do you listen passively to your team members' ideas, or do you poke and prod, pushing them to take their thinking even further? As a colleague remembered, Silicon Valley pioneer (and Intel co-founder) Bob Noyce, "was forever pushing people to take their own ideas beyond where they believed they could go. He would tip back his chair and ask, 'That's all you've got? Have you thought about . . . ' An exchange of this sort left

Noyce's colleagues and employees feeling as though he had bored right through them to some potential buried inside. It was exhilarating and a bit frightening.”

No matter how well developed your peoples’ ideas may be, push them to go just a bit further. If they propose a new initiative, how would they execute it? Is the initiative practical? What stakeholders could they involve? What wider implications would the initiative have for the business? How does the initiative relate to current industry trends? The questions are endless, and by asking them you do several things at once: You show interest in your employee, you validate his or her idea, you model constructive questioning, and of course, you help your employee bring a possibly nascent idea to fruition.

Technique #4: Pose Creativity Challenges

Even the most creative team falls into ruts. Fortunately, there’s an easy solution: whip out some thought experiments and exercises designed to get people thinking in new ways. If you click on Amazon, you’ll find many books with exercises to try. I like to gather a struggling team together, have each person think about a specific problem, opportunity, process, task, or customer, and pose the following questions:

1. How can we do this differently?
2. To what other uses could this be put?
3. What could we add to make it more valuable?
4. What can we eliminate?
5. What can we borrow and adapt to our needs?
6. What ingredient (method, process, person, place, etc.) can we employ instead?
7. How can we change the pattern, or re-arrange the process?
8. Can we do the unexpected, the opposite?

You can bring this technique to life in many ways. You can use it when coaching people one-on-one, you can introduce during a team meeting, you can adopt it as a business process for ongoing reflection, and you can employ as part of a lunch meeting to unleash your team’s creative juices (as in Technique #2 above).

Technique #5: Model Creativity

This is a big one. Although many protégés of superbosses may be naturally creative, they also excel at coming up with new ideas because they’re exposed to bosses who are doing exactly that. Every superboss I studied was startlingly creative—and his or her protégés knew it. As one protégé said of Chiat, “Jay’s middle name was innovation.” Likewise, Intel co-founder Gordon Moore (of Moore’s Law fame) remarked of Bob Noyce: “Anything that came up, he had good ideas.”

You might think of yourself as a “creative person,” but are you really modeling the kind of openness, inquisitiveness, and boldness that defines true creativity? Are you a fount of new ideas? Do you encourage people when they’re ideating? Ask colleagues, reports, and your own boss what they think about your creative presence. If you need to improve, pick a day each month as your “creative day.” Throughout that day, focus on presenting new ideas, asking questions, taking risks, and encouraging team members to innovate. At the end of the day, spend five minutes reviewing the new ideas that were generated. Do any of them strike you as especially promising? If so, follow through on them. Repeat this exercise for several months, cultivating fresh thinking as a habit.

Technique #6: Perform A Creative Audit

Among restaurateurs, chefs, and foodies, global superchef Ferran Adria is regarded as one of the most innovative people on the planet. As a three-star Michelin chef remarked, being around Adria and his ideas “opens doors to me that I couldn’t even imagine existed.”

When his famed restaurant El Bulli was open, Adria made a practice of ending each year by evaluating innovations put in play during the previous twelve months. This “creative audit” was Adria’s favorite metric.

Do you perform a creative audit each year? If not, it’s worth doing. Any time you track a business process, you boost accountability and increase the odds that something good will actually happen. Sit down for thirty minutes and brainstorm all the new projects and initiatives you’ve pursued. To prod your memory, review any notebooks you’ve kept, or skim through your weekly calendar. Ask your reports to do the same. Hold a meeting in which you all share the three or four biggest or best ideas you’ve originated. Performing this exercise each year affirms the importance of creativity among your team. It gives people a sense of accomplishment, reminding them that yes, they *are* creative. It bonds your team together as an engine of innovation. And it might turn up great ideas that somehow fell through the cracks.

It’s easy to book a creativity seminar for your team and then go on with business as usual. “Micro-creativity” demands a different level of engagement from bosses. It calls upon you to act as a creative guide and partner to your team. So get in there. Show them how to think in original ways. Make creativity your priority every day. Your team will never be the same.

Takeaways

- To infuse more innovative spirit into your team, do what the superbosses do: Go micro.

- Apply “check the box” thinking to fostering innovation, and your people will have a much harder time thinking “out of the box.”
- Cultivating micro-creativity is an investment in your team. When important businesses challenges arise, your investment will pay off as team members come through with the big ideas.
- Applying simple micro-creativity tools, you can come to serve as a creative guide and partner to your team.