

# Kick-Start Creative Problem Solving

Intentionally make space for creativity to flourish.

BY BRETT RADLICKI

**C**reativity may have been an overlooked skill in the past, but it has quickly become one of the most necessary soft skills to master. You may find it surprising that creativity can make a difference in the projects, pay, and promotions you receive; however, it makes sense when you consider the demands on today's workforce.

The past year has been a shining example of the need for flexibility and creative thinking. Activities that were critical at the beginning of 2020 were afterthoughts only a few months later, replaced with even more critical activities that themselves may become moot tomorrow.

That is especially true in the world of talent development. The pandemic emphasized the role that learning plays in this ever-changing landscape. Organizations continue to see first-hand how creative TD professionals can reach employees in ways that increase skills, foster engagement, and improve retention.

Creativity provides the foundation for innovative outcomes. Yet not everyone is naturally creative—and most people don't believe that they can become creative. But in fact, anyone can practice and develop creativity.

While creativity is magical, it is not magic. There's a simple process you can apply that will enable you to tap into your creativity, nurture its growth, and build it to the point where creative thinking, creative problem solving, and creative action become second nature.

## **OK, how?**

I have used an approach that incorporates purposeful space for creativity to flourish. You can apply the process to anything from a simple task to a complex strategy. The steps are not groundbreaking, but they scale. When you put them together, they bring creativity into your problem-solving efforts without sacrificing efficiency or compromising deadlines. Here's how it works:

1. Gather the information you need to begin, not yet thinking about a possible solution.



**Information-Gathering Activities for a Career Challenge**



Current state: Commit to journal writing each day for a month to gain better clarity. Alternatively, ask someone close to you how they see your current work situation.

2. Ask yourself what your customer needs. Answer the question using a period of safely contained brainstorming followed by a period of purposeful sorting.
3. Ask yourself how you would meet that need. Once again, answer the question using a specific period of brainstorming followed by a period of sorting.

Following those three steps will enable you to interject creative problem solving into your challenges. However, there are what I call *jolts* that you can apply to each step in the process. For the purposes of this discussion, a jolt is nothing more than an artificial construct that forces you to apply some form of temporary constraint against the current situation. The point of the jolts is to introduce a catalyst that enables you to look at information in a new way. They work efficiently within the three steps to deliver surprisingly effective solutions.

A fresh perspective can be difficult to manufacture because individuals bring a certain amount of unconscious bias to everything they do. Seeing things through a new lens allows for a new reaction that can yield better results. There is no shortage of mechanisms to jolt you out of your current view. Most of them will fall under one of three categories (see sidebar). Jolt activities are a good way to get you unstuck, and the real magic occurs when you apply them to situations in which you think you already have the answers.


Let's dive deeper into some key components of the three steps.

### **Gathering information is essential**


Before you can solve a problem, you must make sure that you have fully heard the customer's request. Ask enough questions to identify the current state, desired change, and root cause. Tapping into the power of truly understanding your customer is the first step in addressing their issue, yet it is easy to get distracted by the problem itself. When you focus exclusively on a problem, you will likely jump to a solution. But resist that natural pull toward a solution during this discovery period.

Resisting the pull can be counterintuitive and difficult because, after all, you are measured by solutions and delivering results. So, why not get to the results as fast as you can? The danger is that jumping into an assumed solution may solve the wrong problem.

It is easy to dismiss the importance of listening and simply arrive at your own conclusions. However, in *Redesigning the Future: A Systems Approach to Societal Problems*, Russell Ackoff writes that "We fail more often because we solve the wrong problem than because we get the wrong solution to the right problem." If you can become one of the rare people who listens well enough to articulate your customers' needs in ways that they themselves cannot, you will set yourself apart.



## **Introduce a catalyst that enables you to look at information in a new way.**



### **Contained periods of safety**

Safety is a key part of generating creative answers to the two questions—each of which you should address separately. Create contained periods of experimentation and failure so as to not affect your ability to deliver results.

Everyone claims to love the story of Thomas Edison failing 10,000 times before successfully creating an electric light. However, failing has consequences. The truth is, history would not hold Edison in such high regard if he had not eventually succeeded in delivering a working electric light.

People say that they value innovation, but they really value innovative results. Innovation is built on a base of creativity, creativity spawns from experimentation, and experimentation leads to failure at



Desired state: Rather than seeking a jolt that constrains possibilities, ask yourself "If money weren't an object, what would I do for a career or a job?" or "What gave me joy as a child that I haven't made time for as an adult?"

least as often as it leads to success. That is an intolerable equation unless you've safely contained experimentation.

The period of safety should take place within the brainstorming phase of both questions. There are no limits during those two specific phases. You do not need to consider cost constraints, time limits, or technology needs. It is dedicated time to experiment, play, and potentially (maybe even hopefully) produce horrible ideas. This part of the process will yield ideas that would never come to light if you were moving straight toward an assumed solution.

The mentality during these phases is decidedly different than anywhere else in the process. During this time, ideas are unfiltered and unembraced. Although you'll discard most of those ideas, they will have an influential role in forming the chosen solution. Jolt techniques help to get things started and can also reframe previously articulated ideas. Either way, the goal is to feel the safety of unencumbered play during this time.

### Purposeful sorting will focus your efforts

A sorting phase must follow each brainstorming phase. This part of the process is where you begin to cluster your ideas into similar groupings and eliminate duplicates. The goal is to filter down to a manageable number of items so you can effectively implement a solution.

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Root cause: Ask yourself "What do I think is preventing me from taking the first step?" Use the 5 Whys process to keep peeling the onion and identify the root cause.

Carefully navigate this part of the process. If you are not careful, unconscious bias and past experience can funnel you toward familiar conclusions. Using jolt techniques during the sorting process is an excellent way to see information in a fresh way. For example, avoid immediately eliminating a cluster of ideas simply because a specific constraint makes the idea impossible to implement. Instead, try looking at the constraint as something to be valued and built around. You may discover that there is a great opportunity available if you make a specific concession.

### Your turn

This three-step process can help you not only serve your clients more fully and creatively but can aid you in solving personal challenges as well. Although it may not come naturally to you right away, it is worth practicing.

The process is a mechanism that gives you space to enhance your creative problem-solving skills. These creative skills will grow over time and enable you to truly innovate while adding enjoyment and satisfaction to your work. After all, as Albert Einstein noted, "Creativity is intelligence having fun."

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## Creative Jolts Categories

Many techniques can jolt people into seeing their situation from a fresh perspective. They typically fall into three categories.

**Embrace constraints rather than avoid them.** Look for the constraint that hurts the most and embrace it fully. One example of this approach is called element elimination, where you force yourself to purge a critical component of the issue under consideration. What would be the ramifications of that decision? Does the elimination take things in an entirely different direction?

**Think about the known in an unknown way.** Seeing things through fresh eyes can be powerful. One technique in this category is called persona role play, where you create a persona that represents a single member of the audience for your solution. Put as much detail as you can into making this person a fully developed human being—then interact with your proposed solution as though you were that person.

**Bring two or more unrelated knowns together in a new way.** Creative outcomes can often spawn from bringing unrelated ideas together and seeing what happens. One example of this approach is called process puzzle, which brings together the linear nature of process with the non-linear nature of a jigsaw puzzle. First, identify the necessary steps in the process. Next, rearrange them in various ways and analyze the outcome for each option. Are certain orders more effective than others? Do specific combinations yield surprising results?



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